Ancient Roots, Imperial Rule, and Communal Life: The Jews of Kurdistan Before 1948

I. Introduction

A. Establishing the Context

Kurdistan, the "Land of the Kurds," represents a vast, mountainous, and historically diverse geo-cultural region spanning the frontiers of contemporary Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.[1] For millennia, this territory, encompassing the northwestern Zagros and eastern Taurus mountain ranges, has been predominantly inhabited by Kurdish populations, alongside a complex mosaic of other ethnic and religious groups.[3] Among the most ancient of these communities were the Jews of Kurdistan, whose presence in the region stretches back over 2,500 years.[6] Traditions link their origins to the very foundations of the Jewish Diaspora, specifically the exile of the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BCE.[6] The subsequent Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE further cemented a significant Jewish presence in neighboring Mesopotamia, which became a major center of Jewish religious and intellectual life, deeply influencing the communities in adjacent Kurdistan.[11]

B. Defining the Scope and Purpose

This report undertakes a detailed historical examination of the relationship between the Kurdish people and the Jewish communities residing within Kurdistan, focusing specifically on the period *before* the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This temporal boundary is crucial, as the events surrounding Israel's founding precipitated a dramatic and near-total exodus of Jews from Kurdistan and the broader Middle East in the early 1950s, fundamentally altering the demographic landscape and severing millennia-old ties.[16] The pre-1948 era, therefore, represents a distinct historical epoch characterized by long-term coexistence, interaction, and adaptation within the specific socio-political contexts of Kurdistan under various empires.

The relationship between Kurds and Jews was far from uniform. It fluctuated significantly across different historical periods, from the relative autonomy observed by medieval travelers to the complex dynamics under Ottoman and Persian imperial rule, and the eventual rise of modern nationalisms.[27] Geographic variations were also pronounced; the experiences of Jews in the predominantly Sunni Kurdish regions under Ottoman control (modern Iraq and Turkey) differed from those in the Shi'a-dominated Persian sphere (modern Iran).[34] Furthermore, interactions varied depending on the social setting – the dynamics within established urban centers like Mosul, Amadiya, Zakho, Sanandaj, or Urmia contrasted with the realities of rural

life under the direct influence of powerful Kurdish tribal chieftains, known as Aghas.[22]

C. Note on Sources and Historiography

Reconstructing the history of Jews in Kurdistan presents unique challenges, primarily due to the scarcity of written historical records produced *by* the community itself prior to the 20th century.[16] Consequently, understanding their pre-1948 experience requires a careful synthesis of diverse source materials. Early glimpses are provided by medieval Jewish travelers like Benjamin of Tudela and Petachiah of Regensburg.[6] Later European travelers and officials, such as Benjamin II, David d'Beth Hillel, Claudius James Rich, Isabella Bird Bishop, and Gertrude Bell, offer valuable, though often biased, observations from the 19th and early 20th centuries.[9]

From the late 19th century onwards, reports from organizations like the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) provide insights into social conditions and educational initiatives, albeit framed by their own "civilizing mission" agenda.[12] Crucially, the mass emigration after 1948 enabled extensive oral history projects, notably by scholars like Mordechai Zaken and Yona Sabar, capturing the invaluable memories and lived experiences of the last generation to live in Kurdistan.[7] Ethnographic studies, focusing on material culture and daily life, further enrich the picture.[27]

The fragmented nature of these sources necessitates a critical approach. European accounts often carry Orientalist undertones [40], while AIU reports were designed to justify intervention.[56] Oral histories, though deeply valuable, are inevitably shaped by memory and the experiences of displacement and resettlement in Israel.[22] Furthermore, historical narratives from all sides, including Kurdish perspectives, can be influenced by contemporary political agendas and the selective use of "negative myths" to delegitimize opposing groups.[24] Constructing a balanced pre-1948 history therefore requires acknowledging these limitations, carefully triangulating evidence from diverse sources, and remaining attentive to the potential biases inherent in each.

II. Deep Roots: Jewish Communities from Antiquity to the Medieval Era

A. Origins and Early Presence

The Jewish presence in the lands encompassing Kurdistan is ancient, deeply woven into the earliest narratives of the Jewish Diaspora. A strong tradition, recounted by Kurdish Jews themselves and noted by later travelers, links their origins to the Ten Lost Tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel, exiled by the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BCE.[6] Biblical accounts record that these exiles were settled in locations such as "Halah, in Habor, by the Gozan River, and in the cities of Media" (II Kings 17:6) – areas geographically situated within or adjacent to the historical region of Kurdistan.[6] This connection is further reinforced by linguistic associations, such as the Aramaic translator Onkelos rendering the biblical

"mountains of Ararat" as the "mountains of Kardu," a clear reference to Kurdistan.[9]
The subsequent Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE, following the conquest of the Kingdom of Judah, brought another significant wave of Jewish settlement to Mesopotamia.[6] While many eventually returned to Judea under the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great, a substantial community remained, establishing Babylonia as a preeminent center of Jewish learning and cultural development for centuries.[18] The proximity and interaction between Babylonian Jewry and the communities in the mountainous Kurdish regions undoubtedly played a role in shaping the latter's identity and traditions.
Further adding to the complex tapestry of origins is the historical Kingdom of Adiabene, situated in the heart of Kurdistan during the Second Temple era (1st century CE). The royal family of Adiabene, notably Queen Helena and her son King Monobaz II (or Izates), converted to Judaism, along with, reportedly, many of their subjects.[6] These royal converts were known for their piety and generosity towards the Temple in Jerusalem.[6] It is plausible that descendants of these converts became integrated into the existing Jewish communities of Kurdistan.[9] Talmudic sources acknowledging the acceptance of converts from "Kardu" (Yev. 16a) lend credence to this possibility.[9] Archeological findings near Urmia, including artifacts with Jewish iconography dating potentially to the 8th century BCE, provide material evidence supporting this long history of settlement.[123]

B. Medieval Jewish Life in Kurdistan

By the medieval period, Jewish life in Kurdistan appears to have been well-established and widespread. The accounts of 12th-century Jewish travelers, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela and Rabbi Petachiah of Regensburg, are invaluable primary sources. They reported the existence of around 100 Jewish settlements across the region, indicating a substantial and dispersed population.[6]
Benjamin of Tudela's description of Amadiya (in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan) is particularly striking. He recorded a Jewish community numbering approximately 25,000 individuals, including notable scholars, who primarily spoke Aramaic, which he referred to as the "language of the Targum".[6] This linguistic continuity, preserving a form of Aramaic similar to that used in the Talmudic era, became a defining characteristic of Kurdish Jewry for centuries.[6]
These travelers also noted the presence of well-established and prosperous Jewish communities in Mosul, a major city situated in close proximity to Kurdistan proper.[8] Mosul served as a significant commercial and spiritual hub, and its Jewish community reportedly enjoyed a degree of autonomy in managing its internal affairs.[16] The relative stability and prosperity of these communities attracted Jewish refugees fleeing violence elsewhere. During the 12th century, Jews escaping the Crusader onslaught in Syria and Palestine sought refuge in Babylonia and Kurdistan.[6] Similarly, in the mid-13th century, the Mongol invasions prompted Jews from major centers like Baghdad to migrate north and west into Kurdish areas, further augmenting the existing communities.[6]

C. David Alroy and Messianism

The 12th century also witnessed the emergence of a significant messianic movement centered in Kurdistan, led by a figure named David Alroy (originally Menahem ben Solomon).[6] Born in Amadiya, Alroy was reportedly well-versed in Jewish law, having studied under prominent figures in Baghdad, and was also known for his knowledge of Muslim literature and alleged skills in magic.[126]

The timing of Alroy's movement, around 1160 CE, coincided with a period of considerable turmoil in the region, marked by the Crusades and the weakening authority of the Seljuk Sultanate.[126] This instability created fertile ground for messianic fervor. Alroy declared himself the Messiah, promising to liberate the Jewish people from Muslim rule, lead them to recapture Jerusalem, and establish himself as their king.[15] He actively sought followers, sending letters to Jewish communities in Mosul, Baghdad, and the warlike Jewish tribes reportedly living in the mountains of Adherbaijan.[126] His charisma and reputed magical abilities apparently convinced many.[126]

Alroy's plan involved seizing the citadel of his hometown, Amadiya.[126] He instructed his supporters to gather there, concealing weapons, under the guise of studying Talmud with him.[126] However, news of the planned revolt reached the Seljuk Sultan Muktafi (or perhaps a later ruler, accounts vary).[16] Accounts of what followed are interwoven with legend. Benjamin of Tudela and other sources recount Alroy's capture, his seemingly miraculous escape from prison (using magic or making himself invisible), and his defiance of the Sultan.[126] Appeals from Jewish leaders in Baghdad and Mosul to abandon his mission, fearing repercussions against the wider Jewish population, were ignored.[126] Ultimately, according to Benjamin of Tudela and others, Alroy was assassinated, allegedly by his own father-in-law who had been bribed by the governor of Amadiya, bringing the revolt to an end.[6] Despite his demise, belief in Alroy's messianic role persisted among some followers, known as Menahemites, particularly in Azerbaijan.[127]

The rise of such a potent messianic figure within the heart of 12th-century Kurdistan underscores the community's engagement with the tumultuous political and religious currents of the era. The Crusades and the internal weaknesses of the Seljuk Empire created an atmosphere of both vulnerability and heightened eschatological expectation among some Jews. Alroy's movement, though ultimately failing and potentially causing backlash, reflects a community not entirely isolated, but actively responding to, and perhaps suffering under, the major geopolitical shifts impacting the region. It demonstrates a potent blend of religious yearning for redemption and a political desire to challenge existing power structures.

III. Navigating Empires: Jews under Ottoman and Persian Rule (c. 1500 - 1918)

From the 16th century onwards, the majority of Kurdistan came under the domination of two major rival powers: the Sunni Ottoman Empire to the west and the Shi'a Persian Empires

(Safavid, Afsharid, Zand, Qajar) to the east.[3] The lives of Jewish communities in Kurdistan during this long period were shaped by the legal frameworks, administrative practices, and socio-political conditions prevalent within these respective empires, as well as by the specific dynamics of local Kurdish society.

A. Legal and Social Status: The Dhimmi Framework

Under traditional Islamic law, both Sunni and Shi'a, Jews and Christians, as recognized "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*), were generally granted the status of *dhimmi*.[34] This status offered them protection (*dhimma*, meaning covenant or pact) for their lives, property, and the freedom to practice their religion, albeit within certain limitations.[36] In return, dhimmis were required to acknowledge the supremacy of Islam, pay a specific poll tax known as *jizya* (from which Muslims were exempt, paying *zakat* instead), and adhere to a range of social and legal restrictions designed to distinguish them from the Muslim majority.[12]

Common restrictions codified over time, often associated with the Pact of 'Umar (though its historical authenticity and dating are debated [146]), included prohibitions against building new synagogues or churches, or repairing existing ones in prominent locations.[39] Dhimmis were typically forbidden from bearing arms, riding horses (sometimes restricted to donkeys, ridden sidesaddle [146]), owning Muslim slaves, or giving testimony against Muslims in court.[34] Distinctive clothing or badges were often mandated to ensure social differentiation; examples include yellow emblems reportedly required in 9th-century Baghdad and later patches or specific attire rules in Safavid and Qajar Persia.[21] In Shi'a Persia, the concept of *najasat* (ritual impurity) added another layer of restriction, deeming non-Muslims ritually unclean and limiting physical contact, food sharing, and access to certain public spaces like baths.[35]

The actual enforcement and severity of these dhimmi regulations varied considerably depending on the ruling dynasty, the specific sultan or shah, the time period, and the geographical location.[35] Periods of relative tolerance, economic prosperity, and even instances of Jews reaching high positions (e.g., finance ministers, physicians, masters of the mint in the Ottoman Empire [156]) contrasted sharply with times of increased persecution, forced conversions (notably in 17th-century Safavid Persia [35] and 12th-century Almohad Spain/North Africa [145]), expulsions, and pogroms.[35] While often providing greater security and opportunity than contemporary Christian Europe, the dhimmi system fundamentally institutionalized a hierarchical social order where non-Muslims were legally and socially subordinate, their protection contingent upon acceptance of this status.[35]

B. The Ottoman Millet System

Within the Ottoman Empire, the administration of non-Muslim dhimmi communities was largely organized through the *Millet* system.[138] Derived from the Arabic word *millah* (nation or religious community), the Millet system granted recognized religious groups (primarily Orthodox Christians/Rums, Armenians, and Jews) a significant degree of internal autonomy.[138] While its origins are debated, with some tracing it to early Islamic precedents like the Constitution of Medina [165] and others arguing it was formalized much later (18th or 19th

centuries) [163], its function was relatively consistent.
Each millet was headed by its highest religious authority (e.g., the Ecumenical Patriarch for the Orthodox, the Hakham Bashi or Chief Rabbi for the Jews), who was recognized by the Sultan and served as the intermediary between the community and the Ottoman state.[138] The millet leadership was responsible for administering internal community affairs, including religious law (Halakha for Jews, Canon Law for Christians) pertaining to personal status matters like marriage, divorce, and inheritance.[144] They also oversaw communal institutions such as schools and courts, and were responsible for collecting taxes (including the *jizya*) from their members for remittance to the imperial treasury.[147]
The Millet system is often presented as an example of Ottoman tolerance, allowing diverse religious groups to maintain their distinct identities, languages, and traditions under the umbrella of Ottoman rule.[39] It provided a framework for self-governance unparalleled in much of contemporary Europe.[138] However, the system also inherently reinforced religious segregation and the legal inferiority of non-Muslims.[138] While granting autonomy, it simultaneously solidified the boundaries between communities and placed them under the ultimate authority of the Sultan and Islamic law, particularly in disputes involving Muslims.[158] The structure could also lead to internal power struggles within millets and dependence on the whims of the ruling Sultan.[138] The degree of autonomy and the actual experience of minorities could vary significantly between the imperial center (Istanbul) and the provinces, and was subject to change based on political and economic circumstances.[149] The 19th-century Tanzimat reforms aimed to modernize the empire and redefine citizenship, leading to further codification and changes in the Millet system, sometimes increasing lay participation but also facing resistance from those invested in the old order.[42]

C. Jews in Ottoman Kurdistan

Jewish communities in the Kurdish regions under Ottoman rule existed within this broader imperial framework of the Dhimmi and Millet systems. However, their experience was further complicated by the specific socio-political landscape of Kurdistan, characterized by mountainous terrain, limited state control, and the dominance of powerful, often autonomous, Kurdish tribal structures.[3] While nominally part of the Jewish Millet headed by the Hakham Bashi in Istanbul, the day-to-day lives of many Kurdish Jews, particularly those in rural areas, were more directly impacted by their relationships with local Kurdish Aghas.[8] This system of local patronage often superseded or operated in parallel with the formal Millet structure (See Section V.A).
Despite the often challenging environment, Jewish intellectual and communal life persisted. The period saw the flourishing of notable rabbinical families like the Barzanis, Mizrahis, Dugas, and Hariris.[9] The most celebrated figure is Asenath Barzani (1590-1670), daughter of Rabbi Samuel Barzani of Kurdistan.[8] Renowned for her deep knowledge of Torah, Talmud, Kabbalah, and Jewish law, she inherited the leadership of the yeshiva in Amadiya from her husband, Rabbi Jacob Mizrahi, upon his death.[8] Recognized as a chief instructor of Torah in Kurdistan and honored with the rare title *Tanna'it* (female Talmudic scholar), Asenath was also a noted

poet in Hebrew.[8] Her life and influence, including legends surrounding her mystical practices [8], attest to a vibrant religious and cultural milieu, even allowing for the exceptional rise of a female scholar in a traditionally patriarchal society.

Economically, Jews in Ottoman Kurdistan engaged in diverse activities. Many migrated into Anatolian regions like Gaziantep and Malatya during the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming active in trade within rural villages.[16] This aligns with the broader Ottoman context where Jews often excelled in commerce and finance.[147]

The 19th-century Tanzimat reforms, aimed at centralizing Ottoman administration and modernizing the state, had complex effects on Kurdistan.[3] These reforms sought to curtail the power of local autonomous rulers, including Kurdish emirs and tribal chiefs.[3] While potentially strengthening the direct legal standing of minorities under imperial law, the erosion of traditional Kurdish power structures could also destabilize the region and indirectly impact the Jewish communities reliant on Agha patronage.[3] The formal establishment (and later dissolution) of the Kurdistan Eyalet (province) from 1846 to 1867 reflects these administrative shifts.[136] The late 19th century also saw the formation of the Hamidiye cavalry, primarily recruited from Kurdish tribes by Sultan Abdülhamid II.[3] While intended to police the eastern frontiers and counter Armenian nationalism, these units gained notoriety for their brutality against Armenian and Assyrian Christian populations, illustrating the complex and often violent interplay between Ottoman state policy, Kurdish tribal power, and inter-minority relations in this period.[3]

D. Jews in Persian Kurdistan (Qajar Era, 1789-1925)

In the eastern parts of Kurdistan under Persian rule, primarily during the Qajar dynasty, the experience of Jewish communities was heavily influenced by the tenets of Twelver Shi'a Islam, the state religion since the Safavid era.[36] The Shi'a concept of *najasat* (ritual impurity) applied to non-Muslims created significant social barriers, restricting physical contact, shared dining, and access to public spaces like baths.[35]

The Qajar state, particularly in its earlier period, was characterized by relative weakness and decentralization.[76] This often meant that the enforcement of dhimmi laws and the level of protection afforded to minorities depended heavily on local governors and the prevailing social climate, leading to significant regional variation and periods of insecurity.[34] Jews, like other minorities, often lived in separate quarters (*mahalleh*) and faced restrictions on occupations, clothing, and even the height of their homes relative to Muslim neighbors.[35]

While the Qajar period saw periods of relative tranquility for some communities, others endured persecution, forced conversions (like the notorious Allahdad incident in Mashhad in 1839, though outside Kurdistan proper), and economic hardship exacerbated by famine and disease.[34] Jewish communities in places like Tabriz and Barfurush suffered destruction or decline due to mob violence.[77]

The increasing influence of European powers (Britain and Russia) in Persia during the 19th century, coupled with the growing awareness and organizational capacity of European Jewry, led to external interventions aimed at improving the conditions of Persian Jews.[13]

Organizations like the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and the Anglo-Jewish Association actively lobbied the Qajar shahs (Naser al-Din Shah, Mozaffar al-Din Shah) for better treatment and permission to establish modern schools.[13] These efforts, combined with internal pressures, contributed to gradual improvements.

A significant turning point was the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911). The new constitution declared recognized religious minorities (Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians – but notably not Bahá'ís) legally equal to Muslims, granted them representation in the parliament (*Majles*), and formally abolished the *jizya* tax.[12] While a landmark achievement on paper, deep-seated societal prejudices and limitations continued to affect the daily lives and opportunities of minorities, including Jews in Persian Kurdistan, well into the subsequent Pahlavi era.[76] The Qajar period thus represents a complex transition, marked by the persistence of traditional Shi'a-based discrimination and vulnerability due to state weakness, but also witnessing the beginnings of modernization, foreign intervention, and constitutional reforms that laid the groundwork for future changes in the status of Persian Jewry.

IV. Life Within Kurdistan (Pre-1948): Society, Culture, and Economy

The Jewish communities of Kurdistan, existing for centuries amidst a predominantly Kurdish Muslim population and alongside Christian minorities, developed unique social structures, cultural expressions, and economic adaptations shaped by both their internal traditions and their external environment. Life varied significantly between the larger towns and the numerous small rural villages scattered across the mountainous terrain.

A. Community Structures and Leadership

Before the major societal shifts of the 19th and 20th centuries, leadership within larger Jewish communities in Kurdistan was sometimes vested in figures known as *Nesi'im* (singular: *Nasi*), translated as "princes" or "ministers".[9] These leaders reportedly held significant authority, imposed their will on the community, and collected special taxes.[9] Even the *Hakhamim* (sages or rabbis) were subordinate to them.[9] This system of centralized communal leadership appears to have faded by the 19th century.[9]

In most communities, particularly from the 16th century onwards, the central figure was the local *Hakham*.[9] Reflecting the needs of often isolated communities, the Hakham typically fulfilled a wide range of roles beyond spiritual leadership. He often served as the *hazzan* (cantor), *mohel* (circumciser), *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), *bodek* (examiner of slaughtered animals for kashrut), community treasurer, teacher, scribe, and even a writer of amulets (*kame'ot*) for protection.[9] Smaller communities were generally subordinate to the religious authorities in larger centers, and for complex legal or religious rulings, communities often turned to the esteemed rabbinate in Baghdad.[9] Prominent rabbinical families, such as the Barzani, Mizrahi, Duga, and Hariri lineages, produced scholars known for their expertise in Jewish law, Kabbalah, and sometimes mystical practices, around whom legends occasionally

formed.[9]
Religious and social life centered around the synagogue and the *Talmud Torah* (religious school).[9] Larger towns boasted multiple synagogues, some of considerable antiquity, such as those reportedly built in Mosul (1210) and Amadiya (1228).[9] These institutions served as the focal points for prayer, study, and communal gathering.
Overlaying these internal structures, particularly in rural and tribal areas, was the pervasive system of Agha patronage.[8] Lacking their own tribal affiliations in a society largely organized along tribal lines, Jewish families or entire communities often sought the protection of a powerful local Kurdish chieftain (Agha). This relationship was typically transactional: the Agha offered nominal patronage and physical security against banditry or inter-tribal conflict, while the Jewish subjects provided loyalty, various services, gifts, and regular payments or dues.[8] The nature of this patronage varied greatly depending on the specific Agha and location, ranging from relatively benign protection to severe exploitation.[27]

B. Language and Cultural Expressions

A defining feature of Kurdish Jewry was their language. Unlike Jewish communities in other parts of Iraq and the Arab world who primarily spoke Judeo-Arabic [18], the Jews of Kurdistan largely retained and spoke dialects of Judeo-Aramaic as their vernacular tongue.[6] This linguistic continuity connected them to the language of the Talmud and ancient Mesopotamia.[6] They referred to their language by various names, including *Lishna Yahudiya* ("Jewish Language"), *Lashon Ha'Targum* ("Language of the Translation," possibly referring to Torah translations), or *Lashon HaGalut* ("Language of Exile").[7] Neighboring Arabs sometimes called it *Jabali* ("from the mountains").[7] Specific regional dialects existed, such as *Nash-Didan* in Urmia and *Lishani Deni* in Zakho.[22] While Aramaic was the primary language, centuries of interaction led to the adoption of words from Kurdish, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew, reflecting the multilingual environment.[6]
Living in relative isolation in mountainous terrain fostered a rich oral tradition.[8] Storytelling was a highly valued skill, particularly for Jewish merchants and peddlers who traveled between villages. In the evenings, they would often entertain their Kurdish hosts, including Aghas, in guest houses (*diwan-khane*) by recounting folktales and sharing news, thus serving as important conduits of information.[32] This oral heritage included legends, epics, ballads, and a wealth of proverbs, many of which were borrowed from or shared with Kurdish and Arabic neighbors, reflecting deep cultural exchange.[81] The work of linguist Yona Sabar, himself a native Aramaic speaker from Zakho, has been crucial in documenting this linguistic and folkloric heritage before its near extinction following the community's emigration.[8] Some folk traditions even posited shared origins, with certain Kurdish myths tracing their lineage to King Solomon's servants or Jewish legends suggesting Kurds descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel.[8]
Musical traditions also reflected this cultural blend. While liturgical music maintained ties to Hebrew cantillation and broader "Oriental-Sephardic" styles, sometimes introduced by emissaries from major Jewish centers like Baghdad or Jerusalem [206], a distinct local style

existed.[202] Kurdish Jews widely adopted and integrated Kurdish folk music, including epics, ballads, and dance tunes sung in Kurmanji Kurdish, into their own repertoire.[9] Jewish bards (*dengbêj*) were sometimes considered primary exponents of this shared musical tradition.[206] Traditional instruments like the *zurna* (oboe) and *dahola* or *daf* (drums) were common in both Jewish and Kurdish celebrations.[205]

Specific customs marked Kurdish Jewish life. Early marriage was reportedly common.[6] Deep reverence was paid to the tombs of biblical prophets believed to be buried in the region, such as Nahum in Alqosh, Jonah near Nineveh, Daniel in Kirkuk, and Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan.[6] Annual pilgrimages, particularly to Nahum's tomb after the festival of Shavuot, were major communal events involving prayer, feasting, storytelling, music, and dance, often celebrated outdoors.[15] Another significant celebration was the *Seharane* festival, traditionally held for several days after Passover.[15] Meaning "moon" or "excursion," it involved camping in nature, feasting, music, and dancing, marking the arrival of spring.[15] Some scholars suggest a link between Seharane and the Kurdish New Year festival, Newroz (also known as Sayeran), another spring celebration with ancient Persian and Zoroastrian roots observed by Kurds and other regional groups.[28] While direct Jewish participation in Nowruz itself is less documented in these sources compared to Seharane, the temporal proximity and shared theme of spring renewal hint at potential cultural resonance or shared celebratory practices in some locales.[28]

The persistence of Judeo-Aramaic, the unique oral traditions, the veneration of local holy sites, and the adoption of regional music and festival elements like Seharane collectively point to a distinctive Kurdish Jewish culture. This culture successfully maintained its core Jewish religious identity while simultaneously engaging in profound and long-term cultural exchange with its Kurdish Muslim and Christian neighbors, resulting in a unique synthesis shaped by the specific environment of Kurdistan.

C. Education

Traditional education within Kurdish Jewish communities primarily revolved around the *maktab* or *cheder*, where boys learned Hebrew literacy mainly for religious purposes, such as reading the Torah.[56] Literacy levels, particularly outside the rabbinical class, were often low compared to other Diaspora communities.[29]

A significant shift began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the arrival of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU).[12] This Paris-based international Jewish organization established modern schools in major towns across the Ottoman Empire and Persia, including several in Kurdish regions: Hamadan (1900), Isfahan (1901), Shiraz (1903), Sanandaj (1903), and Kermanshah (1904), with assistance provided to schools in smaller towns like Tūyserkān and Nehāvand later.[12] In Iraq, AIU took over existing schools, like the David Sassoon school in Baghdad.[26]

The AIU aimed to provide a modern, secular education, heavily influenced by French language and culture, with the goal of "regenerating" Eastern Jewish communities and preparing students for life and economic advancement in a modernizing world.[56] This represented a form of *mission civilisatrice*, often viewing local Jewish communities through a lens of

perceived backwardness and aiming to mold them in the image of emancipated Western Jewry.[66] While initially paying less attention to traditional Jewish subjects [56], the curriculum often included Hebrew and Jewish history, sometimes taught by teachers from Palestine, which occasionally fostered early Zionist sentiments.[18]

The impact of AIU schools was significant. They dramatically increased literacy rates, provided vocational training (especially for girls, in fields like needlework [61]), and exposed students to European languages and Enlightenment values.[12] This education facilitated social and economic mobility, enabling graduates to work for foreign companies, enter the banking system, or secure government positions, particularly after reforms granted minorities greater rights.[60] However, this Western-oriented education could also create a cultural distance between graduates and the more traditional segments of their community, and potentially between Jews and their Muslim neighbors.[60] In the mid-20th century, particularly after 1946, the Oẓar ha-Torah organization established schools with a stronger emphasis on traditional religious education, offering an alternative model.[12]

D. Economic Landscape

The economic life of Kurdish Jews prior to 1948 was diverse, reflecting the varied geography and social structures of Kurdistan. A significant portion of the community, particularly in rural areas, engaged in agriculture – a characteristic distinguishing them from many other Diaspora Jewish populations who were predominantly urban.[1] They cultivated staple crops like wheat, barley, rice, sesame, and lentils, as well as cash crops like tobacco.[9] Many owned orchards, vineyards, and livestock (sheep, goats, cattle).[4] Some villages, like Sindur, were entirely inhabited by Jewish farmers.[9] In some areas, Jews worked as tenant farmers (*reaya*) for Kurdish landlords (Aghas).[4]

Craftsmanship was another vital economic pillar. Kurdish Jews were known as skilled artisans, particularly as weavers of traditional Kurdish clothing, dyers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewelers.[8] Other crafts included carpentry, tanning, and shoemaking.[9] Jewish artisans often served both their own community and their non-Jewish neighbors, sometimes collaborating across religious lines, as seen in the creation of protective amulets (*seipa*) where silver was sourced from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian silversmiths before being worked by a Jewish artisan.[113]

Trade and commerce were central, especially in eastern Kurdistan (Persia) and in urban centers.[9] Jews operated as wholesalers, shopkeepers, and, very commonly, as itinerant peddlers (*xazare*).[9] These peddlers, often traveling by mule or donkey through difficult and sometimes dangerous tribal territories, played a crucial role in distributing goods (fabrics, jewelry, spices, household items) to remote villages and facilitating regional trade networks.[32] Their mobility also made them key disseminators of news and stories.[32] In Persia, Jewish merchants were involved in the expanding trade in commodities like opium and silk, connecting with international networks, including British interests and firms like the Sassoons.[36]

Financial activities included moneylending, a common recourse in the absence of formal

banking and restrictions on land ownership, and currency exchange.[9] While major banking was often controlled by feudal lords or, later, by foreign interests [9], Jews played significant roles in local finance and became dominant in banking and currency exchange in major Iraqi centers like Baghdad by the early 20th century.[18] Other occupations included musicians, dancers, physicians, tailors, barbers, butchers, ritual slaughterers, and various forms of unskilled labor, sometimes including tasks considered undesirable by the Muslim majority, such as refuse collection or cleaning excrement pits.[9]

Economic conditions were generally precarious for the majority of Kurdish Jews, particularly in rural areas.[9] Life was often characterized by poverty, exacerbated by political instability, tribal conflicts, drought, and famine, which frequently forced migration between villages or towards larger towns.[6] However, significant wealth could be attained by successful merchants and urban elites, as noted by travelers in communities like Amadiya, Mosul, Sanandaj, and Urmia.[6] This wealth, however, was often insecure and subject to the demands and exploitation of local Aghas or officials.[32]

The diverse economic roles occupied by Kurdish Jews created a complex web of interdependence with the surrounding society. They provided essential crafts, facilitated trade in often difficult terrain, and sometimes filled economic niches restricted to non-Muslims. This integration, however, existed alongside the vulnerabilities inherent in their minority status and the often-predatory nature of local power structures, particularly the Agha system.

V. Interwoven Destinies: Inter-Community Relations Before 1948

The historical narrative of Jewish life in Kurdistan is inseparable from the story of their interactions with the Kurdish majority and other minority groups, primarily Christians (Assyrians and Armenians). These relationships were complex, varying across time and place, and characterized by a mixture of coexistence, cooperation, cultural exchange, patronage, exploitation, and occasional conflict.

A. The Kurdish-Jewish Nexus

A recurring theme, particularly in later recollections and some external accounts, emphasizes a history of relatively harmonious coexistence between Jews and their Kurdish Muslim neighbors, especially when compared to the experiences of Jews in other parts of the Middle East or Europe.[6] Oral histories collected after the emigration to Israel frequently contain fond memories of Kurdish neighbors and shared life.[22] Sources report that upon the mass departure of Jews in the early 1950s, many Kurds mourned the loss of their neighbors and, in some cases, even maintained the abandoned synagogues.[16] This narrative of positive relations is often linked to shared experiences of being minority groups within larger empires or states, facing common enemies, and sharing certain cultural affinities, including folklore and music (as discussed in Section IV.B).[13] Mutual home visits were reportedly common in places like Zakho.[83]

However, this picture of harmony must be significantly qualified, particularly by the realities of the tribal structure and the Agha patronage system prevalent in much of Kurdistan, especially rural areas. As documented extensively by Mordechai Zaken through oral histories, the relationship between Jewish subjects and their Kurdish tribal chieftains (Aghas) was fundamentally one of unequal power.[8] Lacking tribal affiliation and the ability to bear arms in many contexts, Jews relied on the Agha for protection from banditry, feuds, and general lawlessness.[8] This protection, however, came at a price: loyalty, deference, services, gifts, and often substantial financial contributions were expected in return.[8]

Zaken's research, corroborated by some other accounts, reveals a darker side to this patronage, describing instances of severe exploitation and abuse.[8] This included financial extortion, plunder of property, the imposition of forced partnerships on Jewish peddlers, the abduction and forced conversion of Jewish women, physical violence including murder, and even conditions described by some informants and observers as "slavery" for rural Jews entirely dependent on their Agha.[22] The inferior social standing of Jews as non-tribal dhimmis made them particularly vulnerable, with limited recourse for justice.[9] Jewish leaders developed defense mechanisms, operating within the Muslim and tribal contexts, to try and annul forced conversions, demonstrating their agency within these constraints.[32]

Therefore, the relationship between Kurds and Jews before 1948 cannot be painted with a single brushstroke. While genuine instances of neighborly harmony, cultural sharing, and mutual respect undoubtedly existed, particularly perhaps in urban settings or with specific individuals or tribes, the overarching framework was often one defined by the power dynamics of the tribal Agha system and the legal subordination inherent in the dhimmi status. Protection was often conditional and intertwined with exploitation, creating a complex reality of survival for Jewish communities within Kurdistan.

B. Relations with Christians (Assyrians, Armenians)

Kurdistan was also home to substantial Christian populations, primarily Assyrians (including Nestorians/Church of the East and Chaldean Catholics) and Armenians.[3] Interactions between these Christian groups and the Jewish communities were multifaceted, influenced by shared minority status, linguistic connections, local politics, and the actions of the Kurdish majority and imperial authorities.

A significant link existed through language, as many Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, like the Jews, spoke dialects of Neo-Aramaic.[7] In some areas, like Zakho, these dialects were mutually intelligible, facilitating direct communication.[83] Traditions recorded by travelers like Benjamin II even suggested that some Nestorian (Assyrian) tribes were descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel and practiced "Jewish customs," hinting at perceived or actual historical connections.[9] Another popular tradition claimed that some Assyrian families in northern Iraq were of Jewish origin but had been forcibly converted to Christianity centuries earlier, yet secretly maintained some Jewish practices and married endogamously.[9]

Despite these potential connections, the relationship was often fraught with tension, particularly concerning the interactions of both groups with the Kurdish majority and the

Ottoman state. Historical accounts, particularly from the 19th and early 20th centuries, document numerous instances of Kurdish tribal violence directed against Christian communities (both Assyrian and Armenian).[3] This violence sometimes occurred in the context of inter-tribal feuds where Christians allied with one side became targets of the other, or during periods of state-sanctioned or state-encouraged suppression, such as the Hamidian massacres involving the Hamidiye cavalry.[3] Some commentators argue forcefully that Kurds, particularly the Aghas, were historically hostile to both Christians and Jews, citing evidence of murder, plunder, and abduction.[22]

In specific locales like Amadiya and Zakho, Jews, various Christian denominations (Chaldean, Assyrian, Armenian), and Muslim Kurds lived in close proximity.[9] Accounts from Zakho mention generally cordial relations and mutual home visits between ethnic groups [83], and Jews reportedly bore arms like their Muslim neighbors, suggesting a degree of integration.[209] However, Zakho also witnessed anti-Jewish attacks in 1891-1892.[209] In Urmia, one 19th-century traveler observed that Christians seemed more mistreated than Jews, suggesting variations in status even among minority groups within the same city.[9] The shared veneration of figures like the Prophet Nahum by both Jews and local Christians in Alqosh led to complex interactions, including Christians acting as guardians of the Jewish shrine after the Jews' departure, but also historical incidents involving the removal of relics.[223]

The historical reality points to a complex triangular relationship between Jews, Christians, and Kurds in Kurdistan. Shared minority status under Muslim rule and linguistic ties (with Assyrians) could foster connections. However, the specific power dynamics involving Kurdish tribes, Ottoman or Persian state policies, and differing economic roles meant that experiences varied greatly. Jews often navigated this landscape by relying on the Agha patronage system, which, while exploitative, might have offered a different, perhaps sometimes more stable, form of security compared to the vulnerability faced by Christian groups during periods of intense anti-Christian violence orchestrated or permitted by authorities or powerful Kurdish factions.

VI. Seeds of Change: Early 20th Century Developments (c. 1900-1948)

The first half of the 20th century brought profound changes to the Middle East, significantly impacting the long-established Jewish communities of Kurdistan and setting the stage for their eventual departure. The collapse of the Ottoman and Qajar empires, the aftermath of World War I, the rise of competing nationalisms, and the increasing influence of external ideologies reshaped the political and social landscape.

A. Imperial Collapse and the Rise of Nationalism

The decline and eventual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (1914-1918) fundamentally altered the political map of the region.[3] The old imperial structure, including the Millet system that had governed non-Muslim minorities for centuries, gave way to the formation of new nation-states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria) based on European models.[3] This process

forcibly divided the contiguous Kurdish homeland among these new states, transforming the Kurds into significant ethnic minorities within each.[1]
The rise of assertive, often ethnically exclusive, nationalisms – Turkish, Arab, and Persian – created a challenging environment for all minorities.[3] In Turkey, the Kemalist regime pursued aggressive Turkification policies, suppressing Kurdish identity and language.[131] In Iraq, while initially incorporated into the state structure under the British Mandate, Arab nationalism grew increasingly assertive, particularly from the 1930s onwards.[18] The Pahlavi dynasty in Iran (from 1925) also pursued centralization and Persian nationalism, though its impact on minorities varied.[12]

B. Early Zionist Activity and Emigration

Concurrent with these developments was the rise of modern political Zionism, advocating for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. While geographically distant, Zionist ideas began to penetrate Kurdish Jewish communities in the early 20th century.[16] This built upon a long-standing religious yearning for Zion, evidenced by earlier, smaller-scale migrations of Kurdish Jews to the Land of Israel, such as the arrival of rabbinic scholars in Safed in the late 16th century who established a Kurdish Jewish quarter there.[6] Contact with travelers and rabbis from Palestine helped maintain this connection.[6]
Organized Zionist activity emerged in Iraq in the 1920s, initially tolerated under the British Mandate but facing increasing restrictions under the Iraqi monarchy, especially after the 1929 Palestine riots.[18] Some AIU schools in Baghdad organized Hebrew literary societies promoting Zionism.[26] Thousands of Kurdish Jews emigrated to Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s, driven by a combination of religious fervor and likely deteriorating local conditions.[6] Notable figures like Moshe Barazani, later a member of the Lehi underground, came from a family that immigrated from Iraqi Kurdistan to Jerusalem in the late 1920s.[16]

C. Deteriorating Conditions, Particularly in Iraq (1930s-1947)

The situation for Jews, particularly in Iraq (where the majority of Kurdish Jews resided [6]), began to worsen significantly in the 1930s. The growing Arab nationalist movement, increasingly influenced by the conflict in Mandatory Palestine and Nazi propaganda disseminated via the German embassy established in Baghdad in 1932, shifted from viewing Iraqi Jews as fellow Arabs to viewing them with suspicion.[18]
Despite protestations of loyalty to Iraq, Jews faced mounting discrimination. Unofficial quotas limited their access to civil service positions and secondary education.[18] Zionist activities were banned, and Palestinian Jewish teachers were expelled.[18] The pro-Nazi coup led by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani in 1941, though short-lived, culminated in the devastating *Farhud* pogrom in Baghdad during Shavuot.[26] While primarily targeting the Baghdad community, this event, in which hundreds were killed and widespread looting occurred, sent shockwaves through Iraqi Jewry, including those in Kurdistan, signaling a terrifying escalation of antisemitism.[26]
Although the monarchy was restored, the underlying tensions remained. The period leading up to 1948 saw continued anti-Jewish sentiment, arrests on charges of Zionism or

Communism, and growing insecurity.[6] This increasingly hostile environment, fueled by regional conflicts and imported ideologies, created the conditions for the dramatic rupture that would follow the establishment of Israel in 1948.

VII. Conclusion

The history of the Jewish communities in Kurdistan before 1948 is a narrative spanning millennia, marked by deep roots, complex interactions, and profound transformations. Tracing their origins potentially to the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, these communities established a lasting presence in the mountainous borderlands of Mesopotamia and Persia, developing a distinct cultural identity characterized by the persistence of the Judeo-Aramaic language and vibrant oral traditions.

Their existence unfolded under the successive rule of vast empires, primarily the Ottoman and Persian (Qajar) states. Within these empires, their legal and social status was generally defined by the Islamic concept of *dhimmi*, which afforded protection and religious autonomy but mandated social subordination and specific restrictions. The Ottoman Millet system provided a formal structure for communal self-governance, while in Qajar Persia, the Shi'a notion of *najasat* added further layers of social segregation. However, the application of these imperial frameworks was often mediated by local realities, particularly the powerful influence of Kurdish tribal chieftains (Aghas) in many parts of Kurdistan. The relationship with these Aghas was a defining feature of Kurdish Jewish life, a complex system of patronage that offered necessary protection in an often-unstable environment but frequently involved significant exploitation and underscored the community's vulnerability.

Despite these challenges, Jewish life flourished in various periods and locations. Medieval travelers documented numerous and substantial communities, particularly in centers like Amadiya and Mosul. Figures like the 17th-century scholar Asenath Barzani demonstrate a high level of intellectual and religious vitality. Economically, Kurdish Jews were deeply integrated into the regional fabric, participating in agriculture, specialized crafts (weaving, dyeing, metalwork), and extensive trade networks, often serving as crucial intermediaries. Culturally, they maintained their unique linguistic and religious heritage while engaging in significant exchange with their Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian neighbors, evidenced by shared folklore, musical influences, and possibly syncretic festival practices like Seharane.

Inter-community relations were multifaceted. While narratives of harmony and neighborly coexistence with Kurds exist, particularly in oral memory, they stand alongside documented accounts of exploitation under the Agha system and participation by some Kurds in violence against other minorities, especially Christians. Relations with Assyrian Christians were shaped by shared Aramaic linguistic roots and traditions of common origin, but also by the broader conflicts and power dynamics of the region.

The early 20th century brought new pressures: the collapse of empires, the rise of competing nationalisms (Turkish, Arab, Kurdish, Zionist), and the influence of external ideologies, including European antisemitism and Nazi propaganda. These forces, combined with the escalating conflict in Palestine, led to a marked deterioration in the security and status of Jews, particularly in Iraq, culminating in the *Farhud* pogrom of 1941.

By 1948, the Jewish communities of Kurdistan, inheritors of an ancient legacy and a unique cultural synthesis, stood at a precipice. Their long history within the region, characterized by resilience, adaptation, and complex interdependence with their neighbors, was about to be irrevocably altered by the geopolitical shifts that would lead to their mass exodus in the following years. Understanding this pre-1948 history, in all its nuance and complexity, is essential for appreciating the distinct trajectory of Kurdish Jewry and the deep historical context underlying contemporary Kurdish-Israeli relations.

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