



KERMANSHAH VIII. THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Kermanshah was located not far from the Jewish Academies of Babylonia. The Geonic historian Nathan Ha-Bavli reports that the late 9th-early 10th century [exilarch](#) Mar ʿUqba was banished from 909 to 916 to a locality, not far from Baghdad, called Kermanshah (Neubauer, II, pp. 77-88; Levi, II, pp. 382-83). Surviving the obscure period of the Middle Ages, the Jews of Kermanshah were not affected by the forced conversions under the Safavids (17th and 18th centuries; see [CONVERSION iv. OF PERSIAN JEWS TO OTHER RELIGIONS](#)).

Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel refers to the Jewish community of Kermanshah in his travelogue of 1824-32. According to him, the city had three synagogues and a Jewish population of three hundred families of merchants and peddlers, who, except for a few, belonged to the low income segment of the population (Beth Hillel, pp. 104-5). Joseph Benjamin, another Jewish traveler of the mid-19th century, refers to the Jewish life, economy, and community of Kermanshah. He reports a small Jewish community of forty families. According to him, it was a large, fortified city surrounded by a chain of mountains, and carried "a considerable trade," as well as a "costly carpets" industry (Benjamin, pp. 205-6).



Ephraim Neumark, who visited Kermanshah in the late 19th century (1884-85), writes of a Jewish community of 250 individuals. In his report, Neumark describes a community with some highly esteemed members, such as H. Ḥakim Āqājān, who was a learned physician, a teacher well-versed in the Talmud, and a slaughterer of cattle and fowls according to the Jewish rituals. In Neumark's view, the hatred of Jews, which was prevalent in central Iran, "was not as rife" in Kermanshah (Neumark, pp. 39-75). In the late 19th century, Kermanshah witnessed the public conversion to Islam of seventy members of the family of Ḥakim Naṣir, a prominent physician, followed by the marriage of his son to the daughter of the chief member of the Muslim clergy (Kermanshahchi, pp. 347-50).

As in other cities of Iran, the foundation of [Alliance Israélite schools](#) in Kermanshah in 1904 provided the community with modern education leading to new opportunities. In 1904, the French Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) bulletin, estimated the population of the Jews in Kermanshah city to be about 1,406 (Levi, III, p. 813) and, with its surroundings, about 3,800 individuals (Tsadik, p. 9; *Alliance Israélite Bulletin Annuel* 66, 1904, pp. 168-69). In the 19th through mid-20th centuries, the community was both a sanctuary and a new homeland for refugees from Mashhad, following the forced conversion of its Jewish community and the murder of about thirty-two of them in 1839 (Tasdik, pp. 34-36; Sarshar, pp. 158-60), and later for the emigrants from Bukhara on their way to Jerusalem. Prior to the [Constitutional Revolution](#) in 1905-11, most Jewish men were either peddlers or had small-scale businesses, while the women stayed at home spinning wool and silk or weaving hand-knit footwear called *giva*. In the early 20th century, Jews were able to own shops and businesses in the local markets of the city. Furthermore, having business partners among the Jews of Baghdad resulted in the settlement of many Iraqi Jews in Kermanshah, and close family and socio-cultural ties existed between the two Jewish communities. (Kermanshahchi, pp. 354-56).

Anti-Semitism in Kermanshah, although not as deeply rooted as in some other cities of Iran, was experienced before and after the Constitutional Revolution. Reports of S. Y. Sety, the French principal of Alliance Israelite schools in Kermanshah to the headquarters in Paris (18 July 1904, no. 8150/3), followed by another report two months later (29 September 1904, no. 4805/2), and a letter sent to the British consulate in Kermanshah (28 May 1905) all express his concern about the lack of security for the Jews of Kermanshah in that period (Kermanshahchi, pp. 334-38).



Sety's concerns were actualized in a telegram sent on 31 March 1909 to the Alliance headquarters by his successor, when the Jewish quarter of Kermanshah was looted as the result of an alleged case of blood libel, that is, claiming that the blood of a Muslim had been used in making the Passover bread. This baseless allegation caused 130 homes to be destroyed and about 1,200 Jews to be cast homeless on the streets. Some Muslims delivered bread to the homeless, and, upon learning of the events, the Alliance headquarters sent a contribution of 6,000 francs (Levi, III, p. 836). Corroborating news was also telegraphed to London by the British consul at Kermanshah, Captain Howard, in April 1909. In his report about the looting, the consul also related the compassion demonstrated by some members of the Muslim community to the Jews, giving them shelter and protection. Later, with the support of the British and Ottoman consulates, some looted items were collected and returned to the original owners (Kermanshahchi, pp. 342-45).

By the time of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Jews of Kermanshah played an active role in Zionist activities in Iran. One of the community's early political activists was [Shemu'el Yehezkel Ḥaim](#) (1891-1931). As a dynamic revolutionary, he was one of the Iranian Jewry's most controversial personalities of the era. Later in Tehran, Ḥaim, the editor of the first Jewish journal in Persian script, named *Ha-Ḥaim*, was elected as the Jewish representative to the Majles (parliament) of 1925. However, due to his revolutionary aspirations and ideologies, he was later accused of and imprisoned for anti-government activities, which led to his execution on 15 December 1931 (Levi, III, pp. 951-55).

Another early Zionist activist and pious public figure of Kermanshah was Moshe Hay Isaac Kohen Yazdi (1896-1957), author of *Pardes ha-dat* (The orchard of religion, Jerusalem, 1934), who immigrated to Israel in 1950. David Davidian (b. 1922), known as Masrur, now residing in Israel, represents a contemporary example of the impact of Iranian culture, philosophical issues, literature, and poetic arts on Iranian Jews in general and the Jews of Kermanshah in particular, through his poetic compilation, *Kaškul-e Masrur*. David Adhami (1916- 2010) was another contemporary intellectual of Kermanshah, whose romantic novel, *Be-su-ye kamāl* reflects some aspects of the historical and political life of Jews in general and his philosophical views in particular. In the legal system, Elyahou Raḥamim Pirnazar (1898-1988), a student of Alliance Israélite from 1904, was one of the early licensed Iranian Jewish attorneys practicing in Iran (Wezārat-e dādgostari, p. 61). Another



activist at national and international Jewish levels is the author Heshmatollah Kermanshahchi, an industrialist, social activist, and Zionist of the post World War II era in Iran.

Kermanshah's Jewish population has steadily diminished since World War II, especially after 1948, and in the decades following the Iran-Iraq War, due to immigration to Tehran and Israel.

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