

## A HEBREW LETTER OF 1768

*By. S. S. Koder, Cochin.*

Material information about the early settlers among the Jews of Cochin is provided by the correspondence which Ezechiel Rahabi II conducted in his capacity as leader of the Jewish Community in Cochin with his co-religionists abroad. A record of his official communications not only makes interesting reading, but throws much light on the state of Jewish communities in this part of the world.

Born in 1694, Ezechiel Rahabi II took over, after the death of his father David Rahabi, the office of agent to the Dutch East India Company. The Rahabis enjoyed the confidence of the Dutch officials as well as that of the Rulers of Cochin. As a merchant prince much respected by the Dutch Governor-General, he was held in high repute. In the discharge of his duties as the accredited leader of the Jewish people in Cochin, he maintained correspondence with the outer world on matters affecting them. One of his letters addressed to Rabbi Thubia Boaz in reply to his questionnaires, and published at Amsterdam by the Hebrew paper "*Measseph*" in 1790, is illuminating. After referring to some business deal between Ezechiel Rahabi and Rabbi Boaz, it sets out to answer Boaz's several enquiries. The following are the particulars as furnished by Ezechiel to Rabbi Boaz.

I beg to inform your Eminence that we date our arrival here from the captivity since the Second Temple—May it be rebuilt and established in our days. In 3828 (68 C.E.)\* some ten thousand Jews, comprising both sexes, landed on the Malabar Coast and settled at four centres—Cranganore, Palur, Madai and Polloth.

The majority of them settled at Cranganore which was known as Mahodayapptanam or Shingly. Cranganore was then ruled by Cheraman Perumal, and it was he, known as Iravi Varma, that in 4139 (379 C. E.) conferred on the Jews certain privileges. These are engraved on copper plates, known as *Cheppedu*. The Jews lived in Cranganore for about a thousand years. Their chief was always known as Shree Anandan Mapillay, signifying a man like the Moon. This title was bestowed by Cheraman Perumal. The copper plates

---

\* 3828 Hebrew Era. 68 Christian Era.

were presented to Joseph Rabban as the representative of the Jews, whose leader he was. Eventually this King Perumal distributed his Kingdom in Malabar among eight Kings—his sister's sons. I am sending you a translated copy of the copper plates, from which you will be able to glean all material details. The Jews continued to live in Cranganore till the advent of the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast.

The Portuguese occupation of Cranganore brought in its wake much misery to the Jews, who consequently were compelled to flee to Cochin in 5326 (1566 C. E.) where the Raja of Cochin extended them hospitality, and allotted them sites for future homes and for a Synagogue. These were near his palace, the object being to provide the Jews with immediate protection. The Synagogue was built in 5328 (1568 C. E.) by four eminent Jews—Samuel Castiel, David Belilia, Ephraim Sala, and Joseph Levi. The Portuguese continued to ill treat the Jews in many ways, and not until the Dutch came did they enjoy freedom from persecution.

The Dutch in their first visit attacked the Portuguese, and in this they were aided by the Jewish residents, who supplied the Dutch with all supplies including foodstuffs. During the Dutch occupation a controversy arose between the Raja of Cochin and the Dutch and the latter murdered the Raja, and in the same year were constrained to escape to Cranganore. The departure of the Dutch caused the Portuguese to return once again to Cochin, and with the aid of the people of Malabar, they fell upon the Jews and burnt the Jewish settlement in Cochin. This constituted a retaliatory act on the part of the Portuguese for the role played by the Jews during the Dutch occupation. In the following year the Dutch again appeared in Cochin and succeeded in taking the Fort. This was a signal for the Jews to return from their hiding places to their homes. When the Fort was surrendered and its key handed over to Admiral Van Gose, Shemtob Castiel, the leader of the Jewish community, was present with him. This family has unfortunately become extinct in Cochin. The small Jewish population increased by additional immigrants who came from Germany, Turkey and Yemen; my venerable father David Rahabi came from Aleppo. At present there are 40 families with one Synagogue in Cochin and they live quite happily among the people of Malabar under the protection of the Dutch. Since the

**Photo-Block of the original letter**

( 75 )

35

## הבג

( רנה )

[illegible]

מלח חן התשובות של ר' יוחנא אל רבני  
 על האלור ר' שבי הל ששאל ממנו  
 בפת הראה כי ראשית האגרת הבדורת  
 על פסקי משא ומתן שהיו ביניהם או  
 לא נבא בדפוס .

שאלה א. ששפחה נולד בינו, חודש לחיית  
פגועים דים שר קורבן סביב נחית ביה  
גיה ליידרס (לסוף ג') אלמשי פ' חסום וניה כי חסום  
פ'

# A Hebrew Letter of 1768 from Cochín

Photo-Block of the original letter

(Page 2)

( רכא )

ויהיבתי שקדים שחורים / הם שנתנו בשלל נמר /  
ג רוח וסחרור / אבל דינם ותקם ותפלתם הכל כפועם /  
אכל אין את לוחמים נגותם ולא נותנים להם כי נד  
גד יחי / וכל בענים שאלו קונים / כיון שרען להם  
סחרור / מתחננים פהם / ויחי הם רבים / וכלם  
נעזים תחת דגרינו שם יחי להם איזו דין / לדינם  
אנו לכפר ולחרוך להם / ונמנעם יש הפרש טעם  
לדין / ולביטחם כשו מליכא / ורובן אין נהרין  
נמלוח קפילין ומונה ונבדון הנכור .

שאלה ד' שאל כל פנכני תכלות וט' אודיע  
למכית / מנחיתם כלל בספרדים /  
ומעט מן האשכנזים / ונעשה נ' ימים עתים / וזה נהר  
שאלו מן הארץ / וכל ס' ימי מנוחה שמים חתך שכל  
ההנהגה וכן נפריים משנגע אוד עשים שמים ורקוד /  
וקאמרינו מן י"ו מ' וחדר נכנס למלחמה כח .

שאלה ה' שאל אם יש תלמוד וכו' אודיע למכית  
שם חתם תלמוד נגלי / כנאו מן  
י' שנים יין ויניח / אבל תלמוד יחשלי לא ראוי  
כה / כי לא לקיים דתך בין יפקד / ויש הרבה  
כפרים מדרשות ואלוהות ונשות ישינים גם מרשים .

שאלה ו' שאל כל איזה כושך בו אודיע לבי כ  
הנכנסים שאלו נהגים בה / הם הליכה  
כשוקה כל בית ובה נכנסן כדון / וכל יש איזה הליכה  
מחננים כיו ר' ומה חשלים למחית .

שאלה ז' שאל אם יש בתי מדרשות וכו' אודיע  
למכית / בתי מדרשות מועטים הם אבל  
מלמדי הנקיות / וסיבוקם נותנים מן הקהל / עד שילמדו  
הלכה בשללן ברוך ורש' / וחח' מ' שידלה ללמוד  
יותר מלמוד או ספרים אחרים / אם יחי בתי /  
חון הקהל ילמד / ואם לאו הולכים אלל מלמד בשנתות  
ונעמים המועטים ולומדים עשו .

שאלה

( רס )

יהודים נשיל שנתנו מחיה לאולונדוס / ונשנה  
ידיה ידו וכל אולונדוס לקוין ונתון ימים מועטים  
נכס' הורח לאולונדוס / ומיום הוא נלוכל יהודים  
נכסיו וקנייניו נקדשו / וכוון ששם המפתח של  
היהודים לא יחזיראל בלן גון היה עמו נה'ר שם טון  
קשטיל וכל היה נה'ר נאקו הדור / אבל נפתחוהו  
לוחם הכספות נכר נכסיו עלי נוב / ונשאר מתי  
מכס' לדי / וכל ב נה'ר מד' פנות טולס / מן אשכנזי  
וין עורקים / וכן תרון / ואחרי חני נה'ר נה'ר  
רבי מן הליכה / ונכסיו ידו מן הכל אנו כה נקדשו  
כיו יום נה'ר (ה'ל' למדינתן) ואחר נה'ר / והיו  
שקדים נה'ר שם אנו מליכא נכס' אולונדוס /  
ונכסיו נה'ר עשים שם / משה' של מליכא כלל  
היו קים חלף שדמור / ויחננו אולונדוס נה'ר  
טולס ידוע / ויחננו און אנו לנכס' בה הדון  
הם ידועה ומה לאחננו אולונדוס .

שאלה ח' שאל אם יש נמלכא נה'ר קלוח וכו' /  
אודיע למכית חנו הקדשים יהודים  
לנשים יש נקוסין כמו מ' נשים / אחד נה'ר כ' כל ולא  
יש עוד כלל ארץ מליכא / אלא יהודים הקדשים  
שחורים יש נשמה מקומות / נקדשו ים כיו ק' יהודים /  
וג' נתי נכסיות / ומה נכס' שנה קוסין הקדש  
לנכסיות יש כמו ק' נשים וג' נתי נכסיות / ומה  
פסס ה' פרסאות לנפון עיר כרפור / ושם יש ק'  
נשים / וא' נה'ר גדול / ושם ה' פרסה לנפון עיר  
מינוט / ושם נ' נשים וא' נה'ר / ושם נ' פרסאות  
לנפון עיר מליכא ושם נ' נשים וא' נה'ר / ויחננו עיר  
מטוס ושם נ' נשים וא' נה'ר ערעור מ' נשים ואחר  
נה'ר .

שאלה ט' שאל ב' עיר יהודים לנשים ושחורים  
וכו' אודיע למכית / אנו נקדשים יהודים  
לנשים / מים שמים שאלו מלרן הקדשה חרונ' /  
ויסורים

past twenty years Malabar has been under the rule of the Raja of Travancore. Our masters, the Hollanders, were compelled to accept this. I do not want to express my thoughts as to why this disgraceful step was taken by our masters—the Hollanders.

With regard to your second question as to whether there exist other congregations besides us, I beg to inform you that we, who are known as White Jews, number some forty families with one Synagogue. There is no other White Jewish colony in Malabar, but there are colonies of Black Jews at six centres. In Cochin there are 150 families of these people with three Synagogues.<sup>1</sup> In Anjikaimal, just opposite Cochin, there are 100 families with two Synagogues. Five parsang<sup>2</sup> further north is the city of Parur where there are one hundred families and a large Synagogue. Five parsangs further north is Shenoth where there are fifty families with one Synagogue. Two parsang from Shenoth lies Mala where there are fifty families and one Synagogue. While further south is situated the city of Muttam where there are thirty families and one Synagogue, and in Thirtur<sup>3</sup> there are forty families with one Synagogue.

As regards your third query regarding the two groups of Jews, I beg to inform your Eminence that we, who are known as White Jews, were among those who came from the Holy Land—May it be soon rebuilt and established in our days. The Black Jews were the converts from the natives and had been manumitted. Their laws, regulations and prayers are the same as ours, but there is no inter-marriage amongst these two groups, and we keep ourselves apart from them. All the slaves we bought joined them after manumission, as a result of which they now form the majority. By the grace of God they are under our control, recognising our lead and submitting all their religious controversies to us for a settlement. There are however some differences in observing our religion and traditions. They dress like the people of the country and the majority do not pay heed to the laws of Phylacteries, the Mezusa and the redemption of the first born<sup>4</sup>.

In reply to your fourth enquiry where you have raised the subject of our customs, form of prayers, etc, I beg to inform your

---

1. At present there are only two Synagogues.

2. A Parsang was not quite 3 miles, and a day's journey was 18 Parsang.

3. There are no Jews and Synagogues here at present.

4. All these laws are observed now.

Eminence that we follow mainly the Sephardic<sup>5</sup> rite. We have also adopted some Ashkenazy<sup>6</sup> forms. By reason of the fact that we are living outside the Holy Land, we observe two days of the Jewish festivals. On the feasts of Chanuka and Purim we indulge in greater rejoicing than any other community. This merry making commences from the first of Adar and continues for over two weeks till the sixteenth of that month, after which date we commence to make preparations for the Passover.

Regarding your fifth query about the Talmud and other works, I beg to inform your Eminence that we have copies of the Babylonian Talmud, which have been supplied from Amsterdam and Venesia. We have not seen copies of the Jerusalem Talmud with the exception of Extracts from *En Yakob*. We possess philosophical and other works, both old and new.

As regards your next query regarding the book we consult, I beg to inform your Eminence that our authority for all decisions is based on the work *Beth Joseph* of Shulchan Aruch. Some of our decisions are according to the rulings of Rabbi Moses Isserles.

Regarding the Schools we maintain, I beg to inform your Eminence that we have a few schools, the teachers of which are maintained by the Community. The students, after familiarising themselves with the Halachah<sup>7</sup> and Rashi,<sup>8</sup> proceed to the study of the Talmud under the guidance of the Minister of the Congregation. Classes are conducted as well by competent teachers on Sabbath and other convenient days.

On the subject of Jews in China, I may state that it is revealed to us by trustworthy people that in Tartary there are learned Jews but they are all heretics. Almighty alone knows whether this is true.

Regarding your query whether there are Jews in Tibet, I beg to inform your Eminence that this place is unknown to us, but Jews known as Bene Israels are found in Vijayapore in India.

---

5. Sephardin is the term applied to the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

6. Ashkenazy refers to the Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe.

7. Halachah—a legal formula indicating a rule of conduct prescribed by the Oral Law.

8. A work by a Talmudic scholar and Hebrew writer.

These people are distributed all over the Maharatta province, living under the Moguls. They live in tents. They own oil presses. Some of them are soldiers. They know nothing as regards their faith except to recite the Shema and rest on the Sabbath. We had sent several teachers to them to improve their religious knowledge, but to no avail. One member of their community had come to Cochin and remained here for four years. After mastering our laws and regulations he went back to Bombay and we understand that he has now become their teacher. It is learned that they number 10000 souls.

Regarding your question about the ten tribes, I may inform your Eminence that we are situated at one extremity of Asia, that is near Cape Comorin, which is forty parsang from here. We know nothing about the lost ten tribes.

In the matter of manuscripts, I beg to inform your Eminence that we possessed very old records of poetry, hymns and science but these have been destroyed by age. I shall send you whatever remnants I can find. I also beg to inform you that many Jews are found in Yemen. Some of them are in Moka which is eight days journey from Saana, the capital. Here there are 1000 families with seventeen Synagogues. Many saints and Cabbalists are found amidst them. They are all under the rule of the Arabs and are forbidden to wear turbans. Their present King is a cruel ruler. He had decreed that they must not build Synagogues and houses higher than Mosques and surrounding Muslim habitation unless by special sanction. Eight Synagogues and a score of houses were razed to the ground, while the venerable Rabbi Shalom Arakie was imprisoned to extract from him a huge ransom. He was released after having been imprisoned for ten months. Nevertheless, permission to rebuild the destroyed Synagogues and houses is still withheld.

Saada is a spot some twelve parsang from Saana. Here the Jews live on three mountains. The community consists of 150 families with five Synagogues, a second group consists of 100 families and three Synagogues, while the third unit possesses an equal number of Synagogues for eighty families. These Jews dress like Arabs and are not persecuted. There are learned men among them including Rabbis. These inhabitants are men of small

means, mostly of the labouring class, and are under the King of Bedouins, whose dominion extends over the territory covered by these three mountains. There are cities on the coast—Saar and Naamen, which lie about a day's journey by sea from Muscat. These also come under the jurisdiction of the Bedouins and the Jews living here are immune from persecution. They are all poor. These countries are close to Basra and Persia.

As you have informed me regarding your family, I also desire to give particulars about mine, for God has blessed me with children. My first born is Elia—May God guard and save his soul. My second son is Moses—May God guard and save him, while my third son is David—May God guard and protect him. I have one daughter, Esther. They are blessed with children and grandchildren. May God guard them for ever.

I am too old to serve you. I take leave of you by bowing my head and kissing your hand. May God bless you. These are the words of one who has great regard for you and who is willing to serve you all his life.

Cochin 25th Thishri 5528 (1768)

*Ezechiel Rahabi.*