

MIDHAT PASHA AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF DAMASCUS : TWO NEW DOCUMENTS

Recently two documents were found in the archives of the Jewish-French society Alliance Israélite Universelle (A.I.U.) in Paris which enlighten an unknown side of the activity of Midhat Pasha in Damascus concerning his relationship with the Jewish community of this city¹. These documents, two letters addressed to the secretary of the A.I.U. written and signed by Midhat Pasha himself, discuss his desire and efforts to create a modern Jewish school for the children of the community. However, this issue was not the only one in which Midhat Pasha allowed himself to interfere. His intention to carry out a process of modernization in Syria led him to be involved even in internal issues of the non-Muslims communities.

Until the beginning of the age of Tanzimat, Jewish communities in the Ottoman empire enjoyed considerable internal autonomy. The Hatti Sherif of Gulhane of 1839 opened a period of change in the legal status of the non-Muslim minorities. It is true that these minorities received the formal recognition of the authorities for their process of organizing as autonomic religious Millets². However, on the road to equality, the non-Muslims had to pay the price of accepting legislation that seriously threatened their communal autonomy. The declaration of the decree of

¹ See the documents. On Midhat Pasha in general see *Ali Haydar Midhat, The Life of Midhat Pasha*, London, 1903. On his work in Syria see S. SHAMIR, *The Modernization of Syria: Problems and Solutions in the Early Period of Abdulhamid*, in W.R. POLK & R.L. CHAMBERS (eds.), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 351-381.

² See R.H. DAVISON, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856-1876*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 129-131.

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1856 formally put an end to the autonomy of the Millets in civil, criminal, and commercial matters. The only remaining juridical autonomy concerned matters of personal status. Additional steps were taken to reorganize the communal bodies of the different Millets by new regulations. According to the regulation of the Jewish community of 1864, the Chief Rabbis were formally recognized as the juridical leaders of their communities and acted as their representatives³. These steps gave the Ottoman authorities, at least, the theoretical ability to interfere in the process of electing the Chief Rabbi of the community. The new system of election was almost totally democratic. The Communal Council had to recommend five Rabbis for the position and get the approval of the acting Chief Rabbi (Kaimakam Haham Bashi) and the Spiritual Council for their candidacy. In this new system, the next step should have been election by secret ballot of the members of the General Council of the community. The involvement of the authorities manifested itself in some conditions laid down concerning the nomination of the candidate. For example, the candidate and his fathers had to be Ottoman subjects who were neither younger than thirty nor older than seventy. The final stage of the election was the approval of the nomination as Haham Bashi (Chief Rabbi) by a Firman issued by the Sultan. In Damascus actually, this almost democratic process of choosing the Haham Bashi, was not in use. The Chief Rabbi continued to be elected in the Syrian Jewish communities in the traditional way. Only a few influential members from the upper class and some scholars took part in the nomination of the Haham Bashi⁴.

Soon after his arrival in Damascus, on November 24, 1878, Midhat Pasha realised the sad situation of the local Jewish community. It consisted of about 8,000⁵ souls with no leadership or legal system, living in misery caused by the impoverishment of the wealthy leadership of the community that followed the bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire⁶. The weakness of the community and the internal quarrels that led to its inability to nominate a new Chief Rabbi, brought Midhat Pasha to personally choose a Chief Rabbi for the community and thereby to impose the nomination on the Jews of Damascus. He learned that there was a lack of a charismatic Rabbi who could unite the community and lead it towards modernization. He also realized that the appointment of one of the local Rabbis as Haham Bashi would cause many more quarrels in the community⁷. In order to fulfill this aim he invited Rabbi Efraim (Merkado) Elkalai, at

³ See A. RODRIGUE, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*, Indiana, 1990, pp. 28-33.

⁴ For more details see Y. HAREL, *Changes in Syrian Jewry 1840-1880* (in Hebrew), Ph.D Thesis, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1992, pp. 63-64.

⁵ See *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1^{er} sem. 1881 p. 74. See also Kemal H. KARPAT, Ottoman Population Records and the Census of 1881/82-1893, *International Journal Middle East Studies*, 9 (1978), p. 265.

⁶ For more details see HAREL, *Changes in Syrian Jewry*, pp. 52-57.

⁷ For more details see Y. HAREL, "Pnei Yitshak" "Yismach Lev" "VeLev Nishbar" *Vehamaavak Al Harbanut Bedamesek 1873-1883* (in Hebrew). Forthcoming.

the beginning of 1879, to serve as the Chief Rabbi of Damascus. Midhat Pasha already knew this Rabbi for some years before. At the time Midhat Pasha was serving as the "Vali of the Province of the Danube" (1864-1867), Merkado Elkalai held the post of the Haham Bashi of the Jewish community of Serbia⁸. Whilst serving in Damascus, this Rabbi was rich and did not need any support from the community and as a result was much more independent in his opinions and activities. This contrasted with his predecessors who were financially dependent on wealthy members of the community. Moreover, his source of power was the backing of Midhat Pasha, a fact that allowed him to compete with his opponents from a powerful position⁹. Therefore, the short period of his leadership in Damascus was characterised as a successful one until Midhat Pasha was forced to leave Syria on August 31, 1880. After his dismissal, there was a serious decline in the influence and activities of Rabbi Elkalai until he too left Damascus on February 1883¹⁰.

Apart from dealing with problems like provincial government, administration, fiscal structure, security organization and consolidation of control, Midhat Pasha tried to develop the infrastructure of the country and its inhabitants¹¹. Although the Tanzimat hardly mentioned education, Midhat Pasha understood the necessity for it in order to prepare the population of Syria for the reforms. He encouraged the local society to develop its own new schools in accordance with local needs and by utilizing local resources. He coerced the Muslim notables of Damascus to found a society for promoting the establishment of schools¹². Yet, Midhat Pasha did not limit himself only to the Muslim population and strove to achieve the same goals for the Jewish population of Damascus¹³. For this purpose he had to find an open minded leader in the Jewish community who would cooperate with him in promoting modern education amongst the Jews. Bearing this in mind he decided to appoint Rabbi Elkalai. Indeed, the most significant achievement of their cooperation was the reopening of the school of the Jewish-French society Alliance Israélite Universelle in Damascus¹⁴.

⁸ See *Shaarei Zion*, 7, 27 Tevet 5640, p. 10. On Efraim Elkalai see D. LANIADO, *Lakdoshim Asher Baarets*, Jerusalem, 5712, p. 71 (in Hebrew)

⁹ See *Archives de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle (A.A.I.U.)*, Syrie, XV.E., Damas, 146, Fresco, 17.1.1883; *Jewish Chronicle (J.C)*, 3.12.1880, p. 12.

¹⁰ See Jewish National and University Library (J.N.U.L.), Jerusalem Institute of Hebrew Manuscripts, V-736/261, *Elkakai to Gagin* [?], Damascus, 5643. Rabbi Elkalai deceased in Jerusalem at the end of 1894.

¹¹ For more details see SHAMIR, *The Modernization*, pp. 354-374.

¹² SHAMIR, *The Modernization*, pp. 376.

¹³ The Christian population had their modern schools established by Christian societies from Europe and their autonomy was jealously guarded. See RODRIGUE, *French Jews*, p. 33; SHAMIR, *The Modernization*, p. 376.

¹⁴ On A.I.U. and its activities in the Jewish communities in the Middle East see S. SCHWARZFUCHS (ed.), *L' "Alliance" dans les communautés du bassin méditerranéen à la fin du XIX^e siècle et son influence sur la situation sociale et culturelle*, Jerusalem, 1987; A. RODRIGUE, *De l'instruction à l'émancipation*, France, 1989.

Until 1865, there was only traditional Jewish education in the Jewish community of Damascus. This education, as was the case elsewhere, consisted first and foremost of religious instruction¹⁵. In the beginning of 1865, the A.I.U. opened its first modern school in Syria. Unfortunately, because of quarrels in the community concerning the question of financing the expenses of that school, it was closed until Midhat Pasha's initiative in 1880¹⁶. Midhat tried to utilise persuasion and pressure on the Jewish notables and wealthy persons as he had dealt with the Muslims notables, in order to raise contributions for reopening the school. However, at that time the community was in a bad economic state as most of its wealthy persons had been affected by the bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire in 1875¹⁷. Midhat Pasha did not give up. He applied directly to some wealthy Jews in Europe and to the A.I.U. and asked for their assistance in reopening the modern school for their poor brothers in Damascus. As the name of Midhat Pasha was well recognized in Europe, the Jewish leaders in the West were deeply impressed and agreed with great enthusiasm to contribute the money for this purpose¹⁸.

After raising the money for reopening the school, Midhat Pasha was not through with his involvement in the project. He continued to take care of even the technical details such as acquiring a building which would be suitable for the purposes of the new school. Midhat Pasha also demanded that the A.I.U. send a director from Paris with appropriate qualifications and he promised to give him all the help he needed¹⁹.

In his attempt to benefit the Jewish community in Damascus, Midhat Pasha reasserted his commitment to implement the reforms and to initiate the process of modernization of Syria and its population without any ethnic distinction. His initiative and assistance in reopening the modern Jewish school in Damascus was a very important action that helped the Jewish community there rehabilitate itself and to be able to continue towards modernization even after Midhat's most recent banishment from Damascus a few weeks after he inaugurated the new school.

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¹⁵ For more details on the traditional Jewish education in the Ottoman Empire see RODRIGUE, *French Jews*, pp. 35-38. For more details on the traditional Jewish education in Syria see HAREL, *Changes in Syrian Jewry*, pp. 83-87.

¹⁶ HAREL, *Changes in Syrian Jewry*, pp. 88-89.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

¹⁸ See HAVASELET, 34, 2 Tamuz, 5680, p. 257; 20 Adar 5680, p. 164 (in Hebrew), H. COHEN, *Hayehudim Bearsot Hamizrah Beyameynu*, Tel Aviv, 1973, p. 135 (in Hebrew); P.R.O., F.O. 195/1514, Dickson, Damascus, 12.11.1885; J.C., 16-1-1880, p. 7; 26-3-1880, p. 8; 10.9.1880, p. 13.

¹⁹ See the documents. See as well A.A.I.U., Syrie, I.B., 5, Damas, 22.8.1880; *Ha'Levannon*, 39, 7.5.1880, p. 311 (in Hebrew).

THE DOCUMENTS

1. *Midhat Pasha to the secretary of the A.I.U., Damascus, 24 April 1880.*
A.A.I.U., Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 94

Damas le 24 Avril 1880

Monsieur le Secrétaire,

J'ai pris connaissance de la lettre que le Comité Central de l'Alliance Israélite m'a fait l'honneur de m'adresser en date du 8 Mars par votre intermédiaire relativement à l'école israélite que j'ai pris l'initiative de fonder à Damas.

Je partage complètement l'avis du Comité quant à confier la direction de cette école à un des élèves de l'école préparatoire de Paris¹. Le choix ne pourra qu'être heureux, et se porterait j'en suis convaincu sur un homme réunissant les qualités voulues pour pareille besogne. Quant au local, je dois vous prévenir que la maison Angèle² que vous croyez pouvoir servir à l'installation de la dite école ne convient nullement à la chose. Cette maison, je l'ai visitée moi-même, et elle est bien loin de réunir les avantages qu'offre l'ancienne maison Ambar³ qui se trouve entre les mains d'un créancier anglais⁴. Si c'est de cette dernière maison que vous voulez parler je ne puis que me ranger tout à fait à votre avis, pour en faire l'acquisition.

Le directeur de la Banque Impériale Ottomane auquel je m'étais adressé à cet effet me fait savoir que la Banque Anglaise propriétaire de cette même maison lui a déjà écrit pour qu'il ait à lui soumettre le plan afin de pouvoir conclure le marché avec le Comité.

Dans cette situation, veuillez vous concerter à ce sujet et m'aviser de ce que vous aurez décidé.

¹ This "Ecole normale israélite orientale" (E.N.I.O.), was founded in Paris in 1867. For more details see A. RODRIGUE, *De l'instruction à l'émancipation*, France, 1989, pp. 41-55.

² The house or even the palace of Schemaya Angel, a wealthy Jew, who lived many years in Damascus. Some years after his decease in 1874, his descendants left Damascus. For more details see Y. HAREL, "Pnei Yitshak", "Yismach Lev" "VeLev Nishbar" *Vehamaavak Al Harabanut Bedamesek 1873-1883* (in Hebrew). Forthcoming. See also M. FRANCO, *Essai sur l'histoire des Israélites de l'Empire Ottoman depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours*, New York, 1973, p. 210.

³ Another wealthy Jew that came from India to settle in Damascus and built a wonderful and modern palace. For more details see Isabel BURTON, *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Land*, Vol. I, London, 1875, 171-172.

⁴ For more details about this affair see A.A.I.U., Syrie, I.B., 5, DAMAS, *Kimhi to A.I.U.*, Nisan (Mai) 5635 (1875).

Mr. Hirsch⁵ n'est pas encore arrivé de Jaffa et nous l'attendons toujours pour l'inauguration de l'ouverture de l'école.

Agrérez, Monsieur le Secrétaire, l'assurance de ma considération la plus distinguée.

Midhat

*2. Midhat Pasha to the secretary of the A.I.U., Damascus, 3 August 1880.
A.A.I.U., Syrie, XI.E., Damas, 94*

Damas le 3 Août 1880

Monsieur,

À la suite de la correspondance échangée entre nous au sujet de la fondation d'une école israélite à Damas et de l'inspection faite par M. Hirsch du local approprié à cet objet, j'ai inauguré, il y a quelque temps, l'ouverture de cette école dont le nombre d'élèves n'est pas moins de quarante.

Je n'ai pas besoin de vous dire que j'ai eu beaucoup de difficultés pour amener vos coreligionnaires à souscrire à cette œuvre de bienfaisance. Les cinq mille francs fournis ont à peine fait face aux besoins les plus urgents.

Me rappelant donc vos offres de vouloir contribuer à cette œuvre pour une somme de quatre mille francs l'an, je crois opportun de vous en entretenir afin que vous vouliez bien faire parvenir la dite somme à la communauté israélite de Damas.

Agrérez, Monsieur, l'assurance de ma considération la plus distinguée.

Midhat

⁵ S. HIRSCH was at that time the director of the agricultural school "Mikve Yisrael" of A.I.U. in Jaffa.

Yaron HAREL, *Midhat Pasha and the Jewish Community of Damascus. On Two Recently Discovered Documents*

Here are published two recently discovered letters dating 24 July and 3 August, 1880, from the governor of Syria, Midhat Pasha, to the secretary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, about the reopening of an AIU school in Damascus on Midhat Pasha's initiative. These letters reveal the extent of the enlightened governor's concern for the Jewish community, which he encouraged to renew itself and become modern, as he did with other communities falling under his jurisdiction in Damascus.

Yaron HAREL, *Midhat Pasha et la communauté juive de Damas. Deux nouveaux documents*

Nous publions ici deux lettres récemment découvertes dans les Archives de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle. Datées des 24 juillet et 3 août 1880, elles sont adressées par Midhat Pacha, alors gouverneur de Syrie, au secrétaire de l'AIU à Paris. Ces lettres montrent, à propos de la réouverture d'une école de l'Alliance à Damas sur l'initiative de Midhat Pacha, combien ce gouverneur éclairé était soucieux d'inciter la communauté juive à se moderniser et se régénérer, au même titre que les autres communautés de Damas placées sous son autorité.