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## **"THAT'S THE WAY I WAS CREATED": WOMEN AND GENDER IN YOSEF CHAIM OF BAGHDAD'S STORIES**

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Rabbi Yosef Chaim, the "Ben Ish Chay", was the most important spiritual leader of the Jewish-Iraqi Communities in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His unique Halachic attitude has held, and still have, great impact on Jews whose origin is Moslem countries. In this lecture I shall focus on Yosef Chaim's literary achievements.

Despite his great impact, it seems that his work hasn't yet received the academic attention it deserves. This lack of attention is somewhat surprising, considering the progress made in the study of the Jewish exempla. Yosef Chaim's stories are the most important representatives of this genre in the modern age. In his sermon collections one can find hundreds of stories, most of them can be defined as exempla. Analyzing these stories in literary and historical context will give a fresh and important perspective on Jewish culture in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These stories, in the context of the whole sermons, allows us to see the under currents of a community in conflict, facing the challenges of modernization.

That conflict can be demonstrated by the way Yosef Chaim deals with the gender issue in his writings. This question interested him as the community leader and, as a result, as a storyteller. Proof for that interest can be found in his work "Kanun Al Nissa" (The Women's Code) - the only work he has ever written in Jewish-Iraqi Arabic. The reason for this exception is, of course, the fact it was aimed exclusively at the women of his community. But the Ben Ish Chai deals with the problem also in stories which were aimed at and told to audiences of men (i.e. the rabbi's students or the people coming to the synagogue).

Reading texts like "A tale of the man who hit his wife", "A tale of incarnation of a husband into his wife" and "A tale of a clever woman and her wise son" from a gender point of view, can give us new insight into this theme. We are shown how characterization of women functions in both ways - it shapes them as reproducers of the patriarchal values on the one hand, and on the other, as agents of change.

These ideas, which can be found in stories aimed for men, are sometimes in accordance with the ideas of "The Women's Code" but others are in conflict with them. These places of incongruity are evidence to the doubts and confusion of a spiritual leader in a traditional community, being in the process of change.