
Jewish Immigration and the Establishment of the National Hebrew Community in the 'Mixed City' of Haifa

*L'immigration juive et l'établissement de la communauté nationale hébraïque
dans la ville mixte de Haïfa*

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Jewish Immigration and the Establishment of the National Hebrew Community in the 'Mixed City' of Haifa

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The national Hebrew community of Haifa developed as a result of the Zionist immigration to Israel. To date, the historic research has dealt mainly with the integration of immigrants at the Zionist central institutions. Urban research focused on Tel Aviv and on the Hebrew colonies. Papers have also been written about Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish *Yishuv*. This paper examines the influence of immigration on the developing Hebrew communities in 'mixed cities,' and the nature of the relationship between Hebrew communities and other communities in their urban space, focusing on Haifa during the British mandate period.

'Mixed cities' is a term referring to towns with both Arab and Jewish population, such as Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Tiberias. Establishing a national community in 'mixed' environments was more complicated and perhaps more delicate than in the homogenous Hebrew communities. The fight for autonomy against the colonial authorities was complicated by the struggle for domination and hegemony in the city's institutions (against the Arab representatives). Whilst working to build a 'national unity,' the inter-Jewish relations also suffered from complications resulting from the cultural encounter between the Zionist members of the New *Yishuv* and the orthodox, usually non-Zionist Jews of the Old *Yishuv* in the 'mixed cities.'

Until the middle of the 19th century, the city of Haifa was a small town, with a population of a few hundred people. With the establishment of the German colony (1868) and the beginning of Christian activities in and around the city, the population started to grow. Around 1880-1890, the population of the city was estimated at 6,000 people.

At the end of the Ottoman rule, Haifa enjoyed further increase in population, in commerce, and in traffic. The city was growing rapidly, and improvements were made to infrastructures, to public hygiene, etc. At the beginning of the 20th century, the estimated population of the city was 11,000-12,000 people, reaching 20,000 people in 1911. This was a higher growth rate than in any other city in the country at the time.

Haifa enjoyed golden days during the British mandate. The British made Haifa the capital city of the north, as well as a military and commerce center. The establishment of the port, of the airport, and of the refineries marked the growing importance of the city. This growth influenced and was influenced by the Jewish immigration to the city beginning in the late 19th century.

In 1868, prior to the Zionist immigration, the Jewish community of Haifa was made of about 100 families. The majority were Sephardic people from northern Africa mainly, who had been settling in Haifa since the beginning of the 19th century. Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews had been coming to the city since the middle of the century: they remained a minority among the Jews, but their community was better established and organized. Five out of the six synagogues in town were Sephardic. The way of life in both communities was very much alike and similarly poverty-stricken.

At the beginning of the 20th century, various people immigrated to Haifa and formed the New *Yishuv* – the Zionist immigration. The Jewish community grew and changed.

	<i>Jews: %</i>	<i>Jews</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Source</i>
		100 families	3,500-4,000	1868	
			7,165	1886	Schumacher census
			8,500	1890	
			11,000-12,000	1902	
			15,000	1905	
			18,000	1909	
			20,000	1911	
	13 %	3,000	23,000	1914	Ottoman estimate
Probably just in the Old City		1,406		1917	Zionist executive
	25.3 %	6,230	24,634	1922	British census
	32 %	15,923	50,401	1931	British census
	52 %	54,415	105,000	1938	Community board census
	66 %	84,100	128,000	1948	Community board census

Population growth, Haifa (1868-1948)

The ethnic structure of the community changed over time:

- 1905: M.G. Lewin (later to become the chairman of the community) wrote of 20 Ashkenazi families and of about 120 Sephardic families.
- 1919: Zionist records of Haifa mention the presence of 21.7 % of Oriental Jews, 39 % of Sephardic Jews, and 39 % of Ashkenazi Jews, out of a total of 1,407 Jews at that time.
- 1938 Jewish community census: 86.2 % Ashkenazi (46,660 out of 54,118 people).
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The data should be compared to the general statistics:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Ashkenazi</i>	<i>Sephardic</i>	<i>Yemenites</i>	<i>Other Oriental Jews</i>
1916		41 %		
1918 - 56,000 people	33,000 (58.9 %)	11,000 (19.6 %)	4,400 (7.9 %)	7,600 (13.6 %)
1928	71 %	13 %		
1934 - 550,000 people		25 %		
1938		23 %		
1940	77.7 %			
1943		20.5 %		

The differences among the European immigrants were significant to the community structure. The first immigration waves had come from Eastern Europe mainly, while since the beginning of the 30's, the majority of the immigrants came from Western and Central Europe.

Haifa attracted the immigrants. Until the spring of 1935, 24,000 German Jews had immigrated to Palestine: 8,000 arrived in Tel Aviv, which then made 38 % of the Jewish *Yishuv*. Haifa, then the home of only 14 % of the *Yishuv*, welcome 5,000 immigrants representing almost 20 % of all the immigrants to Palestine. In 1936, Central-European Jews were 14 % of the Jewish community of Haifa, while in Tel Aviv they counted for 9 % of the population, and in Jerusalem for only 5.6 %. A year later, in 1937, out of 40,000 immigrants, 22.5 % came to Haifa, 33 % to Tel Aviv, and 12.5 % to Jerusalem. In 1948, 29 % of native German Jews in Palestine lived in Tel Aviv, 16 % in Haifa, and 9 % in Jerusalem – that is to say that the amount of immigrants that Haifa took in outnumbered the city's original population, making of Haifa a major center of immigrants' absorption.

The new immigrants brought new ideas to the community and changes to its structure. One of those ideas was nationalism, which, among other things, claimed to consider all the Jews as one community – in other words: it aimed at creating a united community, with one representative organization. The revolution wasn't in the idea of a joint representation of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, but that of the single representation of a single community including both origins but without marking the distinction between them.

The old Jewish community of Haifa was in fact made of two separate ethnic communities, the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic ones. The Ottoman authorities, as recorded in the Ottomans' *millet* laws, considered them as one community that enjoyed religious and cultural autonomy. As mentioned above, Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews were characterized by religious separatism but were socially and economically very much involved with their Arab neighbors. The newcomers' idea of one national community comprehended the idea of national and political separatism between Arabs and Jews. Haifa, a 'mixed city,' was a microcosm of the Palestinian reality – a mixed political-geographical space, with both Jewish and Arab populations. The attempt to establish a national community within the city, along the Arab community, was different from other Jewish communities' attempts to create a distinctive geographical space, as in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, for example. Haifa was thus a sample of the larger attempt at building the Jewish 'National-Home' in a 'mixed' Palestine.

Immigration brought financial growth to the community, but we cannot separate this growth from the general development of the city, and the changes that the Zionist immigration brought to the country in general. Community institutions such as modern schools (the school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle opened in 1881), the first nursery school (Ezra, in 1907), or the Anglo-Palestine Bank (1908), were established. The first organized neighborhoods were built outside the city center, marking the beginning of geographical separatism between Jews and Arabs.

The first joint ethnic committee, comprising the Ashkenazi and Sephardic committees, was established in 1907. The major goal of the Community Board (*Va'ad Haeda*) was to ratify the Zionist aspirations to constitute an inclusive body (abiding by the mandatory laws) for the Jewish (and not merely the Zionist) population. Until 1929, the Community Board acted with no legal basis.

However, in 1929, regulations of the *Knesset Yisrael* – the internal governing entity of the *Yishuv* – gave the legal frame and the mandatory backing to the national institutions, at both national and local levels. The role of the Community Boards focused on dealing with the communities' needs in the areas of education, welfare, health, and religion, as well as with municipal elections, in order to have a say and an influence on the provision of services to their communities.

Just as the national representative organizations were democratically-elected general bodies – whose voted regulations and budgets were anchored in the regulations of the *Knesset Yisrael* and required the approval of the mandatory authorities – so were the Community Boards bound by the same regulations to hold secret ballot, direct, general, and democratic elections. Their budgets were subject to the same governmental control. A politically based public leadership was convenient only for those who were familiar with the 'democratic game' and who knew how to take advantage of it. The European immigrants, who were familiar with the political rules, established organizations by which they gained public power: political parties, civic or economic organizations (such as merchandise or workers organizations), and public organizations, such as the neighborhood committees. Though they were not represented at the Community Board, these bodies still had significant political and economic power. They were the economical safety net of the community, and joined the Community Board whenever trouble arose. The 'unorganized,' who, for the most part, belonged to the Old *Yishuv* and to the Sephardic group, could not take part in this progress, and therefore became economical and political inferiors in the new joint community.

It should be emphasized that we are not dealing only with the struggle between Old *Yishuv* and New *Yishuv*, between old timers and newcomers, but also with parallel internal struggle which, within the Sephardic group, opposed those who wanted to become part of the 'Zionist renaissance,' as it was called, and those who tried to maintain the old tradition of separate groups. Being part of the 'Zionist renaissance,' from an inferior's point of view, as mentioned before, and keeping a certain level of commitment to one's original community and identity (against the national ideal) raised a very complicated challenge for the Sephardic leaders, as opposed to the Ashkenazi Orthodox party of *Agudat Israel* that chose not to join the *Knesset Yisrael*.

Despite the described social gaps, until the late 30's, the public leadership of the Haifa community maintained a certain sense of intimacy and collaboration. A same person often served in different public positions, and one could find the same names in the neighborhood committees, in the Community Board, or in other public positions. That explains why many conflicts turned into collaboration. The Community Board became the stage for political compromising, and the arena in which the way to the joint

community was paved. This unique sense of intimacy can be seen in the way the committee operated in emergency situations, when the community leaders joined their efforts and acted together on a personal basis, with no connection to their political sympathies. The best example was the elected chairman, Gotel-Levin, who was repeatedly elected as a chairman despite the fact that he didn't belong to the major workers party, but to the 'General Zionists' minority party. Gotel-Levin, Yoel Moshe Solomon's son in law, an Orthodox but modern Jew himself, a pharmacist, a merchant, and a man of compromise, contributed a lot to the accommodating way the committee (and therefore the community) was run. That intimacy began to change with the community's growth in the 30's, not only because of the increase in population, but also because of the cultural and organizational differences brought by the Central and Western European immigrants. The expressions Old *Yishuv* and New *Yishuv* – old timers and newcomers – changed during those years, as the Old *Yishuv* and first years' immigrants found themselves on the same side, trying to stop the cultural and political changes the Central European newcomers tried to bring into society. New lines were drawn, especially when the cultural struggle turned into a political one, with the establishment of a Central-Western European party, the New *Aliy'a* party at the occasion of the 1942 elections. The party's success in the 1942 elections (reaching second place after *Mapay*), renewed the sector-based orientation of the leadership and the ethnic image of the political and cultural struggle on the nature of the community.

Another area influenced by the new immigration is the relationship between the Jewish and the Arab communities in the city.

As mentioned above, the small 19th century Jewish community was economically and culturally involved with its Arab's neighboring community, despite religious differences. The immigration waves not only changed the demographical ratio between Arabs and Jews, but also brought new ambitions of national identity, and, later on, of national sovereignty. From a local perspective, establishing new, ethnically separated settlements, matched those ideas perfectly. But in the 'mixed cities,' the reality was different and demanded finding different ways to deal with the increasing tension between national independent organizations and the continuous coexistence within the municipality and the city's every day life. In Tel Aviv, the Jewish community who had established the city followed the model of separatism but in close proximity to the mixed 'mother city' of Jaffa. The new immigrants in Haifa debated this problem throughout the mandate period. They established new neighborhoods that were ethnically homogenous, and debated on the extent to which those neighborhoods should be bound to the city of Haifa or to its Jewish community only. *Hadar Hacarmel*, the major Jewish neighborhood, hesitated between becoming the Hebrew city of the Carmel, thus turning into a national leader like Tel Aviv, or becoming the main political and economical anchor to the more complicated reality of the 'mixed city' of Haifa, an option they eventually favored. Most of the later Haifa Bay neighborhoods, confronted with the same question, opted for separatism both from the city and from its Jewish community.

The decisions were not only ideological, but also of economical and political nature. Being part of the city also meant taking the responsibility for non-organized, sometimes non-Zionist Jews, and it meant, of course, being forced to act within the local mixed municipality for the benefit of the common local interests.

These difficulties had an added impact since the Arab population failed to establish similar community institutions throughout the mandate period. The only Arab institutions to care for community matters were on the whole voluntary religious (Muslim or church-based) private organizations. There was no attempt to create a general and democratic organization through general elections.

This paper doesn't deal with the establishment of the Arab community or with the connections between Arabs and Jews. But focusing on the Jewish community illustrates very clearly how, led by public leadership, it increasingly separated from its Arab counterpart. This separatism can be observed at a number of levels:

- **Cooperation and mutual work at the mixed city council:** At the end of 19th century, for city council positions, Jews used to vote for Arab candidates who were considered 'accommodating' to the community. During the mandate, Jewish representatives were elected by the Community Board, and were considered as their delegates to the city council. When the sector-based parties of the Community Board confronted the broader perspective of the

municipality, disagreements were inevitable. The tensions between the separate deeds and aspirations of the Community Board and the need for cooperation and mutual action in the city council didn't lessen during the 40's, even when a Jew, Shabtai Levi, became the city mayor. The Community Board continued its separate activities not only in health, education, and social welfare services, but also in civil defense and civil organization during crisis times, such as World War II.

- **Cooperation in emergency times:** A paper written by Dr. Yakovson on Jerusalem during World War I points out a great amount of Jewish-Arab civil cooperation initiated by the city council. In a parallel research on the city of Haifa at the same time period, I showed how mainly Jewish civil activity was. The committees' documents indeed hardly mention any cooperation with the city's municipality or the Arab communities. This separate orientation continued, as mentioned above, during World War II.
- **Structural separatism:** During the mandate period, the Jewish community expanded its separate organizations and privatized them. The British objected to this orientation, as they supported a general civil infrastructure based on the economic ability of the land. The Jewish community refused to use the government-operated hospital (now known as the Rambam hospital), claiming that it was dirty, that it didn't serve kosher food and that it practiced low medicine standards. The community, together with the Hadassah organization, founded a Jewish hospital, now known as the Bnei Zion medical center. This was the community hospital, as opposed to other Jewish medical centers that were founded by the *kupat holim* – the workers' health maintenance organization. A similar trend affected education, as the Hebrew education system operated as a private one. Only in 1942 was a municipal Education Board established but, despite its alleged Arab and Jewish joint operation, the board acted as two separate bodies.
- **Language:** The majority of the Sephardic community spoke Arabic and was familiar with the Arab culture. The new immigrants, however, demanded to recognize Hebrew as the only national language. The Hebrew language spread through various channels; among them was the demand on the part of the British authorities and the city municipality to recognize Hebrew as one of the official languages and to publish official documents in that language. Another channel was the language classes offered to both immigrants and the old community. The idea of course was to use Hebrew as a federative tool for the new Hebrew community and as a dividing line between the two national communities. But many members of the old community rejected these ideas and considered Arabic as a crucial communication tool. Their demands to teach Arabic together with Hebrew were discarded by the community's new leadership, and they vanished during the 30's.
- **Geographical separatism and the establishing of new, homogeneous neighborhoods:** Despite what was described above, we can assume that within the mixed neighborhoods, a simple human cooperation and relationships existed. An echo of that delicate tapestry of human co-existence can be found, for example, in literature, but research on that topic remains to be done.

Conclusion

The encounter between immigrants and their new home is, inevitably, the story of many changes. The 20th century Jewish immigration to Palestine brought not only demographical changes but ideological and organizational ones as well.

One of the main characteristics of this immigration was the ambition to build a national community. When we come to examine this experience from a local perspective, the case of the 'mixed cities,' and Haifa in particular, is unique. The newcomers affected not only the size and the ethnic nature of the community but also re-defined its character, its internal relationships, and its connections with its Arab neighbors. In general, the immigrants preferred to construct their new Hebrew community in and from the former local Jewish community (or communities). In relation to the Arab surroundings, most of the new neighborhoods determined to become part of a joint municipality frame, along with geographical and organizational separation. Those decisions were reconsidered and were examined time and again during the mandate period, but eventually, they led to the construction of the 'Hebrew community of Haifa.'

The new leaders tried, in fact, to ‘un-mix’ Haifa into separate national neighborhoods and separate social and economical systems, employing their European cultural and political capital to have the British allow such moves. It was the same political and cultural capital that enabled certain Zionist groups to attain power in the inter-Jewish struggle on the new community’s nature, to gain public power, and to gain control over resources from the Old *Yishuv*. Although Haifa remained a ‘mixed city’ after 1948, the lines between the two national communities grew thicker. During the mandate period, the Hebrew community of Haifa became the strongest and the most organized Jewish community of a ‘mixed city’ in Palestine (compared to communities in other ‘mixed cities’ such as Tiberias or Jaffa). The local progressive establishment of a national community in a ‘mixed’ environment can bring to light another angle of the national construction struggle at the level of Palestine’s ‘mixed’ complex reality.