

# The Ark Curtain and The Farhi Family

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**I**n Shaare Sedek Synagogue, Manchester, there is a little Synagogue upstairs, which hosts the daily Minyans. On the Ark, there is an ornate wine coloured curtain (Parochet), which has floral decorations, but embroidered in the top left-hand corner are the initials H.D. – Habibe Dwek. The embroidery has been done with silver thread. This curtain was a typical traditional gift on wedding nights, given by the husband to the wife as a sacred top bed cover, and then passed on to a Synagogue.

This curtain has been on the Ark for some 40 years, and was presented by the Dwek family, and is the only souvenir we have of the illustrious Farhi Family, which dominated the political and commercial life of Damascus, Acre and Sidon, from 1750 to 1830, of which Habibe (Aimee) Farhi Dwek was a direct descendant.

Much of the history of the Farhi Family is recorded in some detail in the Encyclopaedia Judaica, but so great was their fame that many Historians and Travellers wrote extensively about the family and its various ramifications.

Thomas Philipp, the well known Historian, devoted an entire chapter in his book entitled, 'The Farhi Family and the Changing Positions of Jews in Syria, 1750-1860'. Moreover, John Wilson, D.D. FRS, in his capacity of the Honorary President of the Bombay Branch of the Royal

Aleppo Society, refers in some detail, to his visit to the Farhi Family home, describing the palatial residence and the huge library.

The Farhi Family were financiers in Damascus during the 18th and 19th centuries, the first member of the family to consolidate financial and administrative power in Damascus was Saul (Shihada). His sons, Raphael and Joseph inherited his position in Damascus, whilst his third son, Hayyim, entered the services of Ahmad al-Jazzar Pasha, the Governor of the Province of Sidon, who had fixed his residence in Acre in about 1790.

Hayyim Farhi was perhaps the most distinguished of the Farhi Family, and so great was his eminence that even today, in Acre, there still exists The Square in the centre, known as Farhi Square.

Hayyim was responsible for the Treasury affairs during most of al-Jazzar's rule until 1804. He distinguished himself during the stand of Acre, against Napoleon's Armies in 1799. In 1804, Hayyim was imprisoned, but on the death of al-Jazzar he was set free and immediately joined in the struggle for the succession, being a supporter of Suleiman Pasha, who then became Governor in 1805. Hayyim intervened in his favour in Constantinople and Suleiman gave him a free hand in the administration and its finances, until 1818.

Hayyim Farhi also chose Suleiman Pasha's successor, Abdallah

Pasha, but was executed by him in 1820, an unworthy act, considering that Abdallah owed all his success to Hayyim. Hayyim had already suffered personal mutilation at the hands of his enemies, which were many, considering the power, influence and enormous wealth, which the Farhi Family enjoyed.

This was the first blow to strike the family Farhi, and his brothers attempted to avenge him, when they participated in the war waged against Abdallah. Nevertheless, the family continued to hold on to its firm position in Damascus, because of its financial power, and during the 1830's, Raphael Farhi skilfully and successfully protected their position. In 1830, the Egyptian Armies conquered Syria. However, with the return of the Ottoman rule in 1840, Raphael Farhi returned, and the family were once again appointed to the Treasury of the administration, even though the family could never regain its influence.

On the death of Hayyim Farhi in 1820, the famous Farhi Bible was taken to safe custody by the British Consul, and there it remained for nearly a century.

Historians confirm that the power which the Farhi's wielded in Syria for more than half a century, was further enhanced by their ability to exert real influence in Government circles in Istanbul, through the presence there of their cousin Hesekiel, and through general co-operation from the Jewish community of Istanbul. This influence could not be