CHAPTER 7

Traditional Education and Secular Studies

Education, with its aims and practices, was another aspect in the life of the Yemeni Jews that underwent considerable transition following immigration: the changes in this realm affected both the individual and the community. This chapter will focus on analyzing the route from traditional education to the adaptation of educational practices and outlooks to the post-immigration situation (up to the State period).

Modern education was almost unknown to the majority of the Jews living in Yemen. Unlike other Islamic countries where modern schools were established, mostly by Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU), the Yemeni system, like its Muslim counterpart, remained traditional and did not undergo modern reforms.¹ This system excluded girls (although the Muslim one allowed girls to study and a very few did), and its primary goal was to prepare a boy to participate as an adult in communal and religious life, which revolved mostly around the holy days and life cycle. The Mori taught the boys to read and memorize the weekly portions of the Torah, in keeping with the rules of vocalization and biblical tonal notation (ta’ame ha-miqra), including the Aramaic translation of the Bible, chapters from the Mishnah, prayers, etc. The students entered the mi’lama (religious school, Talmud Torah) around the age of four and left it for the life of work at the age of ten or twelve. Nevertheless, the educational process was not over when the boy graduated this formal stage. His education was thereafter complemented by the family. In the evenings, or while his father was engaged in his trade, the boy would read to him or to other family elders what he had learned that morning, and the adult would test his understanding and explain the text. He also participated with the adults in the religious study that took place regularly in the standard synagogue in Yemen. An educated person, in both Jewish and Muslim societies, was considered one who studied the Holy Scriptures and mastered the diverse religious exegetic literature, especially legal texts.²

¹ For traditional education in Muslim Yemen, see Brinkley Messick, The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 15–98.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, there were some short-lived attempts to reform the Jewish education system, mainly in San’a. These changes were largely associated with the activity of the Darda’i enlightenment group, discussed in Chapter 2. As related earlier, the Ottoman occupation catalyzed a number of modern transformations in Yemen and facilitated the connections between Yemeni Jews and other parts of the Jewish Diaspora. Urban Yemeni Jews became familiar with contemporary Hebrew literature, and with modern education systems in the Jewish world. They also learned of the new modern schools that the Ottomans established in the late nineteenth century in San’a and in other major towns, schools whose curriculum included secular studies. Since the 1890s the San’a communal leadership communicated with the AIU, requesting its assistance in establishing a modern school in Yemen. However, the AIU intentions to comply did not materialize. It was the Ottomans who finally opened a modern school for Jewish boys (maktab) in San’a in 1910. The school represented a true revolution in educational methods and curriculum (the study of languages and secular subjects along with religious ones), and it attracted numerous students. However, following the intra-communal dispute over the study of Kabbala, the school became identified with the Darda’im and was closed eventually in 1915. During the 1940s, with the increased interest of Zionist organizations in the affairs of the Yemeni Jews, certain Hebrew textbooks were sent to Yemen along with modest monetary support for a few reformed traditional schools in San’a. But without adequate funding and lacking trained and experienced teaching staff, these efforts on behalf of communal education had an insignificant impact.3 These developments, even the more modest accomplishments, barely reached the tribal-rural districts where most of the Jews lived. As discussed earlier (in Chapter 4), during their stay in the Hashid-Ge’ula transit camp in the mid-1940s, a number of Jews from various parts of Yemen encountered elements of modern Zionist education. Emissaries of the Jewish Agency operated a modern style school and provided the camp’s children with a curriculum that included secular subjects, similar to the curriculum taught in schools run by the Jewish national institutions in Palestine.

Once in Palestine, rural Jews, like urban Jews in Yemen, were ready to modify and modernize their education. Soon after arriving in Palestine they consented that they needed to reform their traditional education in order to meet

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