

## FIRST WOMAN RABBI OSNAT BARZANI

**Osnat Barzani** (1590–1670), was a renowned Kurdish and Jewish woman who lived in Iraq. Her writings demonstrate her mastery of Hebrew, Torah, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah.

She is considered the first female rabbi of Jewish history by some scholars, as well as one of the first recorded Kurdish women.

Barzani was the daughter of Rabbi Samuel ben Nethanel HaLevi Barzani, a rabbinic scholar, whose authority was absolute though he held no official position. He had founded several yeshivot and was head of the yeshivah in Mosul. He lived in great poverty and was regarded as a saint.<sup>[5]</sup> He had no sons, and he was his daughter's primary teacher. A master of Kabbalah, he was said to have taught his daughter the secrets of Kabbalah.<sup>[6]</sup> Barzani adored her father, and regarded him as a King of Israel. In a letter, she described her upbringing:

*I never left the entrance to my house or went outside; I was like a princess of Israel ... I grew up on the laps of scholars, anchored to my father of blessed memory. I was never taught any work but sacred study.*

Barzani was married to one of her father's best students and nephew, her cousin Rabbi Jacob Mizrahi, who promised her father that she would do no domestic work and could spend her time as a Torah scholar. After her father's death, her husband became head of the yeshivah in Mosul. He was so involved in his studies that she essentially taught the yeshivah students and provided them with rabbinic training. Following her husband's death, the leadership of the yeshivah passed to her naturally, and eventually she became known as the chief teacher of Torah. As neither her father nor her husband had been successful fundraisers, the yeshivah was always in financial difficulties, and Barzani wrote a number of letters requesting funds in which she described her and her children's difficult situation. Her home and belongings had been confiscated, including her books, but she felt that as a woman it was inappropriate for her to travel in search of financial support.

In spite of the financial problems, she successfully ran the yeshivah which continued to produce serious scholars, including her son, whom she sent

to Baghdad, where he continued the dynasty of rabbinic scholars. Her few extant writings demonstrate a complete mastery of Hebrew, Torah, Talmud, Midrash, as well as Kabbalah, and her letters are not only erudite, but also lyrical. After her death, many Jews made pilgrimages to her grave in Amadiyah in Northern Iraq, where her father is also buried.

Barzani was also known as a poet. She is said to have authored a piyut (liturgical poem). Barzani was given the title *Tanna'it* (or *tanna'ith*), the female form of for a Talmudic scholar, and a rare honour for a Jewish woman. The title of *Tanna'it*, and her role as head of a yeshiva a rabbinical school, is not equivalent to being a rabbi, and hence she is regarded as a rare example of a female Rabbinical Teacher (but not an actual rabbi which equals a judge) in pre-20th century traditional Judaism.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Legends

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There are many Kurdish stories and legends about her and miracles she performed, including the one described in "A Flock of Angels".<sup>[15]</sup>

In local folklore her gender plays a central role, while in life it did not seem to have presented a problem. Many of the stories which allude to her supernatural powers were found in amulets. These include her ability to limit her childbearing to two children so that she could devote herself to her studies, and the ability to ward off an intruder in order to prevent him from raping her by loudly calling out holy names.

### A Flock of Angels

According to the legend, her father often appeared in Barzani's dreams, revealing dangers to her and telling her how to avert them. On one such occasion, she went to Amêdî where she convinced the Jews to celebrate Rosh Hodesh, the new moon, outdoors, as had been their custom before they were threatened by hostile gentiles.

As they proceeded with the celebration, there were shouts and they saw flames shoot up into the sky. The synagogue had been set on fire, with all the sacred books and scrolls in it. After Barzani whispered a secret name she had learned from her father, the people saw a flock of angels descending to the roof of the synagogue. The angels beat the flames with their wings, until every last spark had been put out. Then they rose up into the heavens like a flock of white doves and were gone. And when the smoke cleared, everybody saw that not only none of

the Jews had been hurt since the congregation had been outdoors, but that another miracle had taken place: the synagogue had not burned, nor were any of the Torah scrolls touched by the flames. After that miracle, the Jews of Amêdî were not harassed by the gentiles for a long time. Gratefully, they renamed the synagogue after her, and the legend ends with the words "and it is still standing today".