PART II

RURAL JEWS AND THEIR TRIBAL AGHAS
CHAPTER ONE

THE EXPERIENCE OF RURAL JEWS

The rural way of life was deeply rooted amongst the Jews of Kurdistan. As reported by early Jewish travelers, Jews lived in hundreds of Kurdish villages, cultivating fields, vineyards and orchards, tending their animals and weaving traditional Kurdish costumes and carpets. David D’Beth Hillel reported (1826–27) that native Jewish farmers lived in four or five villages east of Nisibin, in southeastern Turkey. The existence of synagogues in these villages indicates that these communities must have been relatively established and old. In addition to functioning as a center for prayer, the synagogue would generally house a Hebrew or religious school for children and a center for communal and cultural events. Only rarely did small rural Jewish communities had a specific building designated as a synagogue, and separate buildings for schools and community events. Ben-Yaacob listed approximately 200 villages in which Jews resided throughout the years. In fact, based on the apparent trend of internal migration, rural Jews must have lived in many more villages, because they often migrated from one village to another for various reasons. Many rural Jews lived in two villages, sometimes three, during one generation. Jews in urban centers practiced agriculture as well. Benzion Israeli who visited Kurdish communities in northern Iraq in the mid 1930s reported:

The Jewish agricultural workers in the Kurdish mountains in Mesopotamia acquired a special place within the northern communities. They live mostly in mixed towns and villages. This is a unique layer… I visited Dohuk… from 108 households, 20 have their own [vegetable] gardens, about 50 work as hired workers of Jews and non-Jewish farmers.

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1 Ben-Yaacob (1981) lists more than 200 villages in which Jews lived.
4 Benzio Israeli 1934.