

## Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia: Leader of the Education Revolution in Damascus 1864-1895

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### Abstract

“Jewish colonialism” began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Western European communities fought to instill values such as Haskala, emancipation, and acculturation among Middle Eastern Jews, in order to rescue them from what appeared as “inferiority” to European eyes. The central objective was to transform Middle Eastern Jews into citizens with equal rights who could contribute to the general society in their countries.

The Alliance Israélite Universelle society, that was founded in Paris in 1860, established a network of modern educational institutions throughout Middle Eastern countries. Middle Eastern Torah scholars from this region were in the position of responding to Haskala ideas and especially to the question of modern education brought from abroad by European Jews.

The present study deals with one of the greatest rabbis of the Middle East in the modern period, Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia, Chief Rabbi of the Damascus community between 1883 and 1895, in his role as educational revolutionary. The study examines the relationship of Aboulafia to the Alliance Israélite Universelle and to the issue of modern education as it arose with the renewal of the society’s activity in Damascus in 1880, after a lapse of about ten years.

**Key words:** history, Judaism, Alliance Israélite Universelle, Syria, Damascus, rabbis

## Introduction

There was no Haskala [Enlightenment] movement arising *sui generis* in the Middle East comparable to that in the West. This is to say that there was no Jewish movement sharing an ideological-cultural foundation with the surrounding society and seeking to unseat the Talmud Torah [traditional, religious] school from its preeminence in the Jewish world. It may be recalled that the Jewish Haskala movement in Europe had in fact been a branch of the general European Enlightenment movement and identified with a large share of its values. Moreover, the Jewish-European Haskala arose at a time of social and cultural integration of the Jews within the surrounding gentile society. By contrast, in Middle Eastern Muslim society, there was no powerful Enlightenment movement to impart its thrust to a similar Jewish movement. Thus, Jewish society in the Middle East did not act within a supportive ambiance informed by the ideology of enlightenment. And, therefore, the Enlightenment in the Middle East never entailed a publicly avowed attempt to overthrow the existing order or to challenge the rabbinical leadership.

Moreover, in Middle Eastern Jewish society, there was no idealization of the surrounding society and therefore no aspiration for integration into that society (Nini, 1979, p. 34). On the other hand, Muslim society had not experienced in the modern era religious-ideological reform comparable to the Protestant Christian one, nor social processes of secularization, so that it had no need to develop modern conceptions of tolerance toward unlike minorities. Principles of tolerance that had been followed since early medieval times continued to guide the existence of the Sunni-Muslim majority alongside other Muslim and non-Muslim minorities. Unlike Western European society, Muslim society in the modern period did not demand that the Jews blur their national and religious identity in order to integrate into the surrounding world.

Still, since the end of the eighteenth century and particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, the population of the Middle East was exposed to a strong western influence, to European cultural imperialism. The origins of this influence lay in the desire of the west to impose its outlook and its culture on the Middle East, facilitated by the voluntary process of westernization of extensive parts of local society. Recognition of the achievements and superiority of the west by various groups among the Middle Eastern elites led to a desire to adopt the European model in toto. In other words, in the Middle East, there

was no process of internal development and maturation of the ideas of modernization and progress – including those of the enlightenment – but rather importation of a ready-made European model of those ideas. It should be emphasized that the period under study witnessed a revolution in transportation: the introduction of the steamship shortened communications lines and brought East and West much nearer than before. Under strong western influence, the Ottoman Empire adopted wide-ranging reforms in its military, administrative, and legal systems (Davison, 1963).

This European influence on the Middle East constituted the foundation for the general context in which the meeting between the west and the Jewish communities in the Islamic lands occurred - not internal growth, nor even the influence of the surrounding gentile society, but rather a totally external western influence, partially Christian and for the most part, European-Jewish.

A process referred to by Professor S. Schwarzfuchs as “Jewish colonialism” began in the middle of the nineteenth century (Schwarzfuchs, 1980). Western European communities that had, from the second half of the eighteenth century undergone deep and far-reaching effects of Haskala, emancipation and acculturation fought to instill similar values among Middle Eastern Jews in order to rescue them from what appeared to European eyes as “inferiority.” The central objective was to transform Middle Eastern Jews into citizens with equal rights who could contribute to the general society in their countries. This goal was referred to as “regeneration” (Rodrigue, 1989). The means proposed for reaching this objective was to base Jewish education in Middle Eastern countries on new foundations, the same ones that had led the Jews of Western Europe to their new place in the modern era. Thus, during the second half of the nineteenth century, there were a number of initiatives of individuals and groups in Western Europe seeking to thoroughly revamp the Jewish education systems in the Middle East (Frankel J., 1997, pp. 370-372) (Rodrigue, 1990, pp. 3-4). An organization intended to coordinate the efforts to set up a comprehensive and all-inclusive network of educational and productivizing institutions in the east was founded in France in 1860. This organization, the Alliance Israélite Universelle society, did indeed fulfill its mission, establishing a network of modern educational institutions throughout the Middle Eastern cities (Rodrigue, 1989, pp. 219-225).

One of the important factors that helped the Alliance Israélite Universelle succeed in its program was the existence of local elites that

sometimes initiated activities of the Alliance or provided public support for such activities in the middle eastern communities. The main groups among these elites were the Francos (in Aleppo, Istanbul, Izmir, and Salonica) and the Grana (in Tunis) – Jews of Sephardic origin who had settled in Italy after the expulsion from Spain and Portugal, and who, in pursuit of their commercial ventures, relocated in cities of the Middle East at the end of the seventeenth century. Sometimes, these residents were not counted as members of the community but instead acted alongside it, enjoying the services provided to them without being bound by its regulations (Harel, 1999; Rodrigue, 1990, pp. 37-40; Tsur, 1996b). These Jews, who continued to have close connections with European cities either for commercial reasons or because of family ties or consular service for the European countries, served as “culture carriers” from the west to the east, and they regarded Europe and its values as the model for reformation and rehabilitation of eastern Jewish society. That this elite was also economically affluent made its influence more than commensurate with its demographic weight in Jewish society in the Ottoman Empire (Tsur, 1996a). This elite was joined by some of the local elites and educated elements that had previously, as individuals, encountered general European culture and the values of the Jewish Haskala movement (Benbassa, 1997, p. 19).

In general terms, Middle East sages were in the position of responding to Haskala ideas and especially the question of modern education brought from abroad by European Jews. The fact that the initiative for reform of the Middle Eastern education systems came from European Jewry and not as a demand from the local gentile authorities, softened the threat of dramatic change that would entail a decline in the authority of the religious elite. The policy adopted by scholars of the Jewish community throughout the Middle East was consonant with a coherent, clear, and well-defined world outlook that leaned, on the one hand, on fundamentals of Jewish Halakha and recognition of the Jewish heritage, and was driven, on the other hand, by objective circumstances and the desire to rescue Jewish society from its peripheral status. The choice confronting Middle Eastern sages was whether to support the new winds that were blowing in the world as a whole and in the Jewish world in particular or instead to adopt a defensive stance and attempt to prevent any change in the traditional pattern of life in the Jewish communities they led. Not only were simple questions such as permission to study foreign languages and sciences taken up, but also ideas that arose in the European enlightenment as well as those that had

original Middle Eastern Haskala characteristics (Harel, *The Motives for Change in the Attitude of the Rabbinic Elite in the Middle East towards Modernity*, 2002).

### **The Damascus Community**

On October 6, 1875 the Ottoman Empire declared bankruptcy. In one day, the well-to-do Jews in Damascus, who had invested all their wealth in government bonds, lost their entire fortunes. From then onward, the Damascus community remained without a proper temporal leadership. Its spiritual leadership as well did not function properly, due to ongoing disagreements between two rival groups that prevented any possibility of reaching agreement and uniting around the candidacy of a local Torah scholar for the office of Hakham Bashi (chief rabbi). As a result, between 1875 and 1883, Torah scholars from other communities served in that position in Damascus (Harel, 2010b, pp. 61-66). The appointment of Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia, grandson of the former Rishon le-Zion in Jerusalem, in February 1883 to the office of Hakham Bashi in Damascus signaled a return to the traditional order. Remnants of the veteran elite, recovering a bit from the crash and continuing at the head of the community, wished to appoint a rabbi with local roots, but at the same time with political abilities and prestige in the rabbinical world. Much hope was placed on Rabbi Aboulafia; he was considered to be assertive and was recognized as a Halakhic authority of the first rank (Harel, 1998b).

At the time of the appointment of Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia to the position of Hakham Bashi, the community in Damascus numbered 2,224 families, less than 10,000 persons. Most of the Jews were artisans, petty merchants, and store owners. The rest were peddlers or were very poor. Only ten people were considered to still be well-to-do (Fresco, 1882). Most of Rabbi Aboulafia's tenure in office was devoted to preserving what existed and preventing the community from sliding deeper into the abyss. At the same time, there were areas in which the rabbi made a breakthrough. Although the rabbi's appointment had never been confirmed by a formal decree of the Sultan (firman), his relations with the authorities were proper, as were his relations with heads of the Christian and Muslim communities. His era saw an increase in the number of Jews holding office in government institutions (*Jewish Chronicle*, 1886). At the community level, matters continued without incident, especially after some of the members of the elite with connections and wealth,

who had previously been opponents of the rabbi, lost their property, emigrated, or died. Yet, the rabbi still needed to maneuver between various groups within and outside the community. In addition to the authorities and heads of the other religious communities, these groups included supporters of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Damascus, on the one hand, and fanatical Torah scholars, on the other.

### **The Failure of Alliance**

The first Alliance representative to Damascus arrived on January 22, 1865. The group of Torah scholars in Damascus, led by the head rabbis Yaakov Peretz and Aharon Yaakov, supported the entry of the French-Jewish society into Damascus and cooperated with its representative in order to promote modern education among the children of the community. From the beginning, Rabbi Aboulafia, who was at that time a member of the rabbinic court, was also an advocate of the activity of the Alliance Israélite Universelle among the younger generation. An outstanding example of that support was the rabbi's agreement to join the committee that was to monitor the establishment of a school intended to combine sacred studies with secular ones. However, despite the widespread enthusiasm for the idea of introducing modern education into the Damascus community, the principal of the school was obliged to terminate his mission in Damascus at the end of 1869, for personal reasons, but also due to disagreements with community notables and not with its rabbis (Harel, 2010b, pp. 80-82).

The official activity of the Alliance in Damascus stopped for ten years, but in practice, its values and principles continued to be heard in Damascus through three of the school's former students. They set up a society called *La Société de jeunes gens à Damas* aiming to act in the spirit of the values of the Alliance. These young men regarded education and enlightenment as the highest value, so that with the help of the Alliance they established a library and began teaching themselves the Turkish language, important because it was the language of the government. They untiringly disseminated the message and principles of the Alliance, spreading the content of its bulletin among members of the Damascus community. All that time they entreated the Alliance to reopen its school in the community.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to their activity, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Archives of Alliance Israélite Universelle (AAIU), Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 94, 8.1.1873, Halfon, 2.8.1872, 7.1.1884; *ibid*, Syrie, I.B., 5, Damas, Halfon 20.12.1875; *ibid*, Syrie, I.B., 5, Damas, Balillios, 1.5.1879.

Damascus community remained in unbroken contact with the Alliance, and its leading rabbis continued to approach that body with various requests for assistance.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, after the bankruptcy of the Damascus wealthy, the entire group of Torah scholars appealed to the Alliance for support for themselves and their families. Their main argument was that the notables, who had supported *yeshivot* in their homes and had maintained the Torah scholars, had suddenly stopped all financial aid. Lacking any other trade or profession, the Torah scholars could not support themselves, so that they and their families found themselves in dire straits. This emotional plea, expressing the greatest appreciation of the Torah scholars for the Alliance society, had the endorsement of the spiritual leaders of the community, rabbis Isaac Aboulafia and Shlomo Sukari.<sup>3</sup>

### **Supporting the Initiative of Midhat Pasha**

In 1880, Governor Midhat Pasha provided a tremendous boost to public education in Damascus. Still, no Jew or Christian yet dared to send his sons to a public school for fear they would be humiliated there.<sup>4</sup> But Midhat Pasha was also directly responsible for the reopening in 1880 of the Alliance school in Damascus. Pursuant to his request to the Alliance and to the Anglo-Jewish Association in London, money was allotted for opening a school for boys under the direction of the Alliance. It was unusual that a figure connected with the regime and external to the Jewish community would be the source for a modern European-Jewish educational initiative. At the head of the school committee stood Rabbi Ephraim Alkalai, then Hakham Bashi of Damascus – who, together with two or three other notables, had energetically urged Midhat Pasha to reopen the school (Harel, *Midhat Pasha and the Jewish Community of Damascus: Two New Documents*, 1996). Most of the Torah scholars in the city endorsed this enterprise. Even the Torah scholars who taught in the Talmud Torah school, for whom reopening the modern school would be an apparent threat to their income, elected not to contest it

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<sup>2</sup> See for example AAIU, Syrie, I.B., 5, Damas. Torah scholars in Damascus (including Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia) to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Rosh Hodesh Heshvan, 1876.

<sup>3</sup> AAIU, Syrie, I.B., 5, Damas, thirty-one Torah scholars from Damascus, Heshvan 1879.

<sup>4</sup> United Kingdom National Archives, Foreign Office Archives, London (FO) 195/1514, Dickson, Damascus, 12.11.1885.

but rather to ask the Alliance to adopt both themselves and the Talmud Torah schools. The Alliance Israélite Universelle agreed to their request, and together with the Anglo-Jewish Association in London it began to assist with annual support for the Talmudei Torah.<sup>5</sup> In the years that followed, spiritual leaders of the Damascus community often visited the school to monitor the knowledge of the students. A letter of Rabbi Aboulafia and his colleague Rabbi Shlomo Sukari to the head of the Alliance after their visit to the school, about one year after it reopened, reveals that they were very positively impressed. They spared no praise for the knowledge of Jewish subjects shown by the students, for the way the school was being run, and for its curriculum, which, along with Jewish studies, included also secular subjects.<sup>6</sup>

The emissary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Damascus, Moshe Fresco, regarded the reopening of the school as a turning point, that would end the ignorance of the Jewish youth in the community; but he immediately identified the many problems involved with imparting modern education to the sons of Damascus. According to him, the tuition was too high, and this deterred all strata of the population from registering their children in the reopened institution of the Alliance. He said that Damascus Jews used the bankruptcy of community notables as an excuse for avoiding payment and for demanding that the Alliance allow free study in its institutions. Fresco expresses distress that a dozen years earlier the community had been rich but was not interested in education, and now that it wanted education, it was lacking the means for it.<sup>7</sup> In order to encourage members of the community to sacrifice a portion of their meager incomes for the sake of their sons' education not in a traditional manner, Fresco needed the backing of the leaders, and especially of the most important Torah scholars and the dayanim (judges of the rabbinical court), who were the highest moral authority. This backing was also important because some opposition arose among the second rank of Torah scholars, especially those teaching in Talmud Torah schools, who saw the Alliance Israélite Universelle as a threat to

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<sup>5</sup> See AAIU, Syrie, I.B., 5. Talmud Torah teachers in Damascus to Alliance Israélite Universelle, received on July 29, 1880.

<sup>6</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 96, Aboulafia. Aboulafia and Sukari to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, received on May 29, 1881.

<sup>7</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XV.E., Damas, 146, Fresco, 3.11.1880.



the monopoly they had enjoyed in education.<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Aboulafia continued to openly support the activity of the Alliance, and his colleague, Rabbi Shlomo Sukari, adopted a similar position. Besides their recognition of the great importance of secular studies in addition to sacred ones, they understood that modern education held the key to the progress of Jewish society and the improvement of its standing in the eyes of the gentile society around them. Here is what they said:

*When, every day, we see young Jewish children adding to their knowledge of God's Torah, innocence and wisdom and intelligence and knowledge and written foreign languages and secular occupations [...] words cannot convey the extent of the joy in our hearts when on the appointed day of the examination of the delightful students, ministers and notables of all the peoples joined us and honored and praised the wisdom of the youths, sons of the Hebrews who for a few days found light in their lives.<sup>9</sup>*

Rabbis Aboulafia and Sukari even took a very significant step from a public standpoint and joined the Alliance society as full-fledged members.<sup>10</sup>

This is not a matter to be taken lightly. European-Jewish education also brought about a transformation in how Damascus Jews spent their free time. The Alliance school was the first to present theater productions for the local Jewish public. The dramatizations were usually European, although Bible stories were also sometimes the subject. Moreover, these presentations were the cultural poogee in the life of the Damascus elites. Governmental and military leaders, foreign consuls, high local officials, and notables of the city were invited to attend. They came to the events held at the Alliance school to bask a bit in the fragrances of Europe, since the school was one of the bastions of the French culture so admired by the Damascus elites. It is of interest to note that alongside all these personages, such programs were attended by the chief rabbi and other Jewish notables. The novelty in education – directly encouraged by the moral support of Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia, as well as by his very presence at theater presentations -- was responsible for widening the cultural

<sup>8</sup> France, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale (AECCC), Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

<sup>9</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XVIII.E., Damas, 175, Lizbona. Torah scholars and notables of Damascus to Alliance Israélite Universelle, received on March 27, 1882.

<sup>10</sup> Bulletin de L'Alliance Israélite Universelle (BAIU), 1er sem. 1883, 82.

horizons of Damascus Jews and for social gatherings between Jews and gentiles. Visits at Alliance schools in Damascus by governors and army commanders, notables and consuls, Muslim and Christian clerics, even kings, during lessons or for cultural events were a common occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

### **Education for Girls**

When Rabbi Aboulafia was selected for the office of Hakham Bashi, he continued not only to give his moral support to the Alliance project but also to extend untiringly his practical assistance. Immediately upon his appointment, the rabbi demonstratively rejoined the Alliance society as a full member, and in his wake many members of the community followed suit. Rabbi Aboulafia took care to renew his membership in the society each year.<sup>12</sup> But he was not satisfied with merely demonstrative acts: he promoted the first significant internal change in the field of education for women.

The attitude in the Middle East – not only among the Jewish population – was that education for girls was of no value or use. Since all that a woman did was centered inside the home, she had no need of knowledge except for housekeeping, and her only role was to satisfy the will of her husband and to care for her children. The woman was perceived as lacking any authority whatsoever in the family, let alone in the community. Thus, until the middle of the nineteenth century, there were in Syrian communities no educational institutions for girls, most of whom did not even know how to read and write (Frankel L. A., 1858, p. 115). It was only in the more open-minded and well-to-do families – especially those from the group of Francos – that the daughters were allowed to study either privately or in missionary schools for girls. The opening of Protestant missionary schools for girls created a change in the perception of education for girls. More and more families began to send their daughters to these institutions for the sake of an education, especially since the studies there were free. Sometimes, the institutions even provided the girls with all the school supplies they needed, and their families were given gifts and financial grants (Harel, 2010a).

As part of the struggle against the Protestant institutions for the souls of the Jewish children, and thanks to the efforts of the French

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<sup>11</sup> See for example BAIU, 2ème sem. 1884-1er sem., 1885, 34; 2ème sem.1885-1er sem. 1886, 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> See for example BAIU, 1er sem. 1883, 82; 1er sem. 1884, 104; 2ème sem. 1885-1er sem. 1886, 134.

consul, the Alliance agreed to open the first school for Jewish girls in Damascus.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of November 1883 the institution opened its doors, with eighty students aged six to sixteen, some of whom had transferred from the Protestant schools. The curriculum included the usual subjects such as French, arithmetic, and Hebrew, but also such specifically “feminine” subjects as drawing, embroidery, and music (Jewish Chronicle, 1883; Jewish Chronicle, 1884).

The very willingness of the parents to send their daughters to school, Protestant or Jewish, should be seen as a revolution. It is testimony to the process of a change in outlook from that which had predominated until that time in all that had to do with the status and role of girls and women in society. This does not mean, of course, that there were suddenly new norms of equality between men and women; the absolute majority of Damascus residents, Jews as well as non-Jews, continued for many more years to regard women as creatures of inferior rank, having no authority in the family and taking no part in community affairs, whose role went no further than serving husband and children. Still, the very act of sending the girls to school made a new statement, at least in the matter of the role of women: they began to be considered as a factor having influence on society. Education of the daughter and widening her horizons would enable her to be a better mother, in the sense of being able to impart a broader education to her children; thus, the importance of her standing in a society seeking to develop and move forward.<sup>14</sup> The tension between the desire to advance the Jewish woman and the expectations that she would fulfil her traditional obligations found expression in the demand by community leaders that the Alliance Israélite Universelle provide a teacher of French for the girls, but also teach them handicrafts.<sup>15</sup>

Although only a minor revolution, the opening of a school for girls in the Jewish community was of immeasurable importance. The backing of the Hakham Bashi Isaac Aboulafia for opening the school had been vital, and without it, the opening would not have been possible. This support provided a moral stamp of approval for the change taking place in the status of women. One immediate ramification of founding the

<sup>13</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 94. Heads of the Damascus community to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, received in June 1883.

<sup>14</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893; Rodrigue, A. (1989). *De l'instruction à l'émancipation*. Pp. 81-82.

<sup>15</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 94. Heads of the community in Damascus to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, received in June 1883.

school for girls was the establishment of a committee of Alliance women in Damascus. On the committee were fifteen women of the social and economic elite of the Damascene Jewish community, including the daughter of Rabbi Aboulafia.<sup>16</sup> This was the first organized community activity of Jewish women in Damascus.

### **The First Apprenticeship Workshop for Girls**

Within one year, the great success of the school for girls brought about another pioneering move on the part of the Alliance. This was the opening in Damascus of an institution for trade apprenticeship for girls. The idea of increasing productivity in the Jewish community was a fundamental element in the philosophy of the Alliance. Thus, after the founding of the agricultural school “Mikve Yisrael” next to Jaffa, the Alliance began establishing a network of trade schools and apprenticeship workshops for Jewish boys. In November 1884 the Alliance founded in Damascus a workshop for girls. This institution was the first of all the Alliance workshops for girls. In May 1885, the society also put into operation in Damascus its program for apprenticeship for boys. Students from the Alliance school were assigned to work with Muslim or Christian workshop owners, who in return for payment, taught them a trade. Later, the society set up workshops attached to its schools, and the apprentices worked in them and sold their produce. When the youths completed the period of apprenticeship, the Alliance gave them loans to buy the equipment needed for getting started (Rodrigue, 1989, pp. 89-95).<sup>17</sup> Although usually the subjects studied at the Alliance school were not the modern professions but instead were arts and handicrafts, this project was very highly thought of among Damascenes, since it directly improved and expanded the means at their service for supporting themselves. The project of apprenticeship for girls was particularly appreciated: the Damascenes discovered that the girls were able to earn their living themselves and no longer a burden on the men in their families, as had previously been the case. As the years went by, the enterprise caused a complete upheaval in the status of the Jewish women in Damascus, since they had become self-sufficient, independent of the men around them (Harel, *The Jewish “Girl-Singers” in Damascus*, 2005).

Some of the goals of the Alliance in Damascus were short term,

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<sup>16</sup> BAIU, 2<sup>ème</sup> sem. 1885-1<sup>er</sup> sem. 1886, 56.

<sup>17</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

while others were long term. On the one hand, the poor economic situation made it necessary to prepare the children to cope immediately with everyday needs. Alliance representatives admitted that it was not their intention to train people in such free professions as teachers, lawyers, and engineers, but rather as skilled workers, serious and honest. On the other hand, Alliance teachers sought to promote a change in habits, in ways of thinking, and in the local way of life. The graduates, both male and female, of the Alliance schools were the best agents for spreading the ideas of progress and modern culture in the families.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Revolution in the Talmud Torah**

Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia gave his support to the activities of the Alliance, both because of his world view – that saw nothing wrong in teaching secular subjects to young people – and thanks to his understanding that as a leader of the community, his most important mission was to aid the younger generation, both the sons and the daughters, to break out of the poverty and ugliness that were the lot of most of the Jewish population in Damascus.

Once it had reopened, the principal Moshe Fresco and the committee had been attempting to purchase a fitting building for the school or even to put up a new structure for that purpose.<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Abulafia, a short while after becoming the Hakham Bashi, mobilized all his energies to find an appropriate solution for housing the Alliance schools. He proposed helping purchase the most elegant group of houses in the Damascus Jewish community, the estate of members of the Farhi family. According to him, the palace of this family, that had lost its property at the time of the bankruptcy in 1875, was located in the heart of the Jewish quarter and contained many rooms, well ventilated and lit, large gardens and wide yards, and it was on offer at a reduced price.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Rabbi Aboulafia also aspired to introduce modern education into the system of traditional education. At the time of the bankruptcy, this system in Damascus was composed of several Talmud Torah schools serving mostly the sons of the poor. The sons of the wealthy studied in Christian institutions and with private teachers. The curriculum in the Talmud Torah schools included chiefly the study of

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<sup>18</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1886, 64-65.

<sup>19</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XE.E., Damas, 146, Fresco, 23.11.1880, 3.12.1880.

<sup>20</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 96, Aboulafia. Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia to the Alliance, 18 Av, 1884

Hebrew and sacred writings, on the lowest level. Until the economic collapse, the Talmud Torah schools were supported by contributions from the community well-to-do. But afterwards, the Torah scholars who had been teaching there began to operate them as a private business, without any monitoring or supervision. The Talmud Torah schools were dark, damp, and neglected. The sanitary conditions were very rundown, and the pupils became ill with various diseases. Since the salaries of the teachers were not guaranteed, they were forced to compete among themselves for the pupils. According to contemporary testimony, this competition was humiliating them to the level of becoming the servants of their students.<sup>21</sup>

Alliance representatives were shocked by the situation in the Talmud Torah schools and wanted to help them, first of all with advice for improving the sanitary conditions. They taught new habits of cleanliness, and quickly, there was a steep drop in the number of sick pupils.<sup>22</sup> When the economic situation deteriorated still further, and the support of the Talmud Torah schools by individuals in the community dwindled until it ceased entirely, the teachers turned to Yizhak Astruc, principal of the Alliance school, requesting that the Talmud Torah schools be transferred to the full supervision of the Alliance society. Their request was accompanied by many words of praise for the French-Jewish society, for its work and its educational methods.<sup>23</sup>

Although it was not mentioned specifically in their letter, the teachers hoped that their salaries as well would be paid by the Alliance. At the end of 1885, it was Rabbi Aboulafia who gave final permission for the transfer of full responsibility for the Talmud Torah schools to the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Without doubt, this was the greatest revolution in Jewish education in Damascus effected by the chief rabbi. All at once, 450 children were exposed to the world of modern education. Reforms were undertaken in administration and in studies; the salary of the rabbis was guaranteed – thus the opposition of several of them to the changes was disarmed, an accountant was appointed, and teaching materials were updated. Arabic and French lessons were included in the curriculum, as well as other basic subjects. Hebrew studies were also improved immeasurably. From then on, permanent cleaning workers

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<sup>21</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

<sup>22</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XII.E., Damas, 106b, Astruc. Talmud Torah teachers to Astruc, received on January 26, 1886.

<sup>23</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XII.E., Damas, 106b, Astruc. Talmud Torah teachers to Astruc, received on 2 Shvat, 1886.

were employed, and tuition was collected in an organized manner. With the help of contributions from Europe, especially from the Alliance society and the Anglo-Jewish Association of London, the dilapidated building was renovated, and the students, who had in the past been compelled to sit on the floor, from then on sat on benches.<sup>24</sup>

In this way the Talmud Torah schools were transformed from their backward state, where only sacred studies were taught, to reformed places of learning where secular studies were taught alongside the sacred ones. The support of Rabbi Aboulafia for this step played an important part in the upheaval in thinking experienced by many of the parents in Damascus. Even the most conservative among them could now impart a broader education to their children within the traditional Talmud Torah schools without feeling that they had handed over their children to a European-Jewish education. Within a few months, the number of students in the Talmud Torah schools jumped from 450 to 650.<sup>25</sup> During the following years, the Talmud Torah schools became preparatory schools towards full entry to the modern education system. Every six months, outstanding students transferred from the Talmud Torah to the boys' school of the Alliance.<sup>26</sup>

In the mid-80s, the Alliance society's success in Damascus reached its peak, as more and more of the community joined its ranks.<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Aboulafia became more and more certain as to the pure intentions of the Alliance. The French-Jewish society was not under suspicion, as far as he was concerned, and he believed that it had the capacity and the desire to help the Torah scholars expand and develop the various Jewish subjects. So without hesitation, Rabbi Aboulafia turned to the Alliance, requesting that they support publication of the second part of his book *Penei Yizhak*. He thereby gave expression to what he felt was the appropriate synthesis between sacred and secular.<sup>28</sup>

### **Fighting the Missionaries**

One of the motives for the emphatic position taken by Rabbi Aboulafia in support of the Alliance Israélite Universelle was the extensive

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<sup>24</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1885-1er sem. 1886, 49.

<sup>25</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1886, 35; 1er et 2ème sem. 1888, 51.

<sup>26</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893; JC, 12.4.1895, 18a.

<sup>27</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1885-1er sem. 1886, 134.

<sup>28</sup> AAIU, Syrie, I.C., Damas, 5. Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia to Alliance, 2 Nisan, 1887.

Christian missionary activity among members of the community. By the 90s, there were already two Protestant missionary schools active in Damascus, intended from the beginning for both female and male Jewish pupils, in addition to the schools of the various Catholic orders that allowed Jews to study in them.<sup>29</sup> Jewish visitors to Damascus were astounded at the wide-ranging cultural-educational activity of the Christian orders with the support of European nations and the United States. The enticement to study in the Protestant school was great because, as noted earlier, the studies were free, and needy families even received financial help there. The Protestant school was a meeting point for children from the two extremes of Jewish society: children of the poor who came because of the financial aid, and children of the well-to-do whose parents wished to impart to them a European education and also to enjoy the accompanying economic benefits.<sup>30</sup> Members of the Alliance pleaded with the rabbi to convince members of the community not to send their children to the mission, to which the rabbi replied:

*It is my duty and I shall fulfill it [...] believe me that from the first day I sat in the chair to teach, from twenty years ago until now, among the holy Damascus community...I have been and shall remain on guard, not to permit any son of Israel to walk amongst them, but my hand is not so firm at this time, since the supreme government...has accorded freedom and liberties, and each person shall do as seems right to him, and no one shall tell him what to do, especially since poverty spoils his good judgment and leads him away from God his maker. And for all that, I make every effort to chastise them that they join them not, since blessed be the Lord who has not denied us the redemption of the dignity of the teachings of those who founded and improved our Talmud Torah schools and iskula [school, école - modern schools] and are good and proper teachers to raise the flag of Israel and the flag of our holy Torah and teach the young sons of Israel all the mysteries of wisdom and enterprise and languages and the writings of the peoples of the world and to glorify and exalt the Torah.<sup>31</sup>*

The problem of the mission and religious conversion weighed

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<sup>29</sup> For details of the schools see France, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale (AECPC), Turquie, Damas, vol. 17, 85-109, Bertrand, 10.10.1893.

<sup>30</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, p. 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

<sup>31</sup> AAIU, Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 96, Aboulafia. Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia to Alliance, Damascus, 29 Nisan, 1892.



heavily upon other communities in the Middle East, but unlike in Europe, it never constituted a threat to their very existence (Borenstein-Makovetsky, 1892; Zohar, 1987). This important fact had an influence on the attitude to modern education in the Jewish communities in the region. In Europe, the fear of the influence of the Christian environment on modern education caused the community to turn in upon itself and to distance itself from the general enlightenment. On the other hand, in the Muslim Middle East, assimilation into Christian society did not threaten, trepidation about the Christian educational influence did not result in a blanket interdiction against the modern education but rather led to action meant to neutralize that influence. That approach, in fact, brought about a broadening of modern Jewish education, under rabbinical supervision.

Despite his unwavering world outlook, the Hakham Bashi's war against the mission did not always find practical expression. For example, it had been the customary practice in Damascus and other cities with Jewish communities for houses in the Jewish quarter to be rented to Christians, even to members of the mission.<sup>32</sup> Since the rabbis who preceded him had not protested in this matter – Rabbi Aboulafia allowed this to continue. He often hosted Christian travelers in his home to have discussions with them, until he acquired the reputation of “Christian lover” (Weld, 1881). This approach and the permission the rabbi gave to rent houses to missionaries were instrumental in arousing the Torah scholars of Damascus against him. At the beginning of the 90s, these Torah scholars began a war of no compromise against the mission (Gidney, 1908, pp. 558-560).

### **The Conflict with the Fanatics**

Two traditional educational institutions had the support of the Torah scholars who did not see eye to eye with Rabbi Aboulafia's conduct on educational matters. In this way they became bastions of fanaticism in Damascus. The first stronghold was the community school. It was actually a Talmud Torah in every aspect and was not under the supervision of the Alliance. Five rabbis taught in the school, and they made their living from the tuition collected from the students. According to contemporary testimony, the building that housed the school was neglected and ugly, and the curriculum included only religious subjects. When the Alliance requested extending its supervision

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<sup>32</sup> Aboulafia, *Penei Yizhak*, vol. 5. Izmir 1898, 15 v.

over this institution as well, the attempt was rejected by these rabbis. They were described by the French consul in Damascus – who was very interested in the success of Alliance as the carrier of the French culture to the Jewish communities in the Levant - as “preferring to wither in misery rather than accept the authority of a heretical concept.” (“aiment mieux végéter dans la misère plutôt que de se soumettre à une discipline impie”). The consul added:

*La population de cette école, véritable foyer de fanatisme, appartient du reste, à cette classe de sectaires intransigeants qui voient commettre la plus grave infraction à la loi mosaïque en tolérant l'étude de matières profanes, c'est à dire l'enseignement moderne. Pour eux la lecture de la bible résume toute la science.*

*(The student population of this school that is, indeed a stronghold of fanaticism, comes from the most fanatic and obstinate classes who believe that they will be committing the greatest transgression possible against the Torah if they tolerate secular studies, i.e., modern studies. For them, the literature of the Bible includes all of science.)<sup>33</sup>*

The second educational institution supported by the opponents of Rabbi Aboulafia was the orphanage founded by the well-to-do Raphael Levy Stambuli. About one hundred orphans lived there, and they were well cared for as long as he was alive. But in 1892 Stambuli died without taking care to ensure the continuing existence of the institution after his death, and if not for the help of several charitable families, the orphanage would have been closed. Three teachers taught there, sacred studies only. The attempts of the Alliance at sponsorship encountered the fierce opposition of the conservative Torah scholars.<sup>34</sup>

Why did the strength of religious fanaticism in Damascus during the second half of the 1880s increase to such an extent that the community was considered to be one of the most backward in all of the Middle East. At the beginning of the 90s, the French consul asserted that members of the community were clinging to their beliefs in superstitions and in blind religious fanaticism and that they practiced religion but without an understanding of its values. In his opinion, the fanaticism and the unique way of life of the Jews caused their alienation from the rest of the population, and their only connection with the gentiles was on a

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<sup>33</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

<sup>34</sup> AECPC, Turquie, Damas, vol. 17, 85-109, Gillois, 10.10.1893.

practical business level, i.e., commercial negotiations in the market.<sup>35</sup>

One of the reasons for this was that the promise of modernization and progress held out by the Alliance was not realized. This failure stands out that much more at the end of the nineteenth century, when Damascus was a large educational center comparable with that in Cairo (Tibawi, 1969, pp. 294-295). Signs of disappointment with the activity of the Alliance began to appear several years after the school for boys was opened. Many parents expected that after a few years of studies in the “European” school, their sons would emerge as teachers, engineers, lawyers, or would hold positions in the Ottoman bank, a European commercial firm, or the government tobacco company. According to Astruc, the school principal, the parents did not understand that it would be difficult for their sons to find positions because of the need to work on the Sabbath. Some of the parents who were disappointed with the results achieved through the education of their eldest children were not ready to pay tuition any longer for the education of their younger sons in that institution.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, one of the main problems that the Alliance had to confront was the lack of perseverance in studies and the phenomenon of dropout. This problem was especially severe among the girls. They continued to marry at the beginning of their adolescence and thus were not able to make use of the advantage that modern education had begun to impart to them. Sons of the well-to-do also dropped out, since their incomes were secure, and they could be absorbed in their parents’ businesses even without completing their studies. And as for the sons of the poor, they abandoned school the minute they were able to help augment the family income.<sup>37</sup>

Another problem that arose was the phenomenon of emigration. In the Alliance school those who remained, in effect, were those of the middle class, who knew to appreciate the education. These youth, according to the testimony of the school principal, departed from the old ways and became curious and eager. According to him, the horizons of these students broadened, and they became eager to know what was happening in the world around them and not only in and around Damascus. Some of the graduates entered new fields of business. The knowledge of the graduates enabled the merchants who employed them

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<sup>35</sup> AECPC, Turquie, Damas, vol. 17, 85-109, Gillois, 10.10.1893.

<sup>36</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1886, 64-65.

<sup>37</sup> AECCC, Damas, vol. 7, 169, Gillois, 20.1.1893.

to establish regular ties with the large industrialized and commercial cities in Europe.<sup>38</sup> The meeting with European culture and markets, on the one hand, and the realization that Damascus had little to offer to graduates with a modern Jewish education, on the other, resulted in a wave of emigration of Damascus' educated youth. The Alliance education, therefore, did not rejuvenate the Damascus community but rather the immigrant communities in the Diaspora (Harel, 2010b, pp. 250-253). The departure of the young educated ones left much power in the hands of the conservative elements in the community. They could now point to the damage that the Alliance education had wrought instead of its promised advantages.

The drop in level of the Torah studies in Damascus also helped bring about an increase in religious fanaticism. It is well known that ignorance brings fanaticism; how much more so when it is accompanied by the erosion of the traditional way of life and greater tolerance towards deviations from tradition (Friedman M. , 1975). Disdain for fulfilling the Mitzvot gradually became the accepted popular norm. The Jewish Damascene public was overly rigorous about observing certain Mitzvot, while at the same time trampling others underfoot (Harel, 1998a).

The fall in the level of the Torah scholars in Damascus left Rabbi Isaac Aboulafia almost unchallenged in his Torah knowledge and wisdom. This being the case, he became known as an aggressive rabbi who did not give much weight to the opinions of the Torah scholars in his own city (Goldstein, 1963). Surely, this reputation won him no admirers in Damascus. At the same time, it should be remembered that, like other rabbis in Middle Eastern communities who had political stature comparable to his, Rabbi Aboulafia understood the needs of his era and was therefore open in his approach to modern education. Most of the Torah scholars did not need to cope with the question of the ongoing daily existence of the community, confronting the authorities and the challenges of modernization, and they could ignore the social limitations of the official leadership of the community. Thus, preserving the traditional framework became their overarching concern (Harel, *The Motives for Change in the Attitude of the Rabbinic Elite in the Middle East towards Modernity*, 2002, p. 39). The disappearance of the veteran elites that had shown a great deal of openness towards European culture also led to an increase in the fanaticism and the withdrawal that were in total opposition to Rabbi Aboulafia's perception

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<sup>38</sup> BAIU, 2ème sem. 1886, 65; 1er et 2 eme sem. 1890, 52.

of his world. His receptivity toward western culture only increased the sense of dissatisfaction among one stratum of Torah scholars over his performance as Hakham Bashi. In their war against what they considered to be deviation from the tradition, the Torah scholars in Damascus challenged the leadership of Rabbi Aboulafia. His tolerant attitude toward those who, as they saw it, threatened the tradition, was worse, in their eyes than deviation itself. Since he was the spiritual leader of the community, his stand was of serious educational significance: members of the community were liable to draw the conclusion from it that such deviation was of little consequence.

As happened as well in other communities in the Middle East at the end of the nineteenth century, the internal dynamics of religious fanaticism in Damascus eventually led to a clash between the zealots and the religious political leadership – the Hakham Bashi (Friedman M., 1988, pp. 17-21). Rabbi Aboulafia was compelled to pay the price of remaining steadfast in his beliefs. At the end of October 1894, he was dismissed from the office of Hakham Bashi (Harel, *Between Intrigues and Revolution: The Appointment and Dismissal of Chief Rabbis in Baghdad, Damascus and Aleppo 1744-1914*, 2007, pp. 189-207).

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