Book Review:

**Syrian Jewry in Transition, 1840–1880**


Reviewed by Ari Ariel.

First published in Hebrew in 2003 under the title *Bi-sefinot shel esh la-maarav: temurot be-yahadut suryah bi-te’kufat ha-reformot ha-otmaniyot, 1840-1880* (By Ships of Fire to the West: Changes in Syrian Jewry during the Period of Ottoman Reforms), Harel’s book is a detailed study of the Jewish communities of Aleppo and Damascus during the *tanzimat* era and an attempt to explain how changes during this era eventually effect Syrian Jewish emigration. Though acutely aware of the differences between these two communities (for example, the presence of a relatively large Jewish middle class in Aleppo), Harel lays out a general historical trajectory that is applicable to both: the return of Ottoman sovereignty to Syria after a decade of Egyptian rule, western penetration, economic crisis, and the imposition of reforms that were intended to strengthen Ottoman central authority. Part of these reforms was to be the cancellation of the *dhimmi* status of non-Muslims and the creation of a universal Ottoman subject. As a result, the *tanzimat* are often viewed as an emancipatory gesture intended to better the lives of Jews and Christians in the Empire.

The reforms, however, were problematic for non-Muslims. They could not be implemented fully, to some extent due to the resistance of Syrian Muslims, who Harel says were insulted by the idea of equality with Jews and Christians. At times he goes too far, even describing the Muslim public as “fanatically anti-*dhimmi*”. His focus on the religious component of opposition to reform leads him to almost ignore the serious political challenge that the *tanzimat* posed to the power of the local elite, which naturally resisted any attempt to re-impose Ottoman authority at its expense. From this perspective, insisting on the inferiority of non-Muslims can be understood as a demand to maintain “traditional” political structures that allowed for a high degree of local self-governance. Harel himself notes that the Jewish religious elite often resisted the very reform measures intended to emancipate their community because these encroached on their traditional autonomy and led to increasing Ottoman interference in Jewish communal matters. Moreover, in addition to equal rights, the reforms would have meant equal obligations to the state. Thus, post *tanzimat*, military service should have theoretically been compulsory for all Ottoman subjects, a requirement consistently opposed by Jewish communities throughout the empire. Herein lies the basic contradiction faced by non-Muslims during the reform era: although Jews and Christians obviously favored measures that would give them equal rights to Muslims, they did not want to give up the special privileges allowed to them by the millet system.

As important as changes originating from the Ottoman government were transitions within the Jewish communities initiated by increased contact with the West, which eventually led to the formation of a new class of indigenous modernizing Jews. Here Harel makes an important intervention. He convincingly argues that, despite the ubiquitous portrayal of a perpetual conflict between conservative and westernizing segments of the Jewish community, the rabbinic elite did not understand modernization as contrary to traditional Judaism. Only when religious observance began to decline and the authority of the rabbis was challenged did they begin to resist reform. In fact, Syrian rabbis cooperated with the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in opening schools for Jewish youth. These are the very schools which are often described as the nucleus of Eastern Jewish modernization and an ideological challenge to rabbinic authority.
Both the *tanzimat* and increased European penetration contributed to rising non-Muslim expectations of equal rights and a breakdown of the traditional *dhimma* structure. Syrian Christians, more politically mobilized than Jews, pushed the limits of their new privileges, leading to overt conflict with local Muslims. Syrian Jews proceeded more cautiously, by and large avoiding political engagement and continuing to conduct themselves as *dhimmi*. As a result, they continued to understand their basic relationship to other Syrian communities in terms of difference and separation. In fact, the increasing cultural and political influence of western Jews strengthened the Jewish component of Syrian Jewish identity. Jews, therefore, were not attracted to the regional or secular tendencies of local political movements and the *tanzimat* fostered neither Ottoman nor Syrian national identity among the Jewish community.

Over time, the dual process of approaching the West while maintaining separation from other Syrian communities encouraged emigration. Likewise strong economic push factors existed. The opening of the Suez Canal altered trade routes and the bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire harmed the Syrian banking community. In fact, Christian and Muslim Syrians began to move during the same period. Harel notes that non-Muslims emigrated at a proportionally higher rate and attributes this to religious motives. I would add that Jews and Christians also played a large role in international commerce and, therefore, had both a greater economic incentive for migrating and more contacts abroad.

At times Harel suggests that Jews left Syria in an attempt to free themselves from tradition, though he admits that the migrants established traditional communal frameworks in their new homes. Perhaps then it was economic and societal instability created by economic crisis, along with the cancelation of the *dhimma* and the lack of implementation of the *tanzimat*, which were the prime engines of this migration. These criticisms, however, in no way detract from the exceptional value of this work. Harel’s book is extremely well researched and detailed and will be an invaluable resource for those interested in Syrian Jewry, late Ottoman Syria, and Middle Eastern history more generally.

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