



PIONEERING FEMALE JEWISH EDUCATION

The AIU in Baghdad, 1864–1895

The AIU identified Baghdad, which contained the largest Jewish population in the eastern Arab world at the time, as the key center for a future boys' school in the early 1860s.¹ In fact, Baghdad received the AIU's third school with the opening of the Boys' School in late 1864. This followed the establishment of a boys' school in Tetuan, Morocco, in 1862 and one in Damascus in 1864. However, Baghdad would not receive a girls' school until 1895. This was well after similar schools had been established in other key cities closer to the imperial center, such as Salonica, Izmir, and Istanbul. It was, however, around the same time that such schools were established in Ottoman Tripoli and British-ruled Alexandria.

Although upon the Baghdad Girls' School's opening, the Boys' School had existed for over three decades, the former institution still faced local opposition to girls' education, especially from fathers who did not want to pay tuition for their daughters and mothers who viewed their daughters' education as unnecessary. Furthermore, the Girls' School's first director, Rachel Danon, was tasked with determining how to place students with varying levels of education and ability into suitable groups so that both they and the school could function efficiently. She also had to attend closely to budgetary issues to ensure the school would remain somewhat financially secure, even if the school could count on generous support from both the Central Committee in Paris and the AJA's Executive Committee in London.

In addition to her administrative role as director, Danon also acted as a quasi-diplomatic liaison on behalf of the school in the Jewish community, positioning herself as a modern, educated, cultivated Jewish woman to both her students and their families. Her goals were thus varied as she aimed to establish an enduring school while also setting in motion what she and the Central Committee believed to be a modernization process for Jewish girls.

Yet, while Danon focused on grooming educated and modern girls, the wider goals the school was established to achieve were not limited to female education. In fact, over the course of the late 1880s and early 1890s, the male faculty at the city's Boys' School had concluded that in order to effect lasting social change among the Baghdadi Jewish community, boys' education was insufficient. These educators believed the AIU needed to place at least equal emphasis on the education of Jewish girls, as they were the future wives of graduates of the Boys' School and the mothers of future students of both the AIU's schools and of members of the Baghdadi Jewish community. Only by including girls could the AIU achieve its goal of regenerating the Jewish community in Baghdad.

Therefore, while this chapter discusses and analyzes key aspects of the Girls' School's first year of existence, it also draws from the BAIU, AJAR, *The Jewish Chronicle*, and general AIU correspondence to provide a general background of the AIU's activities in Baghdad. The chapter also discusses the role that Saul Somekh, the director of the Boys' school from 1888 to 1893, played in laying the foundation for the Girls' School. Additionally, it is my hope that by focusing much of this chapter on the events of 1895, scholars of both Jewish and Middle Eastern girls' education will be made aware of the richness and depth of information contained in just one year of correspondence of female teachers at AIU institutions. Indeed, while the lion's share of this chapter's evidence is drawn from the letters of Rachel Danon, I do not attempt to discuss and analyze everything Danon wrote in 1895. Rather, I have focused on information and anecdotes that she related in these letters that shed light on the school's establishment and functioning; her goals as a director, teacher, role model, and cultural emissary; and issues that would recur in future years. One key theme that has been omitted from this chapter, as Danon's letters from 1895 almost solely ignore the issue, is that of the personal life and struggles of a female director in a foreign country. While not discussed here, this is a recurring theme in later chapters.

The Jewish Community in Late Ottoman Baghdad

Since many of its members traced their histories to the pre-Islamic period, the Baghdadi Jewish community was believed by many to predate all other

communities in the city. If one were to separate Sunni from Shiite Muslims, then the Jewish community was also the city's largest. One scholar estimates the Jewish population in Baghdad in 1904 as exceeding 63,000, although it is impossible to assert exactly how many Jews lived in the city at any given time in the late Ottoman period.² What is beyond dispute is that the Jewish population in the city during this period accounted for between 30 and 40 percent of the city's total population.

According to a 1910 British report, the Jewish community in Baghdad was the second largest community in the empire, behind Salonica, and, in general, a prosperous one.³ The report's author claimed that about 5 percent of the community was wealthy, while 30 percent were middle class, 60 percent were poor, and the remaining 5 percent so destitute that they subsisted through begging.⁴ According to the same report, Jews enjoyed a near monopoly over much of the city's trade.⁵ One contemporary scholar notes that Jewish traders were so successful that the city's trade came to a near standstill on the Jewish Sabbath.⁶ It appears that the main competition for Jewish traders came not from indigenous Muslims and Christians but rather from British agents operating in the region.⁷ However, it must be mentioned that some Jews, like the famous Sassoon family, gained British citizenship and set up firms both in the United Kingdom and in India and Hong Kong. As will be seen, these wealthy Jewish families, whether living in or outside of Baghdad, often funded educational initiatives, including those undertaken by the AIU, during this period.

Religious leaders also played a key role in late Ottoman Baghdadi Jewish society, though Yaron Harel has shown how rabbinical power was often constrained by members of the wealthy, secular Jewish elite during this period.⁸ Interestingly, as a result of struggles between the Baghdadi Jewish-moneyed elite and local rabbis, the Chief Rabbi in the community, who was often not a native of the city, often wielded minimal power and was viewed as both subordinate to secular interests and inferior to other local rabbis in terms of religious knowledge and authority.⁹ By the 1880s, the position of Chief Rabbi had been largely undermined by secular and religious challengers, with the leadership of the city's AIU Boys' School among the former group.¹⁰ Harel notes that this decline coincided with the rise of a new secular, wealthy elite who favored the introduction of modern education.¹¹ It is likely that conflicts within the religious establishment and between religious and secular groups during this period aided the AIU's work and subsequent expansion in Baghdad and throughout Ottoman Iraq. However, rabbis, as will be seen, still wielded significant power in certain instances.

Finally, it is important to mention that while the AIU ultimately established the first modern Jewish school in Baghdad in 1864, the latter's establishment did not mark the arrival of European notions of modernity. As both Lital Levy and Orit Bashkin have recently shown, Baghdadi Jews, starting in the early 1860s, took part in the broader *Haskalah*, or Jewish enlightenment, via correspondence with their Indian, Middle Eastern, and European coreligionists, and the intermittent use of print culture.¹² Indeed, during this period, members of the Baghdadi Jewish intelligentsia internalized European orientalist notions of "Eastern" backwardness and, when discussing what they perceived to be less fortunate Jewish communities in neighboring regions, recast themselves as bearers of modernity in contrast with their backward coreligionists in these cities.¹³ Thus, it would be inaccurate to claim that the AIU was solely responsible for large-scale social changes that took place in the city in the late Ottoman period. It would also be inaccurate to assert that the organization implanted European ideals over a community that had previously enjoyed little contact with the outside world, even if this is how AIU writers sometimes portrayed the situation.

Overview of Jewish Education in Late Ottoman Baghdad

Scholars of Jewish education in nineteenth-century Baghdad appear to be in unanimous agreement that the establishment of the AIU Boys' School in 1864 marked the arrival of a Jewish educational institution that focused primarily on secular subjects.¹⁴ In this sense it can be said to mark the beginning of "modern" education in the city. In the decades prior to the AIU's arrival, most Jewish boys received their education in either a Talmud Torah or a *heder*.¹⁵ Hayyim Cohen mentions that there were numerous *heders* in the nineteenth century but only one Talmud Torah, which opened in 1832.¹⁶ Furthermore, he states that the two institutions followed a similar curriculum and that the major difference between them was that *heders* were co-educational, though few girls attended, whereas Talmud Torahs were open only to boys.¹⁷

Both *heders* and Talmud Torahs focused on preparing students for later religious study and consisted mainly of learning the Hebrew language and of rote memorization of Jewish religious texts, though other subjects were sometimes included. Cohen's description of these schools, and their teachers' pedagogical techniques, is not positive:

In most cases, one of the rooms in the teacher's house served as the *heder*, while in the hot summer months, his courtyard was used. The room was bare, the pupils sitting on mats, or sometimes on simple benches without

backseats. There was no blackboard or any furniture in the room, but the teacher's punishment cane was most prominent.

Children from the age of 3–4 up to 12–13 attended the heder together, without any classification as to age or knowledge. The teacher called up each child in turn, taught him a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, or a word, or a sentence according to the child's knowledge, and if he had reached the stage of writing, he would write letters or sentences in the child's copybook, and the child was obliged to copy these lines according to the teacher's example. A child who did not read well or write beautifully was punished by blows or by having to rewrite the material. Since there were often more than 50 pupils, not infrequently it happened that each of them was called before the teacher not more than once a day. While one child was being taught the others would be up to mischief: the teacher's helper who was supposed to supervise them was not very effective.

The child in the heder started his schooling by learning the Hebrew alphabet, then words and sentences, until he was able to read fluently from the Holy Scriptures, with different tunes for the different books of the Bible. At a more advanced stage, if his studies were not interrupted, the child also learned to translate certain chapters of the Bible, and only after that, also writing and even arithmetic. Older children would study the writing of commercial letters in Arabic but with Hebrew characters. They were not taught Hebrew as a spoken language. Even the translation they learned was in an old Arabic dialect which they did not always understand. In the heder no Talmud or religious rules were taught....

The children in the heder did not learn very much, since they studied for a few years only, and were taught by a teacher who not only had no pedagogic training but whose own knowledge was scanty. The salary he received was low and he had to engage in some other occupation—as the cantor or the ritual slaughterer, for example—sometimes during the instruction hours.¹⁸

There is no reason to doubt Cohen's general criticisms, but the quality of instruction must have varied from school to school.

As a result of the lack of modern schools during this period, untrained religious teachers enjoyed a virtual monopoly over formal Jewish primary education. It must be noted that in the mid-nineteenth century missionaries also became active in Baghdad and occasionally attempted to recruit Jewish students by offering modern education.¹⁹ However, they do not seem to have

made a major impact on the community. Thus, rather than missionary or governmental schools, which were discussed in the Introduction, in Baghdad it was the AIU schools that posed the first major challenge to religious teachers' control over formal education for Jewish boys.

Unlike Jewish boys' education, Jewish girls' education in mid- to late nineteenth-century Baghdad was almost entirely informal. Girls, especially those born to middle- and upper-class families, were raised to learn how to maintain a Jewish household and raise families and were not expected to have a consistent, visible role in public society.²⁰ While it does appear, based on the reports of AIU teachers, that by the 1880s young girls occasionally received formal religious education alongside young boys in heders, girls primarily depended on their mothers, or other women in their families, for their education.²¹ Upon approaching puberty, most girls, and certainly nearly all girls from middle- and upper-class families, were confined to their parents' homes to protect their reputations prior to marriage. Furthermore, as in other Jewish communities in the Arab world, many Jewish girls in Baghdad married at very young ages, sometimes as young as eight or nine.²²

Even though the AIU had established a Boys' School in 1864 and the Ottoman government began establishing public institutions for boys' education, formal education for girls remained largely ignored by both the community and the AIU for the next three decades. The establishment of an AIU Girls' School in Baghdad seems to have been briefly considered in the early 1880s by the organization's representatives but was apparently sidelined by rabbinical opposition.²³ As will be seen, a vocational workshop for girls was opened briefly in either late 1885 or early 1886 but closed shortly thereafter. The idea of a dedicated girls' school was seriously entertained by the AIU only in the 1890s. It was at this point that the Boys' School's faculty members came to believe that in order to transform men, women needed to be transformed as well. In a sense, these educators came to view girls' education as even more important than boys' education because the former significantly influenced the latter through all stages of life, first as mothers and sisters and later as wives. Based on recent scholarship dealing with both colonial and nationalist education in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this line of thinking appears to have been quite common among foreign male and female educators in the Arab world during this period.²⁴

The AIU Boys' School in Baghdad

Although several studies have discussed aspects of the AIU Boys' School's founding and its trajectory, no study has attempted a detailed history of either the Boys' School's early or later years.²⁵ In this section I aim to present a brief

overview of the school's early history to highlight certain developments that later affected the Girls' School. I also discuss general AIU goals that in some ways affected students and teachers in both schools.

The AIU established its first Boys' School on December 10, 1864.²⁶ Although the school's enrollment grew over its first year, from forty-three to seventy-five, the school's first director, Salomon Nerson, soon left after a falling-out with the head of the local AIU Committee. During his brief tenure, Nerson had also struggled to convince local rabbis to endorse the school's goals.²⁷ Such problems were typical of new schools in Jewish communities during this period. For example, Aron Rodrigue has shown that the modern Hasköy School established by the Jewish community in Istanbul in 1864 faced intense rabbinical opposition, resulting in the institution being placed under an edict of excommunication.²⁸ According to a letter from 1866 penned by the Boys' School's recently hired Arabic and English teacher, John Muattar, its enrollment had declined by half by the beginning of 1866, and the school would have fallen apart if not for Isaac Lurion, the head of the local AIU Committee.²⁹ Muattar also lamented the fact that locals did not want their children studying multiple languages at the same time as they assumed that these students were not capable of successfully doing so.³⁰ It is worth noting that while the language of instruction in the Boys' School was French, increasing British influence in this area necessitated that English also be taught.³¹ Arabic was also taught, as it was the main vernacular language in the region. Ottoman Turkish, the instruction of which was later made compulsory in all schools by the Ottoman government, was taught as well because it was the empire's administrative language. Finally, as in all AIU institutions, Hebrew was also a part of the curriculum.

While some religious authorities supported the school's founding, others vehemently opposed its existence. The French Consul in Baghdad, responding to a letter sent to him by the students at the Boys' School, informed the Central Committee in Paris that local rabbis were railing against the school and threatening its progress.³² He contended that the rabbis had come to feel threatened by the prospect of students receiving instruction in secular subjects.³³ Although the consul viewed these men as "stupidly fanatical," their opposition is understandable in the context of both the changing nature of Ottoman rule throughout the empire and the arrival of a foreign institution, albeit an avowedly Jewish one, aiming to alter local Jewish society.³⁴ This was because increasing Ottoman state centralization, including attempts to re-order Ottoman Jewish society through the appointment of an imperial Chief Rabbi to whom all other rabbis would be subordinate, and the efforts of foreign organizations to set up secular schools threatened local rabbinical authority throughout the Jewish communities of

the Ottoman Arab world.³⁵ It appears from the students' letter, however, that the local rabbis who opposed the school had very little actual power. Their main weapon was slander, as they unjustly accused the students of atheism.³⁶ This certainly would have aroused suspicion among certain segments of the population, but with a centralizing government in favor of educating Ottoman boys and key members of the community willing to support the school, the rabbis seem to have made little headway. While the Girls' School would later receive support from some religious figures and evoke the ire of others, neither the Boys' nor the Girls' School appears to have ever faced an existential threat from rabbinical opposition. However, as will be discussed, rabbinical opposition clearly hindered the initial establishment of a girls' school.

In addition to varying levels of opposition, the school's staff and students faced the challenge of a lack of a suitable building. The school was located in a cramped area in the middle of the city's Jewish quarter and lacked windows and gardens.³⁷ Fortunately, Albert Sassoon, a Jewish philanthropist who had roots in Baghdad but who lived in British India, donated funds for the organization to erect a new building, which opened in 1873.³⁸ From this point forward the institution was known as the Albert Sassoon School. Over two decades later, the AIU's new Girls' School in Baghdad would also face serious problems with regard to its first home.

Another key development that occurred during the 1870s was the founding of the AJA in London in 1871. In addition to setting up its own schools, this organization worked closely with the AIU and came to play a key supportive role in Baghdad. Besides providing grants to the AIU Boys' School, from the late 1870s, the members of the AJA's Executive Committee in London took it upon themselves to find and pay the salary of the school's English teacher. This greatly aided the AIU both logistically and financially, though it also allowed the AJA influence over the Boys' School. This led to debates over whether French or English should be given precedence in primary education.³⁹ The AJA would later champion the creation of the Girls' School and provide it with significant and consistent financial support.

Unlike the first three decades of the later Girls' School's existence, the Boys' School experienced wild fluctuations in enrollment from the 1860s through the early 1880s. In the 1860s this fluctuation seems to have been a result of both the first director's abrupt and premature departure in early 1866 and local opposition, or at least ambivalence, to the new school. Over the course of the early to mid-1870s, likely as a result of both the opening of a new building and of support from the newly created AJA, the school began admitting more students, many of whom did not pay tuition. By 1875, the student body had

grown to nearly 300, though it appears that only between 150 to 200 students showed up on any given day. Enrollment then dropped precipitously over the next half decade, so that by 1882 the school counted only 125 students, nearly evenly divided between paying and nonpaying students.⁴⁰ The school then witnessed a dramatic increase over the next several years, and by 1886 once again had over 200 students, most of whom were nonpaying.⁴¹ By 1895, the year the Girls' School opened, the Boys' School's enrollment totaled 210, consisting of 116 paying students and 94 nonpaying students.⁴² The Boys' School's enrollment fluctuations and frequent shifts in the ratio of paying to nonpaying students may have convinced the Girls' School's first director to take a firm stand on the issue of tuition and to opt for a slow-growth strategy with regard to enrollment.

While at times the Boys' School seems to have struggled to attract paying students and to win the support of various segments of the community, it was very successful in gaining the support of the Ottoman government and the representatives of foreign governments in Baghdad. Ottoman Governor Midhat Pasha, who has often been praised by scholars for his role in promoting secular education in Baghdad, occasionally visited the school during his time in office and was pleased with his personal review of its students.⁴³ He also apparently established a strong relationship with the AIU's local committee and intervened on behalf of the city's Jews on at least one occasion.⁴⁴ Indeed, as Paul Dumont has shown, one of the organization's key accomplishments in late Ottoman Baghdad was having its representatives relay local concerns to the central Ottoman government. Gaining the ears of local consuls whose governments had influence in Istanbul allowed these teachers and representatives to serve as intermediaries between the local population and the Ottoman government in Istanbul when community members felt threatened by members of the local non-Jewish community and even the local government.⁴⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that French and British consuls also occasionally visited the school, quizzed the students on various topics, and expressed their support for the school's activities. On at least one occasion, the French and British consuls visited the school together to jointly quiz the children in French and English.⁴⁶

Furthermore, while the school was established specifically to educate Jewish boys, it also sometimes admitted the children of prominent Muslims and Christians in the city. This helped the school to build a strong reputation, and gain support, beyond Jewish circles. Indeed, in 1924, Yusuf Rizk-Allah Ghanimah, an Iraqi Christian who attended the Boys' School from 1898 to 1902, penned a history of the Jews in Iraq partly because of the positive views he developed toward the Baghdadi Jewish community as a child.⁴⁷

Finally, the school's goals were both to prepare boys for gainful employment and also to create modern, educated men who would be well prepared, from the AIU's members' perspectives, to lead their community and families out of ignorance and into a new world. For the AIU, modernity implied a separation of synagogue and state, the casting aside of superstitions in favor of rational analysis, a focus on secular subjects such as science, history, geography, and languages, the abandonment of traditional forms of dress in favor of "European" styles, and the adoption of new forms of hygiene.⁴⁸ Thus, the AIU Boys' School's faculty hoped to alter the ways boys acted both inside and outside the classroom. Yet, while boys were important to the AIU's goals, it soon became apparent to the institution's male teachers that in order to bring about societal change the organization would have to focus equally on the community's girls.

Before moving beyond the Boys' School to focus on girls' education, it is worth mentioning that while it experienced its share of difficulties in its first three decades, the Boys' School also trained a cadre of young men who would come to play significant roles in not only the Baghdadi Jewish community but also in Ottoman and, later, Iraqi national life. One of these boys, and certainly the most prominent Jew in late Ottoman Baghdadi and later Iraqi history, was Sassoon Heskeli. Heskeli was born in 1860 and attended the Boys' School in the 1870s before leaving to join his uncle, Saleh Daniel, who was Baghdad's Jewish representative in the first Ottoman Parliament prior to its suspension in 1878, to live and study in Istanbul in 1877.⁴⁹ Heskeli later became an Ottoman Parliament member as well, following the CUP revolution of 1908–1909, and subsequently became Iraq's first Minister of Finance.⁵⁰ In this latter capacity he was the country's first and only Jewish cabinet member. Thus, it is fair to say that the Boys' School made a great impact not just on the Baghdadi Jewish community but on both Ottoman and later national Iraqi political history.

A Failed Attempt at Girls' Education

Certain influential members of Baghdad's Jewish community had desired a girls' school for some time, though it is uncertain to what extent the AIU's Central Committee in Paris thought such an undertaking to be worthwhile. For example, in 1874, Isaac Lurion, the European-born head of the AIU's local committee in Baghdad, formally requested that the Central Committee consider establishing such an institution.⁵¹ The Central Committee discussed the issue but concluded that it would be too difficult to find a suitable candidate to direct the school.⁵² The idea of establishing a girls' school came up several times over the next two decades. It seems to have been discussed in 1883, as the AJA's annual report for

1882–1883 included a brief note signaling the organization's desire to work with the AIU to build such a school.⁵³ The BAIU from the same year indicated that the AIU hoped to establish girls' schools in multiple cities, including Baghdad.⁵⁴

Finally, in June 1885, Jacques Louria, the director of the Boys' School, announced a plan to create a girls' workshop alongside the new Vocational School the AIU was building for lower-class boys. In this announcement, Louria wrote, "A workshop for girls will be created in which we will instruct 20 girls in needlework. We will also provide them with some indispensable instruction in subjects such as Hebrew, Arithmetic, and Arabic.... This workshop will be the point of departure for the creation of a Girls' School."⁵⁵ Several months later, Louria noted that he was optimistic about the workshop because rabbinical opposition to the idea of girls' education appeared to have decreased in recent years.⁵⁶

Unfortunately for Louria, he underestimated the extent of this opposition. In March 1886 he wrote to the Central Committee to inform them that some rabbis were so angered by the opening of the workshop, which counted thirty students, that they had begun trying to prevent Jews from sending their children there.⁵⁷ Some were even considering excommunicating members of the community who did so.⁵⁸ It is worth noting that some rabbis who disapproved of girls' education were supportive of the Boys' School. For instance, in April 1886, Louria informed the Central Committee that a local rabbi wanted to help raise money for the AIU Boys' School but was completely opposed to the girls' workshop.⁵⁹

As a result of such strong opposition, the workshop closed at some point, either in the late spring or early summer of 1886. In August, Silas Sassoon, a Baghdadi Jew from India who was visiting his native city at the time, penned a letter to Louria, begging him to recommit the AIU to the girls' workshop.⁶⁰ He even promised to provide the institution with seventy-five francs per month if it was reopened.⁶¹ According to Louria, Sassoon was preaching to the converted, but the former believed the latter was ignoring obvious rabbinical and even communal opposition to the workshop as well as the general prospect of formal girls' education.⁶² The workshop remained closed, and the issue appears to have disappeared from the AIU's agenda over the next several years.

Saul Somekh and the Planning of the Girls' School

It was Saul Somekh, himself a native Baghdadi Jew, who, as director of the Boys' School in the late 1880s and early 1890s, appears to have been instrumental in advocating for and convincing the AIU's leadership in Paris to at

least seriously consider undertaking the project of setting up such a school for girls. Somekh, who had previously worked in AIU Boys' Schools in Jaffa, Tunis, Aleppo, and Istanbul, along with his colleague Morris Cohen, the Boys' School's British English teacher, who had been recruited for the school by the AJA more than a decade earlier, both deplored what they considered to be the lowly social condition of Baghdadi Jewish women and hoped to improve their situation. The Jewish woman in Baghdad, according to Somekh, was, "very hardworking; her social condition very unfortunate, she knows only a life of work and hardship."⁶³ Improving women's lives only for the sake of women, however, was not the goal of these men.

Although as director, Somekh wielded more influence than his colleague, it was Cohen who, in 1895, in a letter written to the AJA just after the Girls' School had opened, most clearly articulated some of the key reasons why the AIU and the local Baghdadi Jewish community stood to benefit from educating women. This letter, titled, "SUPERSTITION AMONG THE JEWS IN BAGDAD," devoted its first four paragraphs to highlighting perceived communal problems linked to women's ignorance:

In reviewing the social condition of the Jews of Baghdad, the greatest drawback to improvement is found to be the ignorance and superstition of the women. Their prejudicial influence acts continually upon all with whom they come in contact. The ridiculous notions which they acquire in childhood cling to them through life, and are finally transmitted to all the members of their respective families. The consequences of their erroneous notions are met with at every step, and their conduct, which naturally adapts itself to their absurd ideas, strikes the mind of an educated person with the profoundest astonishment.

From the cradle to the grave they wade through a maze of superstitious and unmeaning practices to which they attach the utmost importance, while they invariably disregard the commonest precepts which are observed in civilized countries for the preservation of health or the improvement of the heart and mind. Is it to be wondered at, then, that our efforts to improve the masses have not met with sufficient visible success? The good we do at the Boys' School, on the one hand, is undermined by detrimental home influence, and more particularly female influence, on the other hand. We have a double task to perform. We have not only to eradicate deeply-rooted erroneous ideas imbibed from infancy and supply their place with modern and diametrically opposed principles, but

we have to make way against the silent and powerful contrary influence continually acting at home upon minds hardly released from its grasp. While we expect our pupils to have some civilizing influence upon their own families, our own task is rendered doubly hard by the opposition that every home offers to the introduction of any ideas at variance with those which have for ages been currency, and which have the sanction and open support of the entire community. As a matter of fact, it is indeed hard to find a single person, man, woman, or child, who does not look upon the ideas and practices which we term superstitions as the most reasonable and most natural in the world. Indeed, it may be asked, why should they view them in any other light? Who has ever dared to raise his voice against them, and show that they are wrong? Who would have the courage to tell them that the richest, most respected, and the most important men in the Jewish community of Bagdad, as well as all the spiritual leaders, are on the very same low level in matters of superstition as the women themselves? It is, however, sad to have to state that such is really the case, and still more melancholy to see how indifferent the community is to education and how difficult it is to persuade them of its beneficial results.

As we cannot penetrate into the sanctuary of the family circle, there must be many ideas and practices which escape our knowledge altogether, and cannot be brought within the sphere of our action, and we must hope that our pupils, on growing up, may be able to exert that civilising influence which we are at present unable to communicate to all.

In order that this may be carried on with efficiency, it is absolutely necessary and may be considered of primary importance that the female portion of the community should be able to understand and appreciate what is required of them. It has often been said that "men are what women make them." But without any instruction, can they be expected to set any value upon what we term improvement? Unless they are trained to our ways of thinking, how can we expect them to adopt our modes of action? If no effort is made to eradicate their prejudices and correct their errors, how can we expect them to share our views?⁶⁴

Cohen's letter is insightful for scholars of Women's History and also Gender Studies, as he places the blame for the Jewish community's lack of social progress on the moral failings of women, which he contends were transmitted intergenerationally to both sons and daughters through the cloistered domestic

space of the household.⁶⁵ Thus, regardless of how well the AIU educated boys, the community would continue to experience slow social change since the organization lacked the ability to both provide its students with their initial socialization and to reinforce AIU ideals at home. Implicit in his argument was the common nineteenth-century Victorian-gendered understanding of women as masters of the domestic sphere, responsible for socializing children in ways that would influence them for their entire lives.⁶⁶

Educating girls, therefore, would not only improve the lives of girls and women, but would, in modern Keynesian parlance, have a multiplier effect. It would ensure that educated men would have their values reinforced in the private, domestic sphere, by educated partners. Similar to what Afsaneh Najmabadi has pointed out with regard to changing perceptions of women's roles as wives by advocates of girls' education in late nineteenth-century Iran, the AIU aimed to educate girls partly in order to create wives suitable for companionate marriages with its Boys' School graduates.⁶⁷ More important, however, proper education for girls would ensure that children of both sexes would be raised by mothers who had been socialized to reject superstition in favor of rational analysis and who could pass that type of thinking on to their children and help guide the Jewish community into the modern period. This would not only transform Baghdadi Jewish society but would guarantee that it would not revert back to what Cohen clearly believed to be its irrational past (and present). To put it another way, Cohen viewed women, in their roles as mothers, as intergenerational conduits for civilization. Furthermore, in their roles as wives, they had the ability to either reinforce or alter their husbands' social values. As other historians of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female education have argued, many advocates for women's education in this period assumed that providing women with education would be a way of ensuring that men's thinking and actions would be permanently altered for the better.⁶⁸ In other words, drawing from Elizabeth Antebi's work, the goal was to change the woman to change the man.⁶⁹

While Cohen portrayed Baghdadi Jewish society as static and dominated by irrational thought, Somekh clearly believed that this community had experienced some positive change in the recent past. In a letter from May 19, 1890, Somekh claimed that the community was ready for a school for girls. However, he warned that although many fathers had expressed the desire to educate their daughters, the AIU should not count on total financial support for girls' education from Baghdadi Jewish families.⁷⁰ Interestingly, in the same letter Somekh declared that the rabbis were supportive of the creation of a girls' school, though

he expanded on this in a later letter, dated April 16, 1891. In this piece of correspondence, Somekh, apparently responding to fears of rabbinical opposition relayed to him by the AIU's Central Committee in Paris, stated that older rabbis were opposed to any kind of progress but assured his superiors that they had no moral authority over the minds of their community members.⁷¹ Perhaps more important, he asserted that they were, "viewed very badly by the community, which has come to detest them."⁷² Although he does not link the decline in rabbinical prestige to rabbinical struggles with the AIU, Yaron Harel argues that rabbinical authority in Baghdad began to wane in the 1870s and 1880s as a result of increased secularization among Baghdadi Jews and intra-rabbinical disputes exacerbated by the Tanzimat reforms.⁷³

Still, it is difficult to analyze the veracity of Somekh's specific statements about the decline in rabbinical authority. There are at least two plausible theories regarding his argument, though neither may be true. The first is simply that he was telling what he believed to be the unadulterated truth; the second is that he was exaggerating in order to convince his superiors to construct the school. Irrespective of the "truth" of Somekh's assertions regarding rabbis, the fact that he was a native Baghdadi Jew, born in the city in 1858, may have influenced members of the Central Committee to view him as credible source about the community, above and beyond his role as the director of the Albert Sassoon School. Furthermore, while Somekh, in his letters, was careful to avoid coming across as considering the school's future founding as a *fait accompli*, possibly because he did not want to overstep the bounds of collegiality in his letters to his superiors, it is clear that he was attempting to make the case for such an undertaking.

Alongside championing the opening of a girls' school, Somekh also was also a staunch advocate for a local Jewish teenage girl he believed could one day direct a girls' school, potentially even one in Baghdad. Somekh's correspondence includes multiple letters that present the case for Dola Levy, who was fourteen years old when Somekh first mentioned her to the AIU in early 1890.⁷⁴ While Somekh's letters discussed Levy's abilities and accomplishments as well as her parents' views regarding her own education, they went into very little detail regarding anything else related to her family. According to his first letter, Levy was an intelligent girl from an honorable family, which was capable of paying for the cost of her travels from Baghdad to Paris for training, and would make a fine future director for a girls' school in Baghdad.⁷⁵ This was an important statement since, although not a formal policy at this point, the AIU preferred to not send directors and teachers to work in schools located in their home communities.

In a subsequent letter Somekh mentioned that although girls did not normally frequent the AIU Boys' School in Baghdad because of conservative communal mores that prohibited boys and girls from socializing with one another, Levy had been allowed to do so until her parents removed her, apparently once she neared puberty.⁷⁶ As a student, she had learned how to speak, read, and write French, and had retained these skills even after being removed from the school.⁷⁷ He also praised Levy's family for being conversant with European culture and described her father as the city's leading accountant.⁷⁸ Somekh also noted that Levy was healthy and that although she would clearly arrive in Paris well behind other girls her age in terms of academics she possessed the ability to catch up.⁷⁹ His comment about Levy's need to catch up with other students was clearly a reference to Baghdad's lack of a girls' school. Finally, again striking a compromising tone, he informed his superiors that her parents were not wedded to the idea of her returning to her native city and would consent to the AIU assigning her to where she would be most needed following her training in Paris.⁸⁰

Somekh's correspondence with the Central Committee regarding Levy's potential candidacy sheds significant light on both the social condition of upper-class Jewish girls in Baghdad and on his own goals as an advocate for female education. Although Levy's parents were supportive of her education, and even hoped that she would one day become a teacher herself, which would entail a life in the public spotlight, the fact that they removed her from school at the age of either eleven or twelve highlights the importance that Jewish families attached to their daughters' reputations.⁸¹ It is uncertain exactly how old Levy was when she left school, as Somekh mentioned only that she had left the school just prior to his arrival in 1888.⁸² Additionally, although he later stated that her family approved of Levy working in other cities, it appears that Somekh at first hoped that the organization would consider preparing Levy to run a future school in Baghdad.⁸³ This may explain why Somekh devoted so much space to describing Levy's father's economic and social position in the city. Besides merely assuring the AIU's Parisian leadership of Levy's family's irreproachable morality, support, and ability to finance their daughter's education, Somekh was also likely highlighting the family's prominent place in the local community. This might have been to portray Levy as the ideal candidate to assuage local concerns about female education and mitigate criticism of the opening of a girls' school.

It is worth noting that Levy was eventually admitted to the AIU's training program but was ultimately sent to work in Damascus, and not her native city,

in 1896, over one year after the girls' school in Baghdad opened. Thus, it seems from this brief case study that the Central Committee's members respected Somekh's opinions enough to seriously consider his proposals but also appear to have believed that future AIU-trained directors and female teachers destined for Baghdad should not be natives of the city.

By early 1891, after floating the idea for a girls' school and linking his advocacy for Levy's admission to the AIU female teachers' program in Paris to it, Somekh's arguments seem to have gained receptive ears in Paris. Not only did the Central Committee allow Somekh to expand the AIU's apprenticeship program in Baghdad to include young girls whose families wanted them to learn employable skills such as dressmaking and embroidery, but the AIU's Secretary-General also asked Somekh his opinion about the chances for success of a girls' school.⁸⁴ At the same time he tasked Somekh with creating a provisional budget for such an institution's first year of operation.⁸⁵

As previously discussed, Somekh responded affirmatively to the question about the chances of the school's success. Regarding the budget, he painted a rather negative picture. Somekh's letter, dated April 16, 1891, stated that money was the main obstacle to the founding of a girls' school. In this letter Somekh predicted that it would cost approximately 3,540 francs per year to run the school and that the organization could expect only 900 francs in tuition from approximately thirty paying students.⁸⁶ His budget assumed that sixty students would be nonpaying, bringing the total enrollment to ninety, which, at least initially, would mean that it was smaller than the Boys' School. He attempted to forestall criticism for his projected 2,640 franc deficit by assuring the Central Committee that the AJA, which he pointed out had long championed the creation of a girls' school, would offset half of it.⁸⁷

Besides the deficit, Somekh's chief concern appears to have been attracting a capable female director to lead the school. After stating that an annual salary of 1,800 to 2,000 francs would be adequate to attract a qualified candidate to a dreadful location such as Baghdad, Somekh devoted much of the remainder of the letter to advising the Central Committee as to the route a female teacher should take from Western Europe to Baghdad.⁸⁸ He advised a sea journey, which, assuming Marseilles, France, as the departure point, and Basra as the end point, would take eighteen days, including a stop in Bombay, India.⁸⁹ Upon arriving in Basra, the teacher could take either a British or Ottoman ship up the Tigris and arrive in Baghdad within the day.⁹⁰

In addition to crafting a provisional budget and dispensing advice as to how best to attract and transport a future director for the school, Somekh's

letter also spelled out his vision for how the school's curriculum should be structured. He asserted that the students should be divided into three main tracks and that the initial focus should be on teaching them French and Hebrew.⁹¹ Interestingly, he strongly advised against the instruction of Arabic, as the general language of instruction in the school would be French, and he believed it would be nearly impossible to find a suitable female Arabic teacher in Baghdad.⁹² Somekh's omission of Arabic is important to note since the vast majority of Baghdadi Jewish families at this time would have spoken Judeo-Arabic in their homes. By focusing on French and Hebrew, rather than Arabic, Somekh's desired program would have potentially rendered Jewish girls unable to gain employment or potentially even to access the social and cultural spheres outside of either the local Jewish community or the elite French-speaking community in the city.

Indeed, such a focus would have worked against integrating Jewish girls into general Baghdadi society. This issue was not as important for Jewish boys, as Jewish men had long conducted their personal and financial business in the public sphere, allowing them to mix with their non-Jewish counterparts. However, Jewish women in the urban Ottoman Arab world had historically had fewer interactions with non-Jewish women, and certainly with non-Jewish men, because of dominant cultural taboos related to women traveling outside of the house.⁹³

Although Somekh had hoped to pre-empt criticism of his proposed budget, he apparently met with some resistance from the Central Committee. In a letter from mid-June, 1891, Somekh defended his budget by disparaging the local Jewish community:

Your observations on this question are perfectly just but, given the moral state of our co-religionists in Baghdad, it would be fanciful to appeal to their sense of self-sacrifice. They have the means but not the willingness, they are lacking in generosity. You asked me for a budget and I drew one up using the most exacting methods. I assessed that local resources could cover 900 francs in tuition and do not believe that we can count on a higher amount of revenue.⁹⁴

Indeed, Somekh proceeded to declare Baghdadi Jews to be egotistical, exploitative, and willing to benefit monetarily from the resources and work of international philanthropists while refusing to contribute to their own community.⁹⁵ Implicit in this letter was the notion that Baghdadi Jews, even after more than a

quarter-century of AIU influence, still required external actors to work actively on their behalves to force change upon them.

Unfortunately, Somekh, who left Baghdad in early 1893, did not take up the issue of the Girls' School again. Instead he left it to his successor, Joseph Danon, who had arrived just prior to Somekh's departure, to deal with the issue. Danon, who had previously worked as a teacher in AIU schools in Sofia and Tunis and, most recently, as a director in Sousse, Tunisia, arrived with his wife Rachel, who had previously taught in the Girls' School in Tunis. While Somekh did not remain in Baghdad long enough to see the opening of the Girls' School, he was instrumental in advocating for girls' education in general and was the person who first influenced the AIU's Paris leadership to seriously consider opening such an institution. He also accurately predicted some problems the school would face in the future, including the recruitment of able teachers, the issue of families refusing to pay for their daughters' educations, and the challenge of finding adequate language teachers.

After spending a year getting situated in Baghdad, Danon began building on Somekh's advocacy by also championing the creation of a girls' school. Most notably, he penned a letter to Paris in June 1894 arguing that the graduates of the Boys' School required educated companions to ensure that they would retain the moral values they had adopted while studying under AIU supervision.⁹⁶ Again, this idea of companionate marriage was gaining ground in both foreign- and indigenous-run schools in the Ottoman Empire and Middle East in this period. For example, in British-occupied Egypt, children were taught that the family unit had at its center educated husbands and wives whose bonds were based on love.⁹⁷ Danon also noted that the AIU's work over the previous three decades had helped to prepare the community for the creation of such a school and that he did not expect much resistance to it.⁹⁸ This letter proved decisive, and his superiors soon consented to the establishment of a girls' school in Baghdad.

Rachel Danon and the Opening of the Girls' School

In March 1893, around the time of her twenty-second birthday, Rachel Danon arrived with her husband Joseph in Baghdad so that the latter could take up his new position as director of the Albert Sassoon School. After the Central Committee agreed, in mid 1894, to establish a girls' school in Baghdad, it tasked Rachel Danon with acting as the institution's first director and ordered her to begin ordering materials and enrolling students.⁹⁹ This was not an easy task as Danon had never previously served in this capacity, and the Baghdadi Jewish

community had never had a formal school for girls, with the exception of the short-lived AIU-run vocational workshop that had closed in 1886.

It is worth noting that although her husband was an older and more experienced teacher, Rachel Danon, in her role as director, was not merely a figurehead put in place so that Joseph could exert supreme influence over both schools. Rather, the two worked as colleagues, even though Rachel's salary was less than half of Joseph's, and were responsible for leading their respective schools. In certain instances, however, such as when they communicated with the Ottoman government, Joseph would take the lead. One early example of this was with regard to registering the school with the Ottoman government. Joseph engaged in some legal trickery in order to fast-track the school's approval by Ottoman authorities, who required the school be registered in the name of an Ottoman citizen. Since Rachel had been born and raised in France and held that country's citizenship, Joseph registered the new school under the name of an unnamed Ottoman woman.¹⁰⁰

In spite of her husband's struggles to get the school registered, during this time Rachel's focus remained on organizing the school. Her initial letter mentioned that since local customs dictate that the Girls' School should have only female teachers, and because the local rabbi under consideration to teach Hebrew struggled with the language's script, she would try to find a local female Hebrew teacher.¹⁰¹ While she feared that this might prove difficult because of the dearth of qualified Jewish female teachers in Baghdad, she expressed her confidence that the Central Committee would provide her with proper teachers if necessary.¹⁰² In this letter Danon also requested that the Central Committee provide her with various teaching materials, including song books and physical training manuals as well as various training manuals for the girls who were apprenticing outside of the school.¹⁰³ The idea that girls' schools should have an exclusive or nearly exclusive female teaching staff was apparently widespread in the Arab world's Jewish communities and extended to institutions beyond the AIU's network. The Evelina de Rothschild School in Jerusalem, for example, adhered to similar principles during this period.¹⁰⁴

Before discussing the AIU Girls' School's opening it is worth mentioning that this institution was only the second school for girls in the city. The first such institution was a Catholic school for girls, which had been founded by a Carmelite priest in 1868 and then transferred to the authority of French Catholic nuns in 1880.¹⁰⁵ While an Armenian girls' school had been founded in the 1850s, it is unclear whether this institution was still in existence in the 1880s. In fact, a British consular report from 1885 listed the Catholic Girls' School