

The Great Mosque (*Jama*)

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The founding of the city of Beersheba in 1900 was a unique event since 1517 in the local history of the Ottoman Empire. Not only did the Turks initiate the creation of an entirely new city, but they designated it to be the capital of a new district to be established - the largest of the four districts in the province of Jerusalem - and that, when the site of the planned new town was completely vacant, with only one permanent building, a khan, erected two years before!

During the first few years, the town had a population of approximately 300, and by the fifth year, it had already experienced the exchange of six governors (*kaymakams*) of the Beersheba district. The seventh governor appointed was Mehmet Asaf Bey (1879-1954). As Aref al-Aref attests, “under his rule, Beersheba was enlarged and enhanced.”¹ He notes the construction of the governor's residence, the drawing and storing of water from a well by a machine operating also a government flour mill, the establishment of the post-office and telegraph station, and the planting of many trees. In the spring of 1906, a Jewish visitor to the city remarked: “About a year ago, the honorable Asaf Bey was appointed as *Kaymakan*, A learned man who finished his education in Istanbul and is proficient also in other studies, a man of energy and good will not to sit idle. His first mission was to beautify and improve the city.”²

With his innovations, Asaf Bey intended to benefit not only the townspeople, but also the tens of thousands of surrounding Bedouins. He opened in Beersheba a weekly livestock market,

¹ עארף אל-עארף, **תולדות באר שבע ושבטיה**. ירושלים: אריאל, 2000, עמ' 206.
[Aref al-Aref, *The History of Beersheba and Its Tribes*] The book was originally published in Arabic in 1934, and the Hebrew translation by Menachem Kapliuk was published in 1937 by Shoshani Publishers.

² בן דוד, "באר שבע", **השקפה**, ז, ע"ט (ה' אב א'תתל"ז [28.7.1906]), עמ' 4. [Ben David, "Beersheba"]

and built a mosque intended to serve not only the residents of the small city, but also the Beduins. The situation of the mosque, adjacent to the government house, served to strengthen its identification with the Turkish government. Its high place on the hilltop with its lofty minaret made it stand out against the desert landscape; its elegant structure designed to impress and to embody the attachment of the Muslim Beduins to the Sultan, the Caliph, and to reinforce their religious devotion and their loyalty to the government. Indeed the mosque looked immense in relation to the small, sleepy, dusty town. In the words of a visitor in 1912, "The government house and the mosque excel in the fineness of taste, are splendid and beautiful - perhaps too fine compared with the town itself."³ For nearly three decades, until 1930, there arose no need for an additional mosque in the town: the Turkish mosque serving the entire growing number of the city's Muslims.

It is said that a local prominent and wealthy Arab contractor undertook to build the mosque. When the work had reached a certain height, Asaf Bey saw that the structure did not meet his expectations, and ordered the contractor to completely dismantle it. He brought a Christian architect from Jerusalem to redesign the mosque. Asaf Bey laid the cornerstone himself and continued to supervise the construction. He imposed a tax of 400 Turkish pounds on the local Bedouins to finance the building, while the government provided matching funds.⁴ The construction of the mosque was resumed in the spring of 1906. A Hebrew newspaper, based on official sources, recorded: "The construction of a house of prayer – *Jama* – and its minaret in Beersheba has begun."⁵

³ אליעזר, "באר שבע", הפועל הצעיר ה, 11 (5.3.1912), עמ' 11. [Eliezer, "Beersheba"].

⁴ מריאיון של חאג' חאמד אבו טאהא מתל שבע עם ששון בר-צבי, 20.10.1976: **בדווים מספרים על באר שבע**, פרסום 11 של ארכיון טוביהו, באר שבע, 1977, עמ' 6-7.

[From an interview of Haj Hamed Abu Taha from Tel Sheva with Sasson Bar-Zvi]

⁵ מנדל קרמר, "השבוע", השקפה ז, מ"ב (י"ט אדר א'תתל"ז [16.3.1906]), עמ' 4. [Mendel Kremer, "This Week"].

The stones used in building the mosque – at least the minaret, requiring very strong stones – were taken from the ruins of Haluza⁶ and transported by camels, at the financial loss of some of the Bedouin movers.⁷ During the building of the minaret, two laborers were killed and were buried near the site.⁸ The construction of the mosque was underway when Menachem Shenkin visited the town at the end of April 1906. He wrote: “This is [...] the government building (*Seraya*), and next to it, a house of prayer is being built using hewn stone. The regional administrator [*kaymakam*] then went out to supervise the construction.”⁹ In June of that year, the construction was still in progress. “A large and beautiful mosque is now under construction.”¹⁰ It is likely that the work was completed at the end of 1906. The cost of the building finally amounted to over one thousand Turkish pounds, collected from the Bedouin tribes.¹¹ In contrast with the wilderness of the Negev, the building was strikingly impressive in the eyes of a population unaccustomed to this type of construction. Even at a later date, the architecture of mosque was generally considered to be of praiseworthy perfection.¹²

Because the streets of Beersheba faced the southeast and the mosque had to face the Qibla, that is, southwards towards Mecca, it was necessary to build the mosque at a 45 degree angle to the road, rather than perpendicular to it, so that the façade would directly face the south. The alcove in the wall facing Mecca, the *mihrab*, which indicates the direction of prayer, was

⁶ אל-עארף, שם. [Aref al-Aref].

⁷ מריאיון של עבדאלעאל חסין אבו פריח עם ששון בר-צבי ביולי 1976: ארכיון טוביהו, שם, עמ' 28. אביו היה בין ספקי האבנים. [From an interview of Abdalal Hussein Abu Freih with Sasson Bar-Zvi in July 1976].

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ מנחם שיינקין, "חלומותינו", התרן ג, נ (23.2.1917), עמ' 13. תיאור מיום 29.4.1906.

[Menachem Shenkin, "Our Dreams"]

¹⁰ בן דוד, שם. נכתב בבאר שבע, 18.7.1906. [Ben David. Written in Beersheba on July 18, 1906.]

¹¹ אל-עארף, עמ' 224. [Aref al-Aref].

¹² *Ibid.*

situated at the center of the south wall. This wall, which faces the city and incorporates the main gate, was designed to be symmetrical, with three windows on each side of the gate (the mosque itself has doubled windows). In order to maintain symmetrical balance, a window was also required at the center of the left flank, in alignment with the central dome, but this was exactly where the *mihrab* was to be located. The solution was to build the mosque's middle window as a partly-open window (blind window) with only the upper section and the small rounded upper window ("*taqa*") remaining open. The main gate, including a small one-person door, opened to the enclosed courtyard. The mosque is entered from the courtyard through a portico of four arches. A three-room structure was built on the opposite side to the mosque; two rooms serving as classrooms for the study of the Quran, with an additional separate entrance in the back, while the third western room was used for ablution before prayer. To supply the mosque with water, a deep well was dug to the west of it, but it proved to be dry.

Turkish mosques at the time were characterized by a domed roof over the entire structure and a thin round or octagonal minaret with a cone-shaped roof. Hence, the mosque in Beersheba was designed with a central dome. To lighten its weight, it was built of hollow tubes of black pottery joined by mortar and plastered over. The dome, supported by four square pillars, was raised on a drum with eight windows. The mosque was paved with white, black, and red tiles.

The minaret's spiral staircase, which was built around a central axis, has ninety-one stone steps leading to a balcony supported by chiseled stones in the shape of stalactites (*muqarnas*). According to Aref al-Aref, "The tower is an engineering achievement of the highest perfection."¹³ The grand, elaborately ornamental gate has two marble columns on both sides

¹³אל-עארף, שם. [Aref al-Aref, *ibid.*]

(probably taken from Byzantine ruins). In order to emphasize the connection of the mosque with the central authorities, above the gate, Sultan Abdülhamid's seal (*tughra*) was incised..

In a report to the Sultan in Istanbul, it was noted that the building of the mosque served to draw the Bedouins closer to the central authorities. "Beersheba [...] appeals to the believers' hearts thanks to its esteemed mosque."¹⁴ Asaf Bey's accomplishments were widely acclaimed, and as a show of appreciation, he was awarded many honors.¹⁵ His superior in Jerusalem, the *mutasarrif* Ali Ekrem Bey, reported to Istanbul: "*Kaymakam* Asaf Bey is known for his fruitful work. Since serving as the governor of Beersheba, he is known as an outstanding *Kaymakan* excelling in important efforts and worthy accomplishments."¹⁶ In early 1907, after serving in the Negev, Asaf Bey was appointed governor of the entire district of Jaffa, an urban region with a larger and more developed population, and that "as a reward for performance of his duties, after serving [in Beersheba] very commendably for two years."¹⁷ Thereafter, he continued to demonstrate his administrative capability in public service in other places. Beersheba at the time of his service as the *Kaymakan* has been documented in an impressive photograph album, which he, in his old age, presented to Israel's Ambassador to Turkey in 1951

¹⁴ גנזך המדינה, מכתבי המתצריך, עלי אכרם ביי למזכיר העליון של המאבין באיסטנבול, ללא תאריך. תרגום דוד קושניר.

[Undated letter by Ali Ekrem Bey to the Mabeyn chief secretary in Istanbul, from the Israel State Archives, translated by David Kushner

For English translation: David Kushner, **To Be Governor of Jerusalem**, Istanbul: the Isis Press, 2005, 194.

¹⁵ בן דוד, שם; קרמר, "השבוע", **השקפה** ז, פ"ה (כ"ו אב א'תתל"ח [17.8.1908], עמ' 2. [Ben David; Kramer].

¹⁶ גנזך המדינה, שם, עלי אכרם לוואזיר העליון, 23.12.1907 [5.1.1908]. Ali Ekrem to the Grand Vezir in Istanbul, from the State Archives]

¹⁷ Kushnir, *ibid.*, 193.