

The Druze in Israel

by Dr. Naim Aridi

The Druze community in Israel is officially recognized as a separate religious entity with its own courts (with jurisdiction in matters of personal status - marriage, divorce, maintenance and adoption) and spiritual leadership. Their culture is Arab and their language Arabic but they opted against mainstream Arab nationalism in 1948 and have since served (first as volunteers, later within the draft system) in the Israel Defense Forces and the Border Police.

Worldwide there are probably about one million Druze living mainly in Syria and Lebanon, with 104,000 in Israel, including about 18,000 in the Golan (which came under Israeli rule in 1967) and several thousands who emigrated to Europe and North and South America.

The Druze community in Israel has a special standing among the country's minority groups, and members of the community have attained high-level positions in the political, public and military spheres.

Historical Background

The Druze religion has its roots in Ismailism, a religio-philosophical movement which founded the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt in the tenth century. During the reign of al-Hakim (996 - 1021) the Druze creed came into being, blending Islamic monotheism with Greek philosophy and Hindu influences. Active proselytizing of the new creed was brief; since about 1050 the community has been closed to outsiders.

The first Druze settled in what is now southern Lebanon and northern Israel. By the time of the Ottoman conquest of Syria (1516), Druze also lived in the hill country near Aleppo, and Sultan Selim I recognized Fakhr al-Din as Emir of the Druze, with local authority. Civil strife between the Lebanese Druze and the Maronite Christians ended in 1860 with the autonomous administration of Mt. Lebanon, which was imposed by the great powers. The Druze never regained ascendancy in the region and the center of the community passed to Mt. Hauran in Syria, which became known as Jebel-el-Druze (Mountain of the Druze) - the name formerly synonymous with Mt. Lebanon.

Until the end of Ottoman rule (1918), the Druze were governed by emirs, as a semi-autonomous community. In 1921 the French tried to set up a Druze state under the French Mandate, but the attempt failed.

The Druze in Galilee and on Mount Carmel have always kept in contact with the other branches of the community, especially with those of Mt. Hermon and Lebanon. During the British Mandate over Palestine they refrained from taking part in the Arab-Jewish conflict, and during Israel's War of Independence (1948) became active participants on Israel's side.

Beliefs and Traditions

The Druze consider their faith to be a new interpretation of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For them, the traditional story of the Creation is a parable, which describes Adam not as the first human being, but as the first person to believe in one god. Since then, the idea of monotheism has been disseminated by "emissaries" or prophets, guided by "mentors" who embody the spirit of monotheism. The mentors and prophets come from all three religions, and include Jethro and Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, and Salman the Persian and Mohammed - all reincarnations of the same monotheistic idea. In addition, the Druze hold other influential people - regardless of their religion - in great esteem, as the advocates of justice and belief in one god. These include the Egyptian Akhenaton, the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and Alexander the Great.

Although the Druze recognize all three monotheistic religions, they believe that rituals and ceremonies have caused Jews, Christians, and Muslims to turn aside from "pure faith". They argue that individuals who believe that God will forgive them if they fast and pray, will commit transgressions in the expectation of being forgiven - and then repeat their sins. The Druze thus eliminated all elements of ritual and ceremony; there is no fixed daily liturgy, no defined holy days, and no pilgrimage obligations. The Druze perform their spiritual reckoning with God at all times, and consequently need no special days of fasting or atonement.

The Druze religion is secret and closed to converts. From the theological perspective, the secrecy derives from the tenet that the gates of the religion were open to new believers for the space of a generation when it was first revealed and everyone was invited to join. Since in their belief everyone alive today is the reincarnation of someone who lived at that time, there is no reason to allow them to join today. Therefore, the Druze refrain from missionizing, and no member of another religion can become Druze.

Druze religious books are accessible only to the initiates, the uqqal ("knowers"). The juhul ("ignorant ones") accept the faith on the basis of the tradition handed down from generation to generation.

Tenets and Precepts

The Druze religion has no ceremonies or rituals, and no obligation to perform precepts in public. The main tenets that obligate all Druze, both uqqal and juhul, are:

- Speaking the truth (instead of prayer)
- Supporting your brethren (instead of charity)
- Abandoning the old creeds (instead of fasting)
- Purification from heresy (instead of pilgrimage)
- Accepting the unity of God
- Submitting to the will of God (instead of holy war)

The uqqal are bound by more precepts than the juhal. Their external appearance is also different: the men have a shaven head covered by a white turban, a mustache and a beard; the women wear a white head scarf, called a naqab. The most pious among the women hide all their hair under a separate covering, the iraqiyah, which is fastened around the head underneath the white scarf.

Druze are forbidden to eat pork, smoke, or drink alcohol.

Druze Women

Druze women can attain positions of religious significance, and some have indeed achieved high rank. Regarding personal status, their rights are almost identical to those of men; actually, Druze women are preferred over men in joining the uqqal, because they are considered to be better "spiritually prepared". Consequently, there are more women than men among the uqqal. Female uqqal take part in the religious assemblies in the hilwah (prayer house), but sit separately from the men.

Uqqal men and women usually intermarry. If a juhal wishes to marry a member of the uqqal, the former is expected to declare in advance his/her intention to join in the near future. Druze men, both uqqal and juhal, may not have more than one wife, nor may they remarry their divorced wife, or even be under the same roof with her. Also, a male uqqal may not be alone with a woman who is not a close relative (spouse, daughter, sister, mother) nor even respond to her greeting unless a third person is present. Both men and women are encouraged to guard themselves against immodest or impulsive behavior.

The Druze Educational System

Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the Druze educational system has flourished. In 1948/49, only 981 Druze were enrolled in school - 881 boys and 100 girls. Some 30 years later, there were 18,729 Druze students, an increase by a factor of 19. Today there are over 30,000 Druze students in the school system - some 2.3% of all pupils in Israel, although the representation of Druze in the general population is only 1.6%.

Druze Revered Sites in Israel

Since there is no ritual or ceremony in the Druze religion, there is also no sanctification of physical places. However, the Druze gradually instituted gatherings at significant sites for the purpose of discussing community affairs, and over time such gatherings have taken on the meaning of a sort of religious holiday.

Most of the regional assembly places are located in or near Druze villages in upper and western Galilee, in the Golan and on Mount Carmel.

Jethro's Tomb

One of the most important Druze gathering sites is the tomb of Nebi Shu'eib - the prophet Jethro - at the Horns of Hittin, overlooking Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). According to Druze tradition, Saladin had a dream on the eve of his battle against the Crusaders at this site, in which an angel promised him victory on condition that after the battle he gallop westward on his horse. Where the stallion would pull up, the angel promised, he would find the burial site of Nebi Sheuib. When the dream came true, the Druze built a tomb at the site, next to which is a rock bearing a footprint, believed to be that of Nebi Sheuibhimself. On April 25 each year, the Druze gather at the site to discuss community affairs.

The older section of the existing structure was built by the Druze in the 1880s, after the spiritual leader of the community, Sheikh Mahna Tarif of Julis, summoned an assembly to discuss its construction. A delegation of uqqal traveled to Syria and Lebanon and collected funds for this purpose, and the local Druze also contributed extensively. Renovation work and additions to the building continued throughout the years of the British Mandate, and more intensively after 1948. In recent years access to the site has been improved and connected to electricity and water, with funding from the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and various other government ministries, as well as from the Minorities Unit of the IDF.

Sabalan's Tomb

Sabalan was a Druze prophet, believed to be either Zebulun, the sixth son of the Patriarch Jacob, or one of the emissaries who propagated the Druze religion in the eleventh century. Sabalan's tomb is located above the Druze village of Hurfeish (see Druze towns and villages). It is the site of an annual festive pilgrimage and is visited throughout the year by those who have taken a vow to do so.

Nabi al-Khadr

Al-Khadr means "green" in Arabic. It is also the name given to the Prophet Elijah in Muslim tradition. His tomb is to be found in Kafr Yasif, near Akko. Members of the Druze community gather at his tomb on January 25th.

Tomb of Al-Ya'afuri

The prophet Al-Ya'afuri is not mentioned in any other religion, and the name is neither Arabic nor Persian. His tomb, located near the village of Majdal Shams in the Golan, is considered to be an important place for the Druze.

Nabi Zakarya

This is, in all likelihood, the Jewish prophet Zechariah. His tomb is located in the village of Abu Sinan near Akko. It is a very modest site; there is no set date for gatherings there.

Tomb of Abu Ibrahim

Another minor shrine, the tomb of Abu Ibrahim attracts Druze from all over Israel, in fulfillment of vows and to receive a blessing. It is located in the town of Daliyat el-Carmel on Mount Carmel.

Tomb of Abu Abdallah

This tomb is visited almost exclusively by residents of the village of Isfiya in which it is located.

Druze Towns and Villages

Most of the Druze towns and villages in Israel are populated exclusively by Druze, although over the last century a minority of Christians and Muslims have become residents in some of them. They are located in the north of the country, mainly on hilltops; historically as a defense against attack and persecution.

The largest Druze town in Israel (and the most southern) is **Daliyat el-Carmel**, located on Mount Carmel in the heart of the Carmel National Park, southeast of Haifa. Established some 400 years ago, Daliyat el-Carmel has a population of 13,000 Druze residents, who trace their ancestry to the hill country near Aleppo (Halab) in northern Syria, attested to by their strong Aleppo accent and the name of the largest family in the village - Halabi. The large market in the center of the town boasting traditional Druze and Arab products draws tourists from Israel and from abroad, and there is a memorial center for fallen Druze IDF soldiers. The shrine of Abu Ibrahim is located in Daliyat el-Carmel, and the ruins of several Druze villages are located in the vicinity.

Isfiya, also on Mount Carmel, was built on the ruins of a Byzantine settlement. Many Crusader ornaments and relics found on the walls and in the houses led historians to believe that the village was once a Crusader center. In 1930, remains of the fifth-century Jewish settlement of Husifah were unearthed in the village. They include a synagogue with a mosaic floor bearing Jewish symbols and the inscription "Peace upon Israel", and some 4,500 gold coins dating from the Roman Period. The modern village was founded in the early eighteenth century, when residents made their living from the olive oil, honey and the excellent grapes growing in the region. Some 9,000 people live today in Isfiya: 70% Druze, the rest Christians and Muslims. The tomb of Abu Abdallah is located here.

Northeast of Haifa is the village of **Shfar'am**, a settlement with ancient roots. Shfar'am is mentioned in the Talmud, and in the second century was the seat of the Sanhedrin (the supreme Jewish religious and judicial body). The Jewish community in Shfar'am, dating from the end of the Middle Ages, slowly dwindled away during the 19th and early 20th century. Some 27,000 Druze, Christians and Muslims live in Shfar'am today, and the village has a number of holy sites and prayer houses for all three communities, as well as housing for discharged Druze soldiers.

Further north, overlooking Lake Kinneret, is **Maghar**, believed to be the site of the city of Ma'ariya, where a priestly family lived in Talmudic times. Historical sources mention the many olive trees surrounding the village, which still thrive there today. Some 17,000 people live in Maghar today - 60% Druze, 20% Muslim and 20% Christian.

The village of **Rama** (population 7,000) north of Maghar, was built on the site of the ancient biblical town of Ramot Naftali. Rama is noted for its level of culture, dating back to the Mandate Period; in 1948, the proportion of physicians, attorneys, and engineers in Rama was the highest in the Arab sector. Nearby is the smaller village of **Sajur**.

Located north of Rama, on the peak of Mt. Meron, is the all-Druze village of **Beit Jan**. The village is situated at the highest point in Israel (940 meters above sea level), and has a population of some 9,000. Not far away is **Peki'in**, one of the most ancient villages in the country. It was frequently mentioned in historical sources from the thirteenth century onward, noting its many springs, flourishing gardens and orchards, and its small Jewish community, which has been present there almost continuously since the Second Temple period. In and near the village are significant sites for Druze and Jews, including a restored Jewish synagogue dating back to the Roman Period. The oldest Druze school in the region was established in Peki'in by the Russian church at the end of the nineteenth century.

Ein el-Asad, the only all-Druze village founded in the twentieth century, is located nearby. The village's original residents came from Beit Jan and from Syria and Lebanon. **Kafr Sumei'**, west of Peki'in, is thought to be the site of Kefar Sama, mentioned in ancient Hebrew literature.

South of Kafr Sumei', **Kisra** was the smallest Druze village in the country in the nineteenth century. The village now has about 3,500 residents. The nearby village of **Yanuah** is mentioned in the Bible (as Janoah), the Talmud, and Crusader documents. Next to the village is the shrine of the Muslim prophet Shams.

The only all-Druze town in western Galilee, **Yirka**, is the site of one of the largest factories in the Middle East: the steel mill belonging to the Kadmani Brothers. The factory has enabled the village to develop a large commercial and industrial zone. Home to about 11,000 Druze, Yirka has a number of important sites, the most significant of which is the tomb of Sheikh Abu Saraya Ghanem, an important Druze religious scholar of the early eleventh century.

Abu Sinan, another large Druze town in the area, is mentioned in Crusader documents from the year 1250, as the fortress of "Busnen". Abu Sinan became important during the reign of the Druze Emir Fahr ed-Din al-Mani, who built a palace

there for his son Ali in 1617. Today Abu Sinan is home to about 10,000 persons - 35% Druze and the rest Christians and Muslims. The tombs of the prophet Zechariah and Sheikh al-Hanbali are located in the town.

South of Abu Sinan is the tranquil village of **Julis**, home of Sheikh Amin Tarif, the longtime spiritual leader of the Israeli Druze community, who died in October 1993. His grandson Saleh Tarif, who lives in Julis, was the first Druze to be appointed a minister in the Israeli government.

Druze have lived in **Jat**, a small village northeast of Abu Sinan, since the eleventh century. Druze sacred texts mention Sheikh Abu Arus, who was responsible for the propagation of the Druze faith in the region, and was buried in the village. The population of Jat today numbers some 8,000.

The village of **Hurfeish** is situated on the road that runs east from the coastal town of Nahariya, and the site of the tomb of the important prophet Sablan. On September 10th each year, Druze come to celebrate his festival in the village. In 1972, a monument was erected in Hurfeish in memory of Druze soldiers who fell serving with the Israel Defense Forces.

Druze Villages in the Golan

With some 8,000 residents, **Majdal Shams** is considered to be the center of the Druze community in the Golan. The most important residents - both spiritually and politically - are the Abu-Salah and Safdie families. Majdal Shams is situated in the southern foothills of Mt. Hermon, and is surrounded by thousands of dunams of orchards, the main crops of which include first class apples and cherries.

Most of the 3,000 inhabitants of **Mas'ada**, originate from the Abu-Salah and Safdie families of Majdal Shams. Originally founded as a farm south of Majdal Shams, over time Mas'ada developed into a large village involved in agricultural production.

South of Mas'ada is the village of **Buka'ata**. It was founded over 100 years ago when a family feud in Majdal Shams resulted in many inhabitants fleeing acts of retribution and revenge. Today, the 5,000 residents earn their livelihood from growing apples and grapes.

Ein Kenya lies in the southwestern foothills of Mt Hermon, above the Banyas Nature Reserve. Until the Six Day War (1967), the inhabitants of Ein Kenya included Christians, but today its 1,600 inhabitants are exclusively Druze.