

Defender of His People: Rabbi Shelomo Bekhor Hussein from Baghdad's Journalistic Activities

Shaul Regev

Rabbi Shelomo Bekhor Hussein (1843–1892) was an educated man of great stature, way ahead of his peers for his time and place. He was one of Rabbi Abdallah Somekh's students, the founder of the Yeshiva "Beit Zilkha" in Baghdad.

Rabbi Hussein was famous in two areas: His printing house in Baghdad, the first of its kind, which he established and in which he published many books.

His articles and letters to the Hebrew and Arabic newspapers in Europe, Jerusalem and the Far East.

Rabbi Hussein was unusual and extraordinary, known for his education and the fact that he turned to the modern European world. He brought news items concerning problems found in different communities, such as the drought and Moslem – Jewish relations in Baghdad and Persia, as well as positive reports, such as Alliance activities and the establishment of schools in Baghdad and Persia. He also responded to scientific articles published by Jewish European researchers in the Hebrew press.

As soon as the "Magid" publicized the establishment of the Mekitzei Nirdamim society, Rabbi Hussein independently opened a branch of the society in Baghdad and registered known, great Hakhamim from Iraq, among them Rabbi Yosef Haim. He also offered the society in Berlin a list of manuscripts written by Baghdad Hakhamim.

The name that Rabbi Hussein adopted, which appeared at the end of his missives and letters, was Defender of His People. Many of his letters were requests of help for the Jews of his country and neighboring countries, but he also wanted to paint a true picture of the lives of the Jews in these countries, for the European reader. This, as opposed to various articles depicting the Jews of Baghdad and other places as backward and ignorant.