The Jews of Kurdistan: History, Culture, and Exodus Before 2010

I. Introduction

Definition and Context

The Jews of Kurdistan, known in Hebrew as *Yehudei Kurdistan* [1] and among themselves by the ethnonym *Hōzāyē* [2], represent ancient Mizrahi Jewish communities originating from the mountainous region historically known as Kurdistan. This territory encompasses parts of modern-day northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Turkey.[1] As an ethnoreligious group, their Jewish identity is deeply intertwined with their ethnic origins, tracing back to the ancient Israelites.[4] They lived for centuries, often in relative isolation within the rugged Kurdish landscape, maintaining a distinct ethno-religious identity and unique cultural traditions.[5] Until their mass displacement from Arab and Muslim states beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, Kurdish Jews often lived as closed ethnic communities, preserving their heritage.[1] A significant challenge in reconstructing their history is the scarcity of written records produced by the community itself, necessitating reliance on oral traditions, external accounts, and later ethnographic studies.[1]

Scope and Significance

This report examines the history, culture, societal structure, and experiences of the Kurdish Jews from their ancient origins up to the year 2010. It covers their life within the diverse tapestry of Kurdistan under various ruling empires, their unique cultural and linguistic practices centered around Judeo-Aramaic [1], their interactions with neighboring groups, the pivotal mid-20th-century mass migration, primarily to the State of Israel, and their subsequent adaptation and cultural continuity in their new homeland. The Kurdish Jews hold a unique position in Jewish history, representing a community profoundly shaped by the Kurdish environment while steadfastly maintaining its distinct Jewish identity.

Overview of Key Themes

The report will explore the community's deep historical roots, tracing narratives of origin back to ancient Israelite exiles. It will delve into their experiences under successive empires, highlighting periods of both flourishing and hardship. Key aspects of their traditional society and culture, including language, religious observance, economic life, and unique customs like the Saharaneh festival, will be examined. The complex dynamics of intergroup relations with Muslim Kurds, Christians, and state authorities will be analyzed. A significant focus will be placed on the factors leading to the mass exodus in the mid-20th century, particularly Operation Ezra and Nehemiah, and the subsequent process of integration, cultural

preservation, and identity formation within Israel up to 2010.

II. Ancient Roots and Early History (Antiquity - 12th Century CE)

Traditional Origins: The Assyrian and Babylonian Exiles

A cornerstone of Kurdish Jewish identity is a potent oral tradition tracing their lineage to the ancient Israelites exiled from the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BCE.[2] This narrative aligns with biblical accounts, such as 2 Kings 17:6, which mention specific locations of exile potentially situated within the Kurdish regions, including Halah, Habor (possibly near the Khabur river), the Gozan River, and "the cities of the Medes" (northwestern Iran).[8] Some community members also hold the belief that their earliest ancestors arrived in the region later, during the time of Ezra the Scribe following the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE.[6] Scholarly assessments tend to view these traditions as having a basis in historical reality, suggesting that the Kurdish Jewish population likely incorporates descendants of these ancient exiled communities, often referred to as the "Lost Ten Tribes".[2] This deeply ingrained narrative of ancient origins in the Land of Israel, followed by exile to the very lands they inhabited for millennia, formed a powerful component of their collective identity.

Persian Empires (Achaemenid, Parthian, Sasanian)

The early history of Jews in the Kurdistan region is inseparable from the broader history of Jewish life under successive Persian empires, a presence dating back over 2,700 years.[11] Following the Neo-Babylonian exile, the Achaemenid emperor Cyrus the Great famously permitted Jews to return to Judea in 537 BCE, though many remained in the East.[12] Jewish communities persisted through the Parthian period. The rise of the Sasanian Empire in 226 CE marked a shift, with a renewed emphasis on Persian culture and the elevation of Zoroastrianism to the state religion, leading to periods of suppression for religious minorities, including Jews, as documented in inscriptions from the reign of Bahram II.[12] However, the Sasanian era also saw periods of relative tolerance and even favor. Shapur I (3rd century CE) maintained a noted friendship with the prominent Talmudic sage Shmuel, which benefited the Jewish community. Similarly, Shapur II (4th century CE), whose mother was reputedly Jewish according to rabbinical sources, was friendly with the Babylonian rabbi Raba, leading to the relaxation of oppressive laws.[12] The influence of Jewish figures at court, such as Queen Shushandukht—wife of Yazdgerd I and mother of Bahram V, herself the daughter of the Exilarch Huna b. Nathan—reportedly led to the construction of Jewish neighborhoods in several cities and secured benefits for the community in the 5th century CE.[12] Despite these periods of favor, Jews, like Christians, faced occasional persecution under rulers such as Yazdegerd II and Peroz I in the 5th century.[12]

The Kingdom of Adiabene

A unique episode in the region's history involves the Kingdom of Adiabene, located in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan. In the 1st century CE, the royal family, notably Queen Helena and her son King Monobaz II, converted to Judaism.[3] Their piety and generosity, including significant contributions to the Temple in Jerusalem, are praised in Talmudic sources, marking Adiabene as a significant, albeit transient, center of Jewish affiliation in the region.[3]

Early Medieval Period and First Accounts

Following the early centuries CE, detailed historical records specifically concerning Jewish communities in Kurdistan become scarce for a long period.[1] The first substantial external documentation emerges in the 12th century CE with the itineraries of Jewish travelers Benjamin of Tudela and Pethahiah of Regensburg.[1] Their accounts provide invaluable evidence of well-established and significant Jewish life in Kurdistan. They reported approximately 100 Jewish settlements across the region, indicating a substantial and prosperous population by that time.[1] Benjamin of Tudela specifically mentioned large communities, such as the one in Mosul, a major commercial and spiritual center adjacent to Kurdistan, which he estimated at 7,000 Jews.[2] This community enjoyed a degree of autonomy under a local leader (referred to as an exilarch).[2] These travelers noted that the Jewish populations in Kurdistan and Babylonia may have been augmented by refugees fleeing the violence of the Crusades in Syria and Palestine.[1]

The convergence of the community's own powerful origin narratives connecting them to the earliest Israelite exiles, the verifiable long-term presence of Jews in the wider Mesopotamian and Persian region since antiquity, and the documented existence of numerous established and thriving communities by the 12th century, all contributed to the formation of a deeply rooted sense of continuous belonging and distinct identity. This self-perception, likely reinforced by their linguistic distinctiveness (speaking Aramaic dialects) and the relative isolation afforded by the mountainous terrain, solidified their identity as an ancient community separate from surrounding populations, long before the advent of modern nationalism.

III. Life in Kurdistan: Medieval to Early Modern Era (12th - 19th Centuries)

David Alroy: The 12th Century Messianic Movement

The 12th century witnessed a significant event that emerged from within the Kurdish Jewish community: the messianic movement led by David Alroy (or Alroi). Originating from Amadia in Kurdistan around 1160 CE, Alroy was reportedly well-versed in biblical and Talmudic knowledge, having studied in Baghdad, and was also known for his familiarity with Muslim literature and alleged proficiency in magic or mysticism.[2] The political context of the time, marked by the weakening authority of the Seljuk Sultanate partly due to the Crusades,

created an environment of unrest conducive to such movements.[13] Alroy declared himself the Messiah, capitalizing on the desire for redemption among oppressed Jewish communities. He promised to overthrow the ruling powers, lead the Jews in a triumphant return to Jerusalem, and establish an independent kingdom.[2] He actively sought support, sending letters to Jewish communities in Mosul, Baghdad, and elsewhere, and appealing to warlike Jewish groups in mountainous regions like Adherbaijan.[13] His charisma and perhaps claims of supernatural abilities initially garnered him a considerable following.[3]

Alroy planned an attack on the citadel of his hometown, Amadia, instructing his followers to gather there armed but disguised as students.[13] Accounts suggest this revolt ultimately failed.[2] Stories recorded by Benjamin of Tudela, a key source for Alroy's life [9], recount his capture by the Sultan, a miraculous escape from prison, and further defiance.[13] Fearing widespread reprisals against Jewish communities, Jewish leaders in Baghdad and Mosul reportedly appealed to Alroy to abandon his messianic claims, but he persisted.[13] His movement ended with his assassination, allegedly carried out by his own father-in-law, possibly bribed by the local governor, Saif al-Din.[13] Despite its failure, Alroy's movement left a lasting impression and reflects the messianic fervor present within the community during a period of instability.

Ottoman Period (16th Century onwards)

With the Ottoman conquest of the region beginning in the 16th century, Kurdish Jews came under new rule. Some migration occurred within the empire; for instance, Jews from Kashan, Iran, moved into Ottoman territories during the 1700s and 1800s.[1] Initially, Ottoman rule was often perceived as more tolerant towards Jews compared to some previous regimes, allowing many communities to thrive.[14] Kurdish Jews became active participants in trade networks, particularly in the rural villages and towns of regions like modern-day southeastern Turkey (e.g., Gaziantep, Malatya).[1] However, the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire, particularly during the 19th century, brought increased instability and hardship. Central authority weakened, leading to greater local power struggles and contributing to rising persecution and discrimination against minority groups, including Kurdish Jews.[14] Furthermore, the endemic warfare among various Kurdish clans, among whom Jewish communities were often sparsely scattered, caused considerable suffering and likely contributed to population decline in certain areas.[6]

Asenath Barzani: The 17th Century Female Scholar

Amidst this backdrop, the 17th century produced one of the most remarkable figures in Kurdish Jewish history: Asenath Barzani (1590-1670). Born into the highly respected Barzani rabbinic family of Kurdistan, she received an exceptional education.[1] Her father, Rabbi Samuel Barzani, a renowned scholar and mystic who founded several yeshivas (rabbinical academies) in Kurdistan to address a perceived lack of spiritual leadership, had no sons and personally taught Asenath Torah and Talmud, preparing her to potentially succeed him.[17] Asenath herself wrote that she learned no other craft, dedicating her life entirely to sacred study from a young

age within her family's scholarly environment.[16] Her marriage to her cousin, Rabbi Jacob Mizrahi, was arranged with the explicit promise from him to her father that Asenath would be free from domestic duties to continue her scholarly pursuits.[16]
When her husband became head of the yeshiva in Amadiyah (some sources say Mosul) [1], he was reportedly so engrossed in his own studies that Asenath took on the responsibility of teaching the students.[17] Upon Rabbi Mizrahi's early death, leadership of the yeshiva passed directly to her.[1] She became renowned as the chief instructor of Torah in Kurdistan and was accorded the title *Tanna'it* (a term usually reserved for male Talmudic sages, signifying her exceptional status as a female scholar).[1] While not formally ordained as a rabbi in the modern sense, her role as head of a yeshiva and respected teacher was extraordinary for a woman in that era.[16] Her extant writings demonstrate mastery of Hebrew, Torah, Talmud, Midrash, and even Kabbalah, alongside lyrical prose.[17] She also authored liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*), including one expressing longing for Zion.[17] Despite the yeshiva facing persistent financial difficulties [17], her leadership ensured its continuation as a center of learning. Legends grew around her, involving miracles and divine intervention, further attesting to the high esteem in which she was held.[16]
The story of Asenath Barzani provides a compelling example of resilience and the high value placed on religious scholarship within the Kurdish Jewish community. While operating within a generally patriarchal society, her unique circumstances—her father's foresight and her own intellectual brilliance—allowed her to transcend conventional gender roles and achieve recognition as a major spiritual and intellectual leader. This highlights a capacity within the community, however rare, to recognize and elevate scholarly merit even when found in unexpected quarters.

Early Immigration to the Land of Israel

The connection to the Land of Israel remained a potent force throughout Kurdish Jewish history. Organized immigration (*Aliyah*) began earlier than for many other Mizrahi communities. As early as the late 16th century, a group of Kurdish rabbinic scholars migrated to Safed in the Galilee, then a major center of Kabbalah, where they established a distinct Kurdish Jewish quarter.[1] This initial movement was followed by smaller, intermittent waves of immigration during the subsequent centuries, including the 19th and early 20th centuries, driven by religious yearning and likely also by deteriorating conditions in parts of Kurdistan.[2] These early movements laid the groundwork for the larger-scale migrations to come.

IV. Society and Culture Before Mass Migration (Primarily late 19th - mid 20th Century)

Geographical Distribution and Settlement Patterns

Prior to the mass migrations of the mid-20th century, Kurdish Jews resided across the vast, mountainous territory of Kurdistan, dispersed in numerous villages and towns within the

borders of modern Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria.[1] Their settlement pattern was often characterized by small clusters of families, sometimes only five to ten households, or up to twenty, within larger Kurdish villages or towns.[6] While predominantly a rural population engaged in agriculture and local crafts [2], significant communities also existed in urban centers like Mosul [1] and towns such as Zakho, Amadia, and Dohuk in Iraqi Kurdistan [6], as well as communities in Iranian Kurdistan (e.g., related to historical presence in Kashan [1]) and parts of southeastern Turkey (e.g., Gaziantep, Malatya [1]). The rugged geography of Kurdistan contributed significantly to the relative isolation of many communities, fostering the preservation of distinct traditions and dialects.[2]

Table 1: Estimated Kurdish Jewish Population (Pre-Exodus)

Time Period	Region/Scope	Estimated Population	Source(s)
12th Century CE	Mosul	~7,000	[2]
Late 19th Century (1881)	Kurdistan (General)	12,000 - 18,000	[6]
c. 1948	Kurdistan (Overall)	~25,000	[19]
1950-1952 Airlift	Iraq (incl. Kurds)	120,000 - 130,000	[8]

Note: Estimates vary and represent different scopes (specific cities vs. entire region). The 1950-52 figure includes all Iraqi Jews airlifted, the majority of whom were Kurdish Jews from Iraq.

Table 2: Major Kurdish Jewish Settlements Mentioned (Pre-Exodus)

Settlement	Modern Country/Region	Source(s) Mentioning
Amadia	Iraq (Kurdistan)	[2]
Mosul	Iraq	[1]
Zakho	Iraq (Kurdistan)	[1]
Barzan	Iraq (Kurdistan)	[17]
Akre (Aqrah)	Iraq (Kurdistan)	[17]
Dohuk	Iraq (Kurdistan)	[15]
Bashkala	Turkey	[6]
Bitanura	Turkey/Iraq Border?	[6]
Daya	Turkey?	[6]
Kashan	Iran	[1]
Gaziantep	Turkey	[1]
Malatya	Turkey	[1]

Language and Communication

The primary vernacular language of the Kurdish Jews was a cluster of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic dialects, which they often referred to using terms like *Lishan Didan* ("our

language"), *Lishana Deni* ("language of ours"), or *Lishna Yahudiya* ("the Jewish language").[1] These dialects were direct descendants of the ancient Aramaic language that once dominated the Middle East before the rise of Arabic.[2] The persistence of Judeo-Aramaic served as a crucial marker of their distinct identity. Due to geographical separation, distinct dialects often developed in different towns and villages, usually intelligible but different from the Neo-Aramaic dialects spoken by local Christian (Assyrian/Chaldean) communities.[2] Their Aramaic incorporated loanwords from surrounding languages like Kurdish, Persian, Turkish, and Arabic, as well as Hebrew.[2] Some linguistic features, including specific idiomatic expressions, showed continuity with the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud and ancient Bible translations (Targums), suggesting deep historical roots for their language.[6]

Most Kurdish Jewish men, and many women, were also fluent in the local Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji being frequently mentioned [1]), which served as the lingua franca for commerce, interaction with their Kurdish neighbors, and participation in shared folklore and music.[2] Hebrew held a distinct, sacred role, primarily used for liturgical purposes (prayers, blessings), religious study by learned men, traditional writing, and rabbinic correspondence.[1] Hebrew phrases could also function as a form of secret communication among Jewish merchants.[2] Depending on the specific region within Kurdistan, Arabic (especially in Iraq for official matters or dealing with Arabs), Persian (in Iran), or Turkish (in Turkey) were also used.[1]

Religious Life and Practices

Kurdish Jews adhered to Judaism within the Mizrahi tradition, encompassing Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds.[1] Beginning in the 18th century, communities particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan experienced some degree of blending with Sephardic customs and liturgical practices.[1] Some observers characterized their traditional practice as a unique and archaic form of observant Judaism, distinct from modern denominations.[11] They maintained a strong religious identity and were known for their piety and adherence to Jewish law (*Halakha*) as traditionally interpreted within their communities.[2]

In smaller villages lacking a formal synagogue, religious services were commonly held in designated rooms within private homes.[6] Where synagogues existed, such as the historic 16th-century synagogue in Zakho [15], they functioned primarily as houses of prayer, with community members often preferring homes for social gatherings.[21] This preference might have been influenced by the location of some synagogues away from settlements, near water sources.[21] Local communities typically organized to hire essential religious functionaries: a *dayyan* (religious judge) to adjudicate disputes according to Jewish law via a *bet din* (religious court), and a *shoḥeṭ* (ritual slaughterer) responsible for *kashrut* (dietary laws), who often also served as the *mohel* performing circumcisions.[6] Circumcisions were sometimes even performed in the homes of Muslim neighbors. A community head, sometimes advised by prominent members, managed communal affairs, including the collection of taxes owed to the governing authorities.[6] Historically, in major centers like 12th-century Mosul, a more formal leadership structure existed under a local exilarch.[2]

Religious education for boys typically involved attending a *heder* (traditional school) from

around age six or seven until thirteen or fourteen. The curriculum focused on learning to read and write Hebrew, studying the Scriptures (Torah, Prophets, Writings), and sometimes progressing to the Mishnah.[6] Arithmetic might be taught using a calculating instrument called a "taspe".[6] Girls' formal religious education was often very limited, perhaps only learning the *Shema'* prayer, with their upbringing primarily focused on acquiring domestic skills.[6] Local rabbis were sometimes burdened with practical religious duties—such as ensuring meat was kosher (extracting forbidden sinews), performing circumcisions, and preparing amulets—leaving limited time for extensive teaching.[6] Efforts were made by external organizations like the Alliance Israélite Universelle to establish more modern schools for Jewish children in Kurdistan to improve educational standards.[6]

Kurdish Jewish religious life was marked by deep reverence for biblical figures and traditions connected to the land. They held particular veneration for the tombs of prophets believed to be buried in the region, most notably the Prophet Nahum in Alqosh (near Mosul), Jonah near ancient Nineveh (Mosul), and Obadiah in Mosul.[3] Annual pilgrimages were made, especially to Nahum's tomb following the festival of Shavuot, involving prayers and specific customs like placing dried fruit on the grave before consumption.[3] The tomb of Rabbi Abraham in Berdug was also considered sacred, attracting pilgrims.[6] Belief in the efficacy of amulets, sometimes prepared by itinerant collectors visiting from Jerusalem, was widespread.[6] They preserved ancient Jewish customs, such as the practice mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel (16:4) of rubbing newborn babies with salt, a custom also found among other groups in the region.[21] Beliefs in folk remedies and protections, like using onions to ward off demons, were also part of their tradition.[21] Life cycle events were observed according to Jewish law. Death and burial customs remained distinctly Jewish, even where other practices showed acculturation.[21] Burial occurred quickly after death, handled by the community's *ḥebra ḳaddisha* (sacred burial society), followed by the traditional seven-day mourning period (*shiva*), during which neighbors provided support and food.[6]

Economy and Occupations

The economic profile of Kurdish Jews was diverse, heavily influenced by their predominantly rural setting. Many were engaged in agriculture, working the land as farmers.[2] Ethnographer Erich Brauer's study is noted for capturing this aspect of subsistence agriculture, contrasting with the more common focus on urban, trade-oriented Jewish communities elsewhere.[21] Trade and commerce were also significant occupations. Many individuals operated small stores or acted as itinerant merchants and agents, particularly in the export trade.[6] Men frequently traveled through villages, bartering or purchasing local products like grain, cheese, wool, honey, wax, gall-nuts, and grapes, which they would then sell in larger towns or export, sometimes as far as Russia.[6] More established merchants maintained shops in the bazaars of cities and towns, typically operating from Sunday to Friday.[6] Children often contributed to the family economy by peddling small goods such as tobacco, fruit, and matches.[6] Other occupations included various crafts.

Economic life was often precarious. Merchants faced the constant danger of being waylaid

and robbed while traveling.[6] Poverty was a reality for many. Some poorer individuals resorted to misrepresenting themselves as healers or selling medicinal drugs without proper knowledge.[6] The burden of debt could be crushing, sometimes leading desperate men to abandon their families, leaving women and children in dire straits, occasionally forcing women into situations of exploitation to survive.[6] The community also suffered from the arbitrary actions of local police and officials, adding to their economic vulnerability.[6] The influence of local rabbis to mitigate these issues was often limited by their own poverty and sometimes lack of extensive formal training.[6]

Material Culture and Daily Life

Ethnographic work, primarily by Erich Brauer, documented aspects of Kurdish Jewish material culture before the mass migration, including details about their dwellings, traditional clothing (which showed influences from Persian styles for both men and women), and food preparation.[21] Social life revolved around strong family ties and community connections.[8] Society was generally patriarchal, with traditional gender roles observed, although, as seen with Asenath Barzani, exceptions were possible.[21] Marriage often occurred at a relatively young age.[9]

Cultural Expressions: Folklore, Music, and Traditions

Kurdish Jews possessed a vibrant cultural life rich in oral traditions. This included a large body of folktales, many of which were later collected and preserved by scholars like Yona Sabar.[25] Jewish storytellers adept at recounting Kurdish tales were reportedly appreciated by both Jewish and Muslim audiences, indicating a degree of shared cultural landscape.[2] Music was another area of cultural sharing, with Kurdish Jews participating in and preserving classical Kurdish musical traditions, some of which were common to both Jews and Muslims.[25]

A unique and cherished tradition was the *Saharaneh* festival.[3] Originally celebrated for several days immediately following Passover, it marked the arrival of spring. Families and communities would venture into nature, setting up encampments, often with decorated tents and bonfires.[25] The festival was characterized by feasting, singing traditional songs, lively dancing, storytelling, and enjoying the blossoming landscape.[8] Preparations would commence on the very night Passover concluded.[25] (This timing was later shifted to the intermediate days of Sukkot after immigration to Israel, reportedly due to the popularity of the Moroccan Jewish post-Passover celebration, Mimouna [3]). Other distinct customs included special traditions observed by women, such as *Leil Purim* (Purim night), which involved ritual bathing and activities imitating Queen Esther.[25]

Erich Brauer's Ethnography

The most comprehensive scholarly insight into Kurdish Jewish life before the exodus comes from the work of German-Jewish ethnographer Erich Brauer (1895-1942). During the 1930s, while living in Jerusalem, Brauer conducted extensive interviews with Kurdish Jewish immigrants.[1] His research resulted in the manuscript "The Jews of Kurdistan," the only

full-scale ethnological study ever undertaken on this community prior to its dispersal.[22] Brauer documented their material culture (housing, clothing, food), life cycle events (birth, marriage, death), religious beliefs and practices, economic activities, social organization, and their relations with their Muslim neighbors.[21] Brauer died before the work was widely published; anthropologist Raphael Patai completed the manuscript, translated it into Hebrew (published 1947), and later edited and published an updated English version (1993).[22] Patai supplemented Brauer's original work with additional data, clarifications, and comparative notes on other Oriental Jewish communities.[23] While acknowledging the immense value of Brauer's unique documentation, Patai also noted areas where further depth might have been beneficial, such as the nuances of language use, the specific beliefs underpinning religious ceremonies, and the Jews' perspectives on their Kurdish Muslim and Nestorian Christian neighbors.[21] Brauer's work remains an invaluable historical document, capturing a world that largely ceased to exist after the mass migration of 1950-51.[23]

The cultural tapestry of Kurdish Jewry reveals a dynamic interplay between the preservation of ancient Jewish traditions and adaptation to the surrounding environment. They maintained core elements of Jewish identity—religious law, Hebrew literacy for sacred purposes, distinct life cycle rituals (especially surrounding death [21]), and crucially, their Judeo-Aramaic language.[2] Simultaneously, they participated in the broader Kurdish cultural sphere, evidenced by shared musical traditions [25], folklore [2], bilingualism in Kurdish [2], and adoption of certain material culture elements like clothing styles.[21] Some practices, like veneration of local shrines associated with prophets, might represent a syncretic blend of Jewish tradition and local custom.[6] This careful balancing act allowed them to navigate life as a distinct minority within the Kurdish lands, selectively acculturating while safeguarding the essential markers of their unique heritage. This process reflects the common experience of a minority group adapting aspects of the majority culture for pragmatic reasons while maintaining core identity boundaries.

V. Intergroup Relations and Coexistence (Before mid-20th Century)

The relationships between Kurdish Jews and their neighbors were complex and varied significantly depending on time, location, and the specific groups involved.

Relations with Muslim Kurds

Multiple sources describe the relationship between Kurdish Jews and their Muslim Kurdish neighbors as generally characterized by coexistence and often friendliness, particularly when contrasted with relations involving Christian groups.[6] Accounts mention mutual respect [19] and even participation by Muslims in some aspects of Jewish folk life, as noted by Brauer.[21] There are reports that upon the Jews' departure in the 1950s, many Kurds mourned their absence and, in some cases, helped maintain the abandoned synagogues.[1]

However, this picture of harmony must be qualified. As a non-Muslim minority in a

predominantly Muslim society, Jews existed in a subordinate position, implicitly subject to the conditions of *dhimmi* status, even if not always strictly enforced in the same way across different periods and regions.[21] They were vulnerable to the region's chronic instability, including the frequent and violent conflicts between rival Kurdish clans or tribes, which inevitably impacted Jewish communities living amongst them.[6] They also suffered from arbitrary actions and exploitation by local authorities, police, or powerful tribal leaders (Aghas), who were often Kurds themselves.[6] One comment included in the source material makes strong allegations of historical cruelty, abuse, and violence (including murder, rape, and plunder) perpetrated by Kurds, specifically mentioning Aghas, against Jewish residents.[19] While this represents a starkly negative portrayal that contrasts with other accounts of general coexistence, it may reflect specific historical incidents, abuses of power by local elites in certain areas, or potentially an Assyrian perspective that views Kurdish interactions with all minorities through a lens of historical conflict. It underscores that relations were not uniformly peaceful and that power imbalances could lead to exploitation and violence.

Relations with Christians (Assyrians, Nestorians, Armenians)

Relations between Kurdish Jews and the various Christian communities in the region (primarily Assyrians/Nestorians and Armenians) are often depicted as more fraught than those with Muslim Kurds.[6] A significant source of tension was the persistence of the anti-Jewish blood libel accusation—the false belief that Jews used Christian blood for Passover rituals—which fostered deep-seated animosity.[6]

Understanding this dynamic also requires acknowledging the broader and often violent history between Kurds and Assyrian Christians.[26] Numerous historical accounts document periods of intense conflict, massacres, plunder, forced conversions, and displacement targeting Assyrians, perpetrated by Kurdish groups (sometimes in conjunction with Ottoman or Turkish forces).[26] These conflicts stemmed from complex factors including territorial disputes, religious antagonism, political maneuvering (e.g., Assyrians being seen as foreign allies by Kurds and Arabs), and the rise of nationalist sentiments.[26] The Simele Massacre of 1933, where Iraqi forces led by a Kurdish general killed hundreds of Assyrians, is a particularly traumatic event in Assyrian collective memory.[26] This history of persecution informs the perspective expressed in [19], which vehemently denies Kurdish friendship towards either Jews or Christians and controversially re-designates Kurdish Jews as "Assyrian." While Jews certainly suffered from the general instability that also affected Christians, their specific relationship with Kurds appears to have followed a different trajectory than the often violently antagonistic one between Kurds and Assyrians.

Relations with Governing Powers (Ottoman/Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian)

As subjects of large empires and later, modern nation-states, Kurdish Jews were under the authority of distant central governments whose control over the mountainous periphery could be tenuous. They experienced the effects of imperial decline, such as the instability and increased discrimination during the late Ottoman period.[14] They were also subject to the

actions of local officials and police forces, often suffering from arbitrary treatment and corruption.[6]

The redrawing of Middle Eastern borders after World War I and the rise of nation-states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria) across Kurdistan created new pressures and challenges.[18] In Turkey, the state's official policy of denying Kurdish identity and suppressing Kurdish language and culture created a hostile environment for all Kurds, though the provided sources focus more intensely on the situation in Iraq as the primary driver of the Jewish exodus.[27] In Iraq, the rise of Arab nationalism, amplified by pro-Nazi propaganda during the 1940s, and the escalating Arab-Israeli conflict after 1948 led to a dramatic and catastrophic deterioration in the status and security of the entire Iraqi Jewish community, including those in Kurdistan.[9]

Ultimately, intergroup relations for Kurdish Jews were multifaceted and cannot be reduced to simple narratives of uniform friendship or perpetual conflict. Local coexistence and even mutual respect seem to have been common in many places and times, particularly with Muslim Kurdish neighbors. However, this existed alongside the realities of minority subordination, vulnerability to regional violence and instability (including inter-Kurdish conflicts), specific tensions with Christian groups fueled by religious prejudice, and exploitation by local power figures. The decisive factor leading to the community's departure, however, appears to have been the state-level political and ideological shifts, particularly the rise of aggressive Arab nationalism in Iraq following the establishment of Israel, which rendered continued Jewish life there untenable.

VI. Transition and Exodus: The Mid-20th Century

The mid-20th century marked a dramatic and irreversible turning point for the Jews of Kurdistan, culminating in the transfer of almost the entire population from their ancestral homeland to the nascent State of Israel.

Rise of Zionism and Early 20th Century Migration

The ancient longing for Zion, deeply embedded in Jewish religious tradition, found fertile ground among Kurdish Jews, who are often described as having been intensely Zionist.[3] This sentiment was nurtured over generations through religious texts, prayers, and contact with emissaries and travelers from the Land of Israel who brought news and teachings.[9] As noted earlier, small-scale *Aliyah* had occurred since the 16th century. This intensified in the early 20th century, with thousands more Kurdish Jews migrating to British Mandate Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s.[9] Some individuals became actively involved in the Zionist movement and pre-state underground organizations. A notable example is Moshe Barazani, whose family immigrated from Iraqi Kurdistan in the late 1920s; he joined the Lehi (Stern Gang) and became one of the *Olei Hagardom* (those executed by the British).[1] This growing Zionist commitment provided a strong "pull" factor when conditions in their home countries deteriorated.

Deteriorating Conditions (Especially in Iraq)

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 triggered a swift and severe backlash against Jewish communities in many Arab countries, with Iraq being a prime example.[9] The situation for Iraqi Jews, including the large Kurdish Jewish population within its borders, worsened dramatically. The Iraqi government enacted increasingly hostile measures: public violence against Jews escalated, Zionism was declared a capital offense, and emigration to Israel, already restricted since 1947, became punishable by imprisonment.[20] Anti-Jewish sentiment was fueled by nationalist rhetoric and pro-Nazi propaganda that had gained traction during the preceding years.[19] The traumatic memory of the Farhud pogrom in Baghdad in 1941, a brutal outbreak of anti-Jewish violence primarily driven by Arab nationalists, cast a long shadow of fear.[18] In the early 1950s, a series of mysterious bombings targeted synagogues and other Jewish gathering places in Baghdad, further intensifying the climate of insecurity and pressure to leave.[19]

Operation Ezra and Nehemiah (1950-1952)

Against this backdrop of persecution and fear, a crucial window of opportunity opened. In 1950, Israel enacted the Law of Return, granting automatic citizenship to any Jew immigrating to the country.[20] Concurrently, in a move likely driven by a complex mix of motives including economic pressure and perhaps underestimating the scale of Jewish desire to leave, the Iraqi government passed a special law in 1950/51 temporarily permitting Jews to emigrate.[18] However, this permission came at a steep price: emigrants were forced to renounce their Iraqi citizenship permanently and liquidate their businesses and sell their property, often at drastically reduced prices.[18] They were allowed to take only minimal personal belongings (limited to 66 pounds of luggage) and a small amount of cash (around $140), with valuable items like jewelry explicitly forbidden.[20]

Despite these harsh conditions, the response from the Iraqi Jewish community was overwhelming. Within the first month of registration opening, some 50,000 Jews signed up, and the number quickly swelled to 90,000, stunning the Iraqi government which had anticipated perhaps only 8,000 emigrants.[20] This mass registration threatened the collapse of administrative institutions where Jews played significant roles.[20] Zionist activists issued manifestos urging Jews to seize the opportunity, invoking biblical calls to "flee, daughter of Babylon".[20]

The logistical challenge of transporting such a vast number of people was met through a massive airlift operation coordinated by Israel, Zionist organizations, and international Jewish aid groups like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).[19] Named "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah" after the biblical figures who led the return from Babylonian exile to rebuild Jerusalem [20], the airlift began in May 1951 and lasted for over a year. Using aircraft chartered from the Near East Transport Company and Israel's national airline, El Al, more than 120,000 (some estimates reach 130,000) Iraqi Jews were flown to Israel, initially via Cyprus and later through direct flights from Baghdad to Lod airport.[8] Personal accounts recall difficult conditions on the flights, such as passengers having to sit on the floor.[18] This operation encompassed the vast majority of Kurdish Jews residing in Iraq.[1] Concurrently, almost all

Kurdish Jews from Iranian Kurdistan also made their way to Israel during this same period [1], along with others from Kurdish areas in Turkey and Syria.[28]

End of an Era

By the time Operation Ezra and Nehemiah concluded in early 1952, only a tiny remnant of Iraq's ancient Jewish community, estimated at around 6,000 individuals, remained.[20] The mass exodus effectively brought millennia of vibrant Jewish presence in the lands of Kurdistan to an abrupt end.[21] The community's center of gravity had decisively shifted from its ancestral towns and villages in the Middle East to the State of Israel.

The rapid and near-total departure of Kurdish Jews can be understood through the interplay of powerful forces. Severe "push" factors—escalating persecution, state-sanctioned discrimination, the stripping of economic assets, violence, and pervasive fear, particularly in Iraq—made continued life untenable. Simultaneously, strong "pull" factors—a deeply ingrained religious and Zionist yearning for return to the Land of Israel, the concrete reality of the newly established Jewish state offering refuge and citizenship under the Law of Return—provided a compelling alternative. The Iraqi government's brief, perhaps miscalculated, decision to permit emigration, despite the punitive conditions attached, acted as the critical catalyst that allowed these forces to converge, resulting in one of the most dramatic population transfers in modern Jewish history. The success of the operation also testified to the organizational capacity of Israeli and international Jewish bodies in responding to the crisis.

VII. The Israeli Experience (1950s - 2010)

The arrival of tens of thousands of Kurdish Jews in Israel during the early 1950s marked the beginning of a new chapter, characterized by the challenges of adaptation, the process of integration into a new society, and the efforts to preserve their distinct cultural heritage.

Arrival and Settlement

The immigrants arriving through Operation Ezra and Nehemiah often first passed through temporary transit camps known as *Ma'abarot*, which provided basic shelter and services while more permanent housing was arranged.[20] Initial living conditions could be rudimentary; one personal account recalls families living in tin huts upon arrival.[18]

A significant concentration of Kurdish Jews, especially those arriving from Iraq, settled in Jerusalem and its surrounding areas.[1] Neighborhoods like Katamonim in Jerusalem became known for their large Kurdish populations.[8] In these areas, the community established its own synagogues and sometimes schools, maintaining communal cohesion.[8] Reflecting their largely rural background in Kurdistan, Kurdish immigrants also played a major role in Israel's agricultural development, founding over 30 *moshavim* (cooperative agricultural villages) across the country.[1] This pattern of settlement, combining urban concentration with agricultural pioneering, shaped the community's early footprint in Israel.

Integration Challenges and Socio-Economic Adaptation

The transition from the often traditional, rural, and mountainous environment of Kurdistan to the developing, more urbanized, and socially different society of Israel presented significant challenges.[8] Many immigrants arrived with agricultural backgrounds and skills that were not always easily transferable to the Israeli economy of the 1950s and 60s. Initial employment for many Kurdish Jews was found in physically demanding sectors like construction, agriculture, selling produce in markets, or opening small businesses, including restaurants featuring Kurdish cuisine which gained popularity.[8]

Like other Mizrahi immigrants arriving during this period from Middle Eastern and North African countries, Kurdish Jews faced the broader challenges of integration into an Israeli society whose institutions and cultural norms were largely shaped by the earlier waves of Ashkenazi (European) immigrants.[28] While specific details of discrimination against Kurdish Jews as a distinct group are not heavily elaborated in the provided sources beyond the general Mizrahi context, some studies note that their unique identity was sometimes overlooked, with Kurdish Jews being subsumed under broader categories like "Babylonian" or Iraqi Jews.[28]

Over subsequent decades, socio-economic adaptation progressed. Later generations born or raised in Israel increasingly pursued higher education and entered a wider range of professions, including medicine, technology, business, and public service.[8] By 2010, many Kurdish Jews and their descendants had achieved full integration into various facets of Israeli society.[19]

Cultural Preservation and Transformation

Integration into Israeli society occurred alongside concerted efforts to maintain and adapt Kurdish Jewish cultural traditions. A major transformation involved language. While the first generation often arrived speaking Judeo-Aramaic and Kurdish dialects, subsequent generations increasingly adopted Hebrew as their primary language, reflecting national policy and social integration.[8] Some immigrant parents actively encouraged their children to speak only Hebrew upon arrival to facilitate integration.[18] As a result, Judeo-Aramaic as a daily spoken language became increasingly rare among Israeli Kurds over time.[3]

Despite the language shift, many cultural practices endured. Religious observance continued, with communities maintaining their specific liturgical customs in dedicated synagogues.[8] Strong family ties remained a hallmark of the community.[8] Perhaps the most visible expression of cultural continuity was the preservation of the *Saharaneh* festival. Although shifted from its original post-Passover timing to the intermediate days of Sukkot [3], it evolved into a major annual public event in Israel, attracting thousands of participants. These celebrations became important occasions for showcasing and transmitting Kurdish Jewish identity through traditional food, music, dancing, and communal gathering.[3] Smaller domestic traditions, like the use of samovars for making tea, also persisted among some families.[18]

The community also contributed notable figures to Israeli public life, culture, and politics. Examples include Yitzhak Mordechai, who served as a high-ranking general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and later as Minister of Defense and Minister of Transportation [15], and

the singer Itzik Kala, known for performing in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Kurdish.[19]
By 2010, the identity of Israeli Jews of Kurdish descent reflected this complex process. The vast majority identified strongly as Israelis.[8] Yet, concurrently, they maintained a powerful sense of cultural connection and loyalty to their Kurdish heritage and ancestral homeland.[8] This dual identity was not seen as contradictory but rather as an integral part of their experience.

Transnational Ties and Relations with Kurdistan (Pre-2010)

Despite the physical separation and the passage of time, emotional and cultural ties between the Kurdish Jewish community in Israel and the Kurdistan region persisted and, in some ways, deepened, particularly concerning the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This enduring connection manifested in various ways.[8]
Organizations emerged in Israel dedicated to fostering Israeli-Kurdish relations and friendship.[10] Israeli Kurds often expressed strong political interest in and support for Kurdish aspirations in the region, viewing a kinship between the two peoples based on shared experiences of persecution and statelessness.[4] While the large-scale public demonstrations of support for Kurdish independence occurred later (e.g., during the 2017 KRI referendum [19]), the underlying sentiment was present well before 2010.
Personal connections also endured. There were instances of travel between Israel and the KRI, with some Israeli Kurds visiting their former homeland to explore family roots or reconnect with the landscape of their heritage.[19] Increasingly, Muslim Kurds from the KRI also began visiting Israel, sometimes participating in cultural events like the Sahareneh festival alongside their former Jewish neighbors, indicating a degree of mutual desire to maintain connections.[19] This ongoing interaction led some scholars to debate whether the Kurdish Jewish community in Israel could be considered a "diaspora" in relation to Kurdistan, maintaining significant transnational ties and a sense of connection to a former homeland, even while being fully integrated citizens of Israel.[28]
The experience of Kurdish Jews in Israel up to 2010 thus illustrates a pattern of successful integration into the national fabric—socio-economically, politically, and linguistically—combined with the resilient preservation of a distinct ethno-cultural identity rooted in their unique history and origins in Kurdistan. They navigated the pressures of assimilation inherent in the Israeli "melting pot" ideology of the early state years while actively cultivating and celebrating their specific heritage through communal institutions, cultural practices like Sahareneh, and enduring emotional and sometimes political links to Kurdistan. This trajectory demonstrates not a simple erasure of origins, but a complex negotiation resulting in a hyphenated identity: proudly Israeli, yet indelibly connected to their Kurdish past.

VIII. Conclusion

Summary of Journey

The history of the Jews of Kurdistan spans millennia, rooted in ancient traditions linking them to the earliest Israelite exiles in Assyria and Babylonia. For centuries, they carved out a distinct existence within the mountainous landscapes of Kurdistan, developing unique cultural and linguistic traditions centered around their Judeo-Aramaic dialects. Living under successive empires—Persian, Ottoman, and later within the borders of modern Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria—they experienced periods of relative stability and cultural flourishing, producing notable scholars like Asenath Barzani, alongside times of hardship, instability, and discrimination. Their society was characterized by strong communal bonds, deep religious piety marked by unique local customs and veneration of prophetic sites, and a complex web of relations with their diverse neighbors, most notably Muslim Kurds.

Pivotal Exodus

The mid-20th century represents a watershed moment in Kurdish Jewish history. Driven by a confluence of factors—intense Zionist aspirations, escalating persecution and violence particularly in post-1948 Iraq, and a brief window allowing emigration under harsh conditions—the vast majority of the community undertook a mass migration. Operation Ezra and Nehemiah (1950-1952) airlifted the bulk of Iraqi Jewry, including most Kurdish Jews from that country, to the newly established State of Israel, effectively transferring the demographic and cultural center of Kurdish Jewry from its ancestral lands to Israel.

Status by 2010

By 2010, the Kurdish Jewish community in Israel, estimated to number around 200,000 or more individuals (including descendants) [1], had become an integral part of Israeli society. While facing initial challenges of adaptation, particularly for those from rural backgrounds, subsequent generations largely integrated socio-economically and adopted Hebrew as their primary language. Nonetheless, they successfully maintained a strong and distinct Kurdish Jewish cultural identity. This was evident in the continued vibrancy of traditions like the Saharaneh festival, the persistence of unique culinary and musical heritage, strong family and community networks often centered in specific neighborhoods or agricultural settlements, and an enduring emotional, cultural, and sometimes political connection to Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the Jewish presence within Kurdistan itself had dwindled to near extinction, with only a handful of individuals or families remaining.[9]

Legacy

The journey of the Kurdish Jews is a testament to the resilience of cultural and religious identity across vast stretches of time and through profound geographical and political transformations. Their heritage, forged over millennia in the distinctive environment of Kurdistan, was successfully transplanted and adapted to the new reality of life in Israel. By 2010, they stood as a vibrant community within the Israeli mosaic, embodying a unique synthesis of ancient Jewish roots, centuries of life intertwined with Kurdish culture, and integration into the modern Jewish state, while still cherishing the distinct legacy of *Yehudei Kurdistan*.

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