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## Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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## Women's *Aliyah*

### *Migration Patterns of North African Jewish Women to Eretz Israel in the Nineteenth Century*

The pioneering women of Palestine, those Jewish women who joined the Zionist *aliyyot* (migration; literally, “ascent”), have been the focus of much current research on gender and Jewish settlement in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eretz Israel.<sup>1</sup> However, these pioneers represented only a small proportion of all Jewish women in the country at the time.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the exclusion of the traditional women from the historiography of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel in the nineteenth century is particularly glaring, considering the demographic imbalance in the population: nearly two-thirds of all adult Jews were women.

#### The Problem of Sources

Few written sources have been uncovered relating to women in the traditional societies of nineteenth-century Eretz Israel, and those we have are limited in scope. Immigrants from North Africa, both men and women, left almost no written records that shed light on the topic under discussion: there are no known diaries, few personal letters have survived, and communal records relate only indirectly to the process of migration itself.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is questionable whether those existing documents shed light on the realities of the times, as internal communal “censorship” was strict, lest the Holy Land

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be defamed.<sup>4</sup> In addition, most existing documentation was written by men, and from their perspective.

Although few written descriptions remain to shed light on the migrations of North African women, a wealth of demographic information can be culled from contemporary censuses carried out in Jewish communities of nineteenth-century Eretz Israel. At the initiative of Sir Moses Montefiore, a Jewish philanthropist and public figure in nineteenth-century England, a modern census was carried out five times among the Jews of the Holy Land, in 1839, 1849, 1855, 1866, and 1875.<sup>5</sup> In most instances, the Jewish population was enumerated by household, with detailed information relating only to the male head of the household: his place of birth, age, year of arrival in the country, profession, and members of his household. Only the existence of married women is noted, and usually (but not always), their names. However, separate lists were prepared of the numerous widows in each of the communities, with columns for information as noted for the male heads of households (see figure 1). Although we cannot rely on an analysis of the demographic information for women listed as widows at the time of the census to reconstruct a comprehensive picture relating to all women, it does provide a relatively reliable picture, as many of these women immigrated as young girls or married women. More importantly, such an analysis opens new directions for research, reveals areas of Jewish life yet unexplored, and raises pertinent questions regarding traditional Jewish communities.

Together with gender theories culled from a variety of disciplines such as demography, economics, geography, sociology and history, the analysis of the censuses has created the framework from which additional documentation has been examined. A gendered reading of scattered evidence on North African *aliyah* to Eretz Israel found in travelers' journals and diplomatic papers presents numerous examples and graphic descriptions. Oral documentation collected from the descendents of those women immigrants to Eretz Israel (*olot*) has also been integrated into the research. The elderly female informants in particular opened a window into the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. They added "flesh and blood" to the skeletal existence recreated by the statistical analysis. These combined resources have permitted a serious examination of the demographic characteristics of *olot*, their motivations in migrating, and the effects of their *aliyah* on the communities of their destination. This article will limit the discussion to aspects of the migration itself; its implications for Jewish life in Palestine will be dealt with separately.



## Demographic Imbalance of the Population

The high percentage of women within the Jewish population of the Holy Land can be explained by three major factors: first, marriage patterns of North African Jews, both in Palestine and in their communities of origin; second, differential rates in life expectancy between men and women; and third, patterns of *aliyah*, differing for families and singles, the latter primarily widows.

In both the Maghreb and Palestine, the traditional age of marriage for girls was around twelve, and for boys between sixteen and eighteen.<sup>6</sup> High mortality among Jews of all ages resulted in a large number of widows and widowers, as well as numerous remarriages, which traditional Jewish society encouraged to ensure community stability. However, a greater age differential between men and women was common in second and third marriages, with younger girls marrying older men.<sup>7</sup> As a result, many women remained widows, even at relatively young ages of twenty and thirty.<sup>8</sup>

Another phenomenon that seems to be similar in both regions is that of differential mortality rates for men and women, favoring women. During the nineteenth century, natural disasters, disease and epidemics, poor sanitary conditions, deteriorating physical conditions, and a general lack of health services were particularly severe in Eretz Israel, and actually resulted in a natural decrease in population. Although these factors affected both men and women, it seems that the situation for women was somewhat better than that for men. Despite the dangers involved in childbirth, women worked at home — in their homes or in the homes of others — in a relatively safe environment. Men, on the other hand, were exposed to more danger both because of their work in trades and crafts under less protected conditions, and because of their workplace, in the open market or in Arab villages, often among population hostile to them.<sup>9</sup> As a result, many more women were widowed than men, both in the Maghreb and in Palestine. These factors created a demographic imbalance, which in turn resulted in much greater statistical chances for widowed or divorced men to remarry than for the greater numbers of women in the community.<sup>10</sup>

Before examining the gendered patterns of *aliyah*, it is necessary to focus first on the patterns of *aliyah* in general, and those of North African Jews in particular. It is within this context that North African women's *aliyah* will be examined.

During the nineteenth century, a steep increase in the number of Jews ar-

living in the Holy Land not only balanced the negative growth rate of the Jewish population, but also surpassed it, resulting in a significant overall increase in the Jewish population in the country. The number of North African Jews residing in the Holy Land, for example, grew from some hundreds at the beginning of the century, to nearly eight thousand at the outbreak of World War I.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1870s, North African Jews comprised approximately one-quarter of the Jewish population in Eretz Israel: in Safed and Tiberias nearly three-fourths of the Sephardi community were of North African descent, as were the Jewish communities as a whole in Haifa and Jaffa. However, in Jerusalem and in Hebron, where the Sephardim of Turkish and Balkan origin dominated communal relations, North African presence was limited: in Jerusalem, they represented no more than 15 percent of the Sephardi community (or 8 percent of all Jews in the city), and only a handful of North African Jews settled in Hebron.

In Eretz Israel, however, there was an exceptionally large proportion of women. This may be explained by the combination of demographic characteristics suggested above — that is, different marriage ages for boys and girls, the prevalence of remarriages with greater age differentiation, and gendered differences in life expectancy — together with patterns of migration particular to Eretz Israel. Traditional Jewish society not only sanctioned *aliyah* for widowed women but may even have encouraged it. Widowed men, as mentioned, generally remarried, and migrated to Eretz Israel as part of a family unit.

### Women's Migrations

Various theories and models have been proposed to explain the complex process of migration in general, and *aliyah* to Eretz Israel in particular. Political upheavals, economic changes, and personal safety are among the primary motivating factors noted. Secondary factors generally include ideological and personal aspirations and individual circumstances.<sup>12</sup> An analysis of the demographic characteristics of North African women who immigrated to Eretz Israel, and in particular those characteristics that point to motivating factors for *aliyah*, reveals a gender bias in the organization of the models developed to explain migration. Factors influencing women's decisions to migrate almost all, and not unexpectedly, fall in the private, individual sphere. This stereotyped dichotomy of society brings into question both the terminology used and its gendered view of women's reality. Must these mod-

els direct research on women's activities exclusively to the private and family spheres? I suggest that existing categories be utilized, yet re-defined in order to create a broader definition of the phenomenon of *aliyah*, a definition that will be more inclusive (and perhaps more credible?) and therefore applicable to all groups of Jews who immigrated: men and women, rich and poor, the learned and the common people, and to various cultural and ethnic groups. For example, categories such as personal status that influence an individual's response to economic and political change, can be redefined to include wealth, age, and profession, as well as gender. Thus the division between private and public becomes blurred, with gender as a primary variable.

Initial research on women's migrations has mostly dealt with economic aspects, and in particular, those of contemporary women in less developed countries.<sup>13</sup> From these works, it becomes clear that women's positions in their families and communities generally explain and define the limits of their geographic mobility, their motivations for far-distance migrations, and the natural selection of immigrants among the women in their society. However, one must consider not only marriage possibilities or economic factors of the labor market as motivating and influencing the decision to migrate, but also ideological and spiritual factors, and the part of women in migrations that were principally ideological, such as *aliyah* to Eretz Israel. That being said, one also must recognize that it is impossible to ascertain the full range of factors that motivate each individual to migrate. Moreover, as the demographer Everett S. Lee has noted, "The decision to migrate . . . is never completely rational, and for some persons the rational component is much less than the irrational."<sup>14</sup>

### North African Jewish Women's Love of Zion

Although we have no direct documentation on factors motivating North African women to migrate to Eretz Israel, one may assume that the main factor is their deep emotional attachment to the Holy Land and their belief in its inherent spiritual qualities.<sup>15</sup> This overriding, deep attachment to the Holy Land and the special virtues that living in the country endows upon its Jewish inhabitants explains the spiritual factors motivating all Jews, and not only women. We will focus here on those aspects of the traditional love for Zion defined specifically by gender.

On the one hand, most scholars have discussed the traditional attachment of North African Jews to Eretz Israel and their legal obligations to mi-

grate there, using terms and forms of expression of the established (male) community: fixed and written prayers, poems (*piyyutim*) written in praise of Eretz Israel, public communal lectures (*derashot*), and rabbinical court decisions that discuss the commandments and their significance as well as financial contributions to the Holy Land and its inhabitants. Men could—and did—elevate their well being in study and prayer while living in their original communities. Women seemingly had no direct part in such activities, all well documented in the writings of communal male leaders and rabbis.

On the other hand, women, as well as men, believed in the special virtues endowed upon those living in the land—atonement of sins, answers to private, individual prayers, health and longevity.<sup>16</sup> The act of *aliyah* itself, of migration to the Holy Land, endowed each immigrant with a special status: Each Jew living in the country became a special envoy of his or her family, community, and the entire Jewish people. These women immigrated (“ascended”) to the Holy Land in order to “ascend in holiness,” and to strengthen their faith, and not to be part of a social revolution.<sup>17</sup> Upon their arrival in the Holy Land, they prayed fervently and often on the graves of saintly rabbis, they made supplications for their own personal benefit and for that of all Jews.<sup>18</sup>

By broadening the definitions of expressions of the traditional love and attachment to Zion and the religious activities of North African Jews to include those outside of the established rituals of the community, and by including nonformal expressions of religiosity, women's love of Zion and their deep desire for *aliyah* are revealed. During the nineteenth century, for example, the phenomenon of saint veneration grew among North African Jews in general, and among Moroccan Jews in particular. Women as well as men, and perhaps more than men, participated in public celebrations (*hilot*) and believed in the special powers of saintly men and women.<sup>19</sup> This belief also encompasses a deep connection to Eretz Israel, accompanied by each individual's personal participation in the process of redemption.<sup>20</sup>

Many women vowed to move to the Holy Land to thank God for fulfilling a prayer, to prostrate themselves on the graves of famous rabbis, such as Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai in Meron near Safed, or to “visit” the Prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel. Although the ideological basis for such a vow is deep within traditional Jewish culture and its affinity for Zion, a vow is a very private and individual expression of this attachment. Vows of men attesting to *aliyah* exist in legal contracts and rabbinical court decisions;<sup>21</sup> the vows of women seem to have been much more private and informal, and as such, were not documented in communal records. They are, however, remembered and repeated in stories relayed through generations by family members.

Research that integrates gender with such aspects of saint veneration, vows, and attachment to Eretz Israel may well reveal additional aspects of the folk religion of North African Jews as well as the possibilities for religious self-expression among women, including their decisions to migrate to the Land of Zion.<sup>22</sup>

### *Aliyah* in Family Units

One of the dominant characteristics of *aliyah* from North Africa to Eretz Israel in the nineteenth century is its pattern of family migration.<sup>23</sup> In 1829, for example, Joseph Wolff, a missionary of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, reported from Beirut that he saw “fifty Jews besides their wives and children . . . coming from Tunis and Tripoli, for the purpose of residing at Jerusalem.”<sup>24</sup> An analysis of the Montefiore censuses shows that almost a quarter (23.2%) of all North African-born men in the Holy Land arrived as children (up to 15 years of age); and over half (57%) were between the ages of 20 and 49. Only about 10 percent of the men immigrated between the ages of 50 and 60 and less than 10 percent (8.6%) were over the age of 60. As mentioned above, nearly all the males were married at the time of their arrival in the country.<sup>25</sup> Associational migration characterized most North African Jewish women traveling to the Holy Land together with their families: their fathers, husbands, and sons.

In addition to immediate families listed in the censuses, it is possible to identify extended families that appear to have immigrated together. Family cohesion and continuity gave support to the immigrants both during their long journey and while adjusting to a new environment and society after their arrival.<sup>26</sup> In 1844, for example, eight families, including many widowed mothers/grandmothers, set out from the Moroccan city of Meknès on their way to Eretz Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Moroccan authorities also seemed to have recognized the fact that Jews preferred to immigrate to Eretz Israel in family units. Jewish men often had to travel for their work in commerce and trade. However, because of their importance to the economy of the country, the authorities tried to supervise their movements outside Morocco. In an attempt to prevent Jewish males from migrating, emigration from the country was prohibited; heavy exit taxes were imposed upon them, or alternately upon their wives, certain to accompany them.<sup>28</sup> The German traveler Baron Heinrich von Malzan wrote of his three years in North Africa during the 1860s and noted that exit taxes could

be exorbitant, especially for an entire family, remarking that women were required to pay ten times that of men.<sup>29</sup> In 1892 it was reported, “To leave the country, the men used to have to pay \$4 and the women \$100, and sometimes the departure of the latter is still prohibited.”<sup>30</sup>

But what was the part of women in the family decision to migrate to the Holy Land? At times, women seemed to have encouraged and even initiated the migration of their families. Rabbinical court decisions, such as that of Rabbi Raphael Moshe Elbaz (1823–1896) in Sefrou in 1858, show the express wishes of women to immigrate to Eretz Israel, and in fact, their right to immigrate, even in light of objections from their families.<sup>31</sup>

There are also instances in which women refused to migrate with their husbands, and postponed or canceled plans for *aliyah*. In the 1870s, for example, the illustrious Rabbi Isaac Ben Naim from Tetuán desired to settle in Eretz Israel, but his wife objected. In the end, R. Ben Naim made a pilgrimage journey to the Holy Land in 1877, after which he returned to Tetuán.<sup>32</sup> Court cases, presenting instances of family discord, indicate that the decision to migrate to Eretz Israel was a family decision, in which women were active participants.

### Widows' *Aliyah*

In addition to families, singles — mostly widows — also immigrated to Eretz Israel. In the early nineteenth century, the American Consul in Algiers, William Shaler, reported that these were “aged and infirm Jews, sensible that all their temporal concerns are drawing to a close.”<sup>33</sup> However, one must bear in mind the statistics presented above, showing that the great majority of *olim* from North Africa in fact were not old at all. These *olim* migrated in order to live in the Holy Land, to “take pleasure in her stones, and favor her dust” (Psalms 102:15). More than men, it seems that women, mainly widows, chose to spend their final years in the Holy Land, after a difficult life in exile. Although they did in fact die there, the Jews from North Africa do not seem to have been motivated by the wish to die and be buried there.

As noted above, statistical information is available only for those enumerated as widows at the time of the nineteenth-century censuses. Although clear conclusions are not possible because of the limitations of the data, it is still significant to note that twice as many women as men arrived in the country over the age of 60 (see figure 2). Because of the high mortality rate, both in Palestine and in the Maghreb, because of the disparity in ages be-

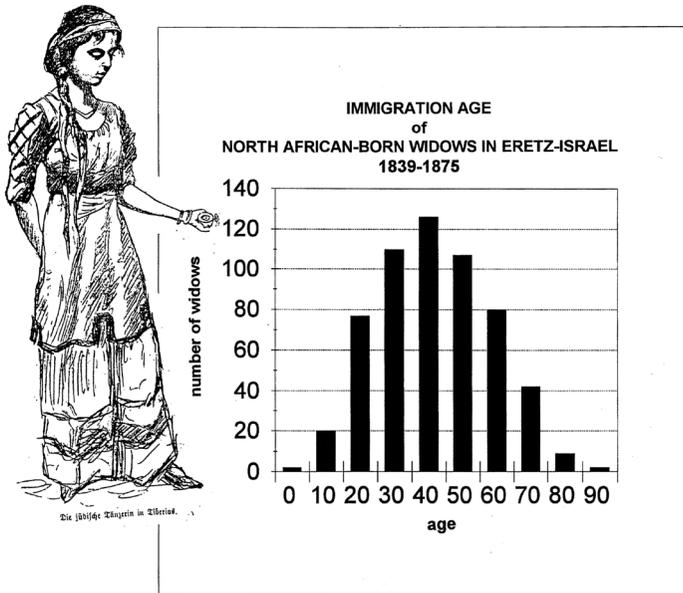


Fig. 2. Immigration age of North African-born widows in Eretz-Israel, 1839–1875. Statistics compiled from the Montefiore censuses, 1839, 1849, 1855, 1866, 1875. Drawing from Sven Hedin, *Jerusalem* (Leipzig, 1918), p. 77.

tween the partners and the difference in life expectancy between men and women, it is difficult to ascertain who among those widows enumerated arrived as widows and who was widowed after her arrival. One notation written on the list of Maghrebin widows in Jerusalem in 1855 notes that “all the widows came with their husbands . . . however much to our distress, they . . . died”<sup>34</sup> (see figure 1). In 1854, for instance, a caravan of Jews set out from Meknès for Palestine, and there, in addition to several extended families, were “ten elderly widows, and another of great skill in sewing, and also of great learning in the Bible and Mishnah . . . and all prayers . . . were known to her.”<sup>35</sup> The 1855 list of widows in the Sephardi community in Safed enumerates some sixteen widows who all migrated from the Tunisian community of Jerba three years previously, all in their fifties or sixties, leading to the conclusion that most if not all arrived as widows.<sup>36</sup>

How did widowhood affect these women’s decision to migrate to the Holy Land?<sup>37</sup> Although social conventions generally limited the geographic mobility of women in traditional societies, economic need, family obligations, and philanthropic activities often mitigated prohibitions.<sup>38</sup> The spatial mo-

bility of women, the motivations for their long-distance migrations, and the selectivity of female migrants are also determined by the position of women within their families and within their communities. *Aliyah* was not only socially acceptable, but seen as a holy act in the eyes of the community. Research using gender as a primary variable in the study of migrations has suggested that certain categories of women are in fact “selected out” for migration, or actually pushed out. Among those are women already at the fringes of society — single women, widows, divorcees, and those with limited means of existence.<sup>39</sup> Although older women often became the matriarchs of their families once widowed, and as such assumed an elevated status, this status should be distinguished from their often-marginal functions in daily life.<sup>40</sup> Jewish families possibly recognized this distinction, and thus accepted the decision of their mothers and sisters to migrate.

After fulfilling their obligations to family and community, many widows were, for the first time, independent. This was the only time in which they could act freely on their own decisions.<sup>41</sup> Thus they could finally fulfill their desires and dreams and migrate to Eretz Israel. However, it must be added that such independence was often limited by their own economic resources or those made available to them by their families. Such may be the case with the sixteen widows from Jerba and the eleven widows from Meknès.

## Conclusions

Research focusing on gender in the study of Jewish migrations to Eretz Israel reveals attitudes and patterns of behavior and authority, which previously were barely noted. Although social constraints generally were placed upon women's movements, *aliyah* seems to have been accepted and even encouraged. The ideological-religious factors motivating North African Jews to immigrate to Eretz Israel, their deep love of the Holy Land, and their desire for religious fulfillment were all shared by both men and women. However, the interpretation of these factors and their fulfillment as embodied in actual migration took different forms. The relative independence and freedom of widows enabled many of these women to carry out their dreams, fulfill their vows, and express their own religious aspirations.

*Aliyah* from North Africa, and specifically the large numbers of women participating in these migrations, not only added to the social weave of the communities, but also changed it. Whether women migrated to the Holy Land as widows or whether they became widows after settling in the coun-

try, the communities were blessed with a large number of women. The communal male leadership had to contend with the needs and demands created. Problems particular to them as women and as immigrants in the traditional urban centers of nineteenth-century Palestine were dealt with — or ignored — within the context of the demographic imbalance of the Jewish population in general, and of the widows in particular. The social implications of such patterns and problems will be discussed elsewhere. However, it seems that the same ideals embodied in these women in their decision to migrate continued to fortify them after their arrival and gave them strength to cope with the severe poverty and enormous problems of daily life in nineteenth-century Eretz Israel.