

The Installation of the Exilarch (Baghdad 12th century)

R. Nathan ha-Kohen [ha-Bavli] went on to describe the appointment of the Exilarch and how the people paid their allegiance to him at that time. It was as follows:

When there was a communal consensus on the appointment, the two Heads of the Yeshivot, together with their students, all the leaders of the congregation, and the elders, would gather in some prominent individual's house in Baghdad. He would be one of the greatest of that generation, such as Ne'ira<sup>1</sup> or the like. The man in whose home they gather is singled out for honor by this and receives much praise. His standing is enhanced by his meeting of the leaders and elders in his home.

The community would gather in the main synagogue on Thursday. The Exilarch would be installed by the laying of hands. The shofar was sounded to let all the people know from the youngest to the eldest. And when everyone heard it, each of them would send him a gift—each according to his means. All the leaders of the congregation and the wealthy would send him fine clothes, jewelry, and gold and silver vessels—each as he saw fit. The Exilarch, for his part, would take great pains in preparing a feast for Thursday and Friday which included all kinds of food and drink, and all sorts of confections, such as various sweets.

When he arose on Saturday to go to the synagogue, many of the prominent members of the community would join him in order to accompany him there. At the synagogue a wooden dais has already been specially prepared for him. It was seven cubits in length and three in width.<sup>2</sup> It was entirely covered with fine fabrics of blue, purple, and crimson silk. Under the dais stood young men who had been chosen from amongst the leading families of the community. These young men were distinguished for their sweet, pleasant voices. They had to be well versed in all aspects of prayer. Meanwhile, the Exilarch himself was hidden from sight together with the Heads of the Yeshivot. So at this time, while the youths were standing beneath the dais, there was no one at all sitting on it. Then the Cantor would begin with the "Praised be He who spoke,"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Concerning this important Jewish notable who was a banker to the Abbasid court, see Walter J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Medieval Islam* (New York, 1969), pp. 34-44, and above, pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 4.66 meters x 2 meters assuming that the Hebrew cubit is being used to refer to the Arabic *dhirāt al-malk*. See Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* (Leiden, 1955), p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> The first prayer recited after the Preliminary Morning Blessings (*bricht ha-shahot*) and the Mourners' Kaddish.

and the young men would answer in chorus at the end of each phrase with "Praised be He." When the Cantor chanted the Sabbath Psalm (Psalm 92), they respond with the refrain "It is good to give thanks unto the Lord." The entire congregation recited in unison the preliminary hymns.<sup>4</sup> When they had finished, the Cantor would stand up and begin the prayer "The soul of every living being shall praise You," and the choir of young men would respond after each phrase he had chanted "Shall praise You." They continued this way until they reached the first Sanctification<sup>5</sup> which the congregation would recite silently and the young men out loud. Immediately following this, the youths fell silent, and Cantor alone would continue until he had completed the prayer "Praised be Thou, O Lord, Who has redeemed Israel." Then all the people would rise for the Amidah.<sup>6</sup> When the Cantor comes to the Sanctification during the repetition before the Ark,<sup>7</sup> the chorus of young men repeat after "the Holy God" in a loud voice. The Cantor then finishes the prayer, and the congregation would sit down quietly.

When everyone was seated, the Exilarch would emerge from the place where he was hidden, and when the people saw him, they would all rise, to their feet and remain standing until he was seated alone on the dais that had been set up for him. Next, the Head of the Sura Yeshiva would come out and take a seat on the dais after bowing to the Exilarch, who would return the bow. After him, the Head of the Pumbeditha Yeshiva emerges, bows, and sits to the Exilarch's left. Throughout all this, the people remain standing until all three have taken their seats—the Exilarch in the center, the Sura Gaon on his right, and the Pumbeditha Gaon on his left. An empty space remained between each of the Geonim and the Exilarch. Over his head was spread a canopy of precious fabric which was suspended by a cord of fine linen and purple.

At this point, the Cantor would lean his head under the canopy and bless the Exilarch with benedictions which had been specially composed for the occasion one or two days before. He would do this in a low voice which could only be heard by those seated on the dais and by the choir under it. As he is blessing him, the young men would respond in loud

<sup>4</sup> Aram, "verses of song," the selection of psalms and poetical biblical readings recited after the prayer "Praised be He who spoke."

<sup>5</sup> The first recitation of Isa. 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," and so on.

<sup>6</sup> The so-called "standing" prayer containing the *Shemona Esreh* (Eighteen Benedictions), recited first silently by the congregation, then repeated out loud by the cantor. It forms the essential core of the daily service.

<sup>7</sup> This second, longer sanctification begins with the prayer "We sanctify Your name on earth." It is recited facing the Ark.

chorus "Amen!" But the entire congregation remains silent throughout his blessing.

The Exilarch now begins the sermon, expounding on the Torah portion for that Sabbath. Or, he might give permission to the Sura Gaon to open with the sermon, and the Sura Gaon, in turn, would grant permission to the Pumbedtha Gaon. In this way, they show their deference to one another, until finally, the Head of the Sura Yeshiva begins. An interpreter who is standing near him passes his words on to the people.<sup>8</sup> He would deliver the sermon in an awe-inspiring manner with his eyes closed. He would envelop himself in his prayershawl which he pulled over his head and down to the brow. No one in the congregation would open his mouth, twitter, or say a word while he was speaking. Should he feel, however, that someone was talking, he would open his eyes, and fear and trembling would descend over the congregation. At the conclusion of the sermon, he would present a problem with the formula: "Indeed, you should study." A wise and learned elder would stand, give an answer, and then sit down again.

The Cantor now recited the Kaddish.<sup>9</sup> When he reached the words "in your lifetime and in your days," he would add "and during the lifetime of our Prince, the Exilarch" before continuing with "and during the lifetime of all the House of Israel." Upon finishing the Kaddish, he again blessed the Exilarch, and after him the Heads of the Yeshivot. With the blessings completed, he now declares: "Such-and-such a city and its villages have contributed such-and-such a sum to the Yeshiva. He mentions all the cities that have sent contributions, and he blesses them. Next, he blesses those individuals who are responsible<sup>10</sup> for collecting the contributions and who look after them until they reach the Yeshivot.

The service now continues with the Cantor taking the Torah scroll from the Ark. After having called up the Kohen and the Levite, the Cantor brings the scroll down from the reader's pulpit over to the Exilarch. All the

<sup>8</sup> This interpreter may either have been translating the sermon from Aramaic to Arabic, or—and this seems more likely—he was a sort of human loudspeaker who passed on the speaker's words to the assembly. Such "repeaters" were found in the large mosques in Islam as well.

<sup>9</sup> The Aramaic doxology recited at the conclusion of various parts of the service.

<sup>10</sup> It was customary in the Middle Ages to insert special mention of the exilarch, the heads of the yeshivot, the *nāsī*, or a leading scholar in the Kaddish known as *Qaddīsh de-Rabbānān* (the scholar's Kaddish). This was done as a token of allegiance, just as in Islam, the caliph, sultan, or governor were regularly mentioned in the *khutba* (Friday sermon).

<sup>11</sup> See above, pp. 47-48.

people remain standing while the Exilarch has the Torah in his hands and reads from it. The Heads of the Yeshivot stand beside him. The Sura Gaon translates it after him. Then he gives the Torah scroll back to the Cantor who returns it to the Ark. After it is put back into the Ark, the Exilarch takes his seat, and everyone else sits down. Following the Exilarch, the Rēshē Kallot read (from another scroll), followed by the students of the Geonim. The Geonim themselves, however, do not read from the Torah since others had been given precedence on this occasion.

When the *maḥfir*<sup>12</sup> has finished the last portion, a prominent and wealthy individual standing near him would translate after him. This is a great honor and distinction for him. When he has finished, the Cantor again blesses the Exilarch by the Torah. All the readers who are experienced and qualified to conduct services stand around the Ark and say "Amen." He then blesses the two Geonim and returns the second Torah scroll to its place. Everybody prays the Musaf service<sup>13</sup> and goes out.

As the Exilarch departs, all the people accompany him to his house in a procession, going before and after him, singing his praises. The Heads of the Yeshivot, however, do not go with him. The Exilarch does not permit any of the scholars who have accompanied him to his house to leave until they have enjoyed at least seven days' hospitality. From that time on, he does not leave his house. People gather and pray with him there, be it on secular days, sabbaths, or holidays. If he does have to go out on some business, he rides in the litter of an official similar to that of the Caliph's ministers. He would be beautifully attired. Behind him would walk a train of as many as fifteen men. His servant would run after him. Should he happen to pass any Israelites, they would run up to him, touch his hands, and greet him. As many as fifty or sixty people might do this both on his way to his destination and upon his return home. This is the custom. He would never go out without his entourage, just like any of the Caliph's ministers.

Whenever the Exilarch wishes to appear before the Caliph either to request something or simply to wait upon him, he asks the Caliph's viziers and servants who have regular entry to his court to speak to the Caliph, so

<sup>12</sup> The *maḥfir* is the person who reads the concluding verses of the weekly Torah portion, followed by the Prophetic portion (Heb., *haḥfāra*).

<sup>13</sup> The "additional service" on Sabbaths and holidays, which follows the *shaharit*, or "morning service."

<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew text reads *maḥziqim be-yādav* (literally, "grasp his hands"). However, it is customary in the Middle East and North Africa merely to quickly touch or press the hand of a holy man or some other charismatic figure.