

When Cultures Collide: Ottoman, Jewish and European Influences on the Folds of the Henna Dress

A sepia-toned photograph of Iraqi schoolgirls depicts sixty children ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers, seated and standing against a brick facade in Baghdad in 1900.¹ Their dress is uniformly Westernized—from ankle-length garments with ruffled collars to wide, full-length sleeves and gathered skirts in plaid or striped patterns, belted and cinched at the waists (fig. 1). Photograph historians who study the Ottoman period and read portraits believe these modernized textiles reflect a desire to connect with a larger “national identity beyond the Jewish community.”² The bourgeois attire and “dignified” facial expressions become a way of seeking inclusion with non-Jews and moving away from being considered an outsider or religious Other, a sartorial example of collective “longing and belonging.”³ In addition, these nineteenth century photographs are carefully curated by Jewish families to project an impression of economic security.⁴ Women and men pose in special outfits that they believe will showcase to the outside world a certain level of status in society. For that reason, they could also be considered a “chamber of fictions,” more image-making than reality.⁵ The girls’ serious faces seem to capture a feeling of educational privilege. Yet just a few years later and out of frame, all including the youngest among them will most likely be married in traditional wedding ceremonies to considerably older men, some even to rabbis, which was customary for middle and upper-class Ottoman Jews at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶ In addition, the girls will never continue on an educational path, unlike many Jewish boys who will attend yeshivas and study Torah.

¹ Esther Juhasz et al., *The Jewish Wardrobe : From the Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 2012), 295.

² Michele Klein, “Dressing Up: ‘Reading’ Costume in the Photograph Albums of Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Jews,” *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture* 21, no. 3 (December 2, 2022), 572.

³ Klein, “Dressing Up: ‘Reading’ Costume in the Photograph Albums of Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Jews,” 595.

⁴ Klein, “Dressing Up: ‘Reading’ Costume in the Photograph Albums of Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Jews,” 572.

⁵ Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 70.

⁶ Judith Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Wayne State University Press, 1998), 103.

Therefore, the westernized dress complicates and hides a troubling marital tradition that is still very much an active part of Jewish religious and cultural life at that time. If one looks at the two-dimensional images in this light as an uneasy balance between tradition and modernity, it is not difficult to imagine the original owner of the Henna Dress, Dakhla Rachel Mu'Allem. In 1891, she would have been an eleven-year-old Jewish Baghdadi child just like the schoolgirls in the photograph. On the eve of her wedding, she would have been helped into a tulle underdress and tucked in among the folds of the outer garment by her mother and bridesmaids before the ritual henna celebration began.

Today, the textile is a ghostly reminder of that event, a “lived garment” measuring just four feet and 3.8 inches high (figs. 2-3), part of a collection of Jewish clothing at the Israel Museum.⁷ There is an “eerie absence of the human body.”⁸ But if one looks at the child-sized ceremonial dress in conversation with the doll-like bodies from the photograph, one can see how this textile captures worlds colliding—Ottoman, Muslim, Jewish and European. Do the collisions of these overlapping and co-existing identities produce styles and belief systems that can be at odds with one another, confuse or constrain the wearer? How does the fit, fabric, style and purpose of this Jewish/Ottoman/Baghdadi/Europeanised garment communicate the different worlds from which it came? One can almost view the Henna Dress as its own “vestimentary system,” a term coined by the French literary critic Roland Barthes to suggest a kind of ecosystem of local material and social culture all existing within the folds of a single garment.⁹ The vestimentary system of the Henna costume is nuanced. Wrapped in its threads are contradictory visual signifiers—socio-economic status, elements of modesty and exposure,

⁷ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 300.

⁸ Nicola J. Thomas, “Embodying Imperial Spectacle: Dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899—1905,” *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 3 (July 2007): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474007078205>.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 10.

religious norms and ancient tradition alongside the desire to be fashionable and modern—all of which point toward a mixed, fluid self-identity.

This fashion-forward *dar'a qasa* style dress was adopted not just by the Mu'alleem family, but by many bourgeois Jewish (and Muslim) Iraqis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was characterized by a long skirt, deep neck line with a front breast panel and fabric flourishes around the waist, wrist and hemline. The Mu'alleems may have been emulating even more elite Baghdadi families like the Sassoons, Shaashas, Zulufs and Zilkas, exceedingly wealthy, cosmopolitan clans who were often connected through family ties to Bombay, Hong Kong, Paris and England. Their costumes, like this sumptuous example, speak to broader, worldly connections, as people and textiles moved along the 'silk roads' between Baghdad, a regional trading center in the Ottoman Empire, across Asia to Europe (figs. 4a and 4b).¹⁰ Its handsewn silver embroidery or *tel* (Turkish for wire) created by Dakhla's mother blends with a décolleté (originating from France) and lace chemise (from Italy), depicting the acculturation to Westernized-style.¹¹ Its glittering fitted bodice is also evidence of a transition away from Ottoman sartorial restrictions on 'non-believers' (Jews and Christians) towards Tanzimat reforms. These modernizing initiatives were put in place in the mid-nineteenth century across the Empire. The dress was also a break with Jewish sumptuary regulations and rabbinic warnings about halakhic codes regarding modesty or adopting outside customs.¹² In other words, overlapping self-identities—European, Ottoman, Middle Eastern and Jewish—as well as the cautionary voices against modernizing from Jewish authors, rabbis and Torah scholars of that

¹⁰ Aviva Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume* (Massada Publishers, 1985), 39; Jason Farago, "'The Sassoons': A Family Romance at Global Scale," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/arts/design/sassoons-jewish-museum-art-exhibition.html>; Muhammad Mudhaffar, "Studies on the Civilizational Importance of Silk Roads and Silk Production in Iraq," 2.

¹¹ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 300; "Lace: A Sumptuous History," SFO Museum, 2014, <https://www.sfouseum.org/exhibitions/lace-sumptuous-history>.

¹² Heather J Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 133-134; Aviva Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 69-71.

time, are literally present in the fibers of the garment.¹³ Against the backdrop of half-Westernized, half-Ottomanized Jewish schoolgirls, the Henna Dress is a case study in how Baghdadi Jews, living in a world marked by modernization from the Ottoman Tanzimat and also Halakhic tradition, boldly embraced a complex, multi-hyphenate style in their ceremonial attire.

How Muslim and Jewish Laws Shaped a Dress

In the late 1800s, the open neckline and more opulent style of the Henna Dress was a new phenomenon for Ottoman Jews. The warp and weft of the garment's silk weave is laid out in a vertically-striped pattern throughout the bodice, skirt and sleeves. Dakhla's hands would have been emphasized by the fabric that flares out from a cinched band at both wrists. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, most Jewish women (Jewish men as well, though the similar garment was called a *dishdasha*) wore the *entari* all the time, a traditional, simple coatdress with two side panels that closed in front (fig. 5).¹⁴ Affluent Baghdadi men, who navigated between the East and the West as they sold, traded and built businesses, brought home new fashions and fine fabrics from many locations in the Empire including Bursa in Northwestern Turkey and Damascus, Syria, as well as Persia, Asia and India. At the approximate time this garment was sewn by Dakhla's mother, Jewish journalistic and religious urban communities in Iraq, Greece, and Turkey debated about the danger involved in modernizing the woman's ceremonial dress (*dar'a qasa*) worn during weddings and other ritual events.¹⁵ It is highly likely that Dakhla's cosmopolitan family would have been aware of such opposing

¹³ Ariel Picard, "Ben Ish Hai," Jewish Women's Archive, February 27, 2009, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ben-ish-hai>.

¹⁴ Miriam Phelan, "Sephardi Dress," The Jewish Museum London, August 18, 2017, <https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/2017/08/18/sephardi-dress/>; Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 147; "Entari," Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451160>.

¹⁵ Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, 133.

viewpoints, and it is interesting that they still chose to embrace a more modern style for their daughter.

The form-fitting bodice and sparkling silver thread on the Henna Dress are a Western interpretation of the traditional *entari*. But unlike the *entari*, the *dar'a qasa* features flowing sleeves that flounce, then taper right above the wrist and widen out again almost hiding the hands from view, as well as a new focus on the breasts. In the Henna Dress, a high waist is accentuated by an open panel of lace and ruffled blue fabric as well as a matching, repeat blue band around the waist, a departure from *entaris* which fall straight to the ground in two panels with little or no decorative flourishes. The long, voluminous sleeves of the Henna Dress signify prosperity and affluence. They are clues for the viewer that this young woman was not standing over a hot stove or working outdoors (fig. 6).¹⁶ Late nineteenth century dresses, particularly clothing designed for special occasions, exhibit this kind of sleeve. Originally from Europe, the pronounced, full sleeve is worn by wealthy heiresses, specifically in Paris. “Large sleeves first had their moment in the 1830s and became their biggest in the 1890s.”¹⁷ While the Henna Dress does not have oversized *gigots* or ‘leg of mutton’ sleeves that are in vogue at the same time, its exaggerated cuff is a fashion statement and not something one would ever consider for manual labor.

The thinly veiled, semi-transparent opening at the chest highlights the wearer’s décolleté, similar to European-style dresses commonly worn throughout England, France and America at that time (figs. 7a-c).¹⁸ These comparanda display a variation on the chest as a focal point. In the American version, a peekaboo triangular shape exposes a hint of skin across the breast bone almost like a narrow window. In the black French evening dress, the shape is reversed,

¹⁶ Sandee Brawarsky, “The History and Meaning of Jewish Dress, at the Jewish Museum,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 21, 2017, <https://www.jta.org/2017/11/21/ny/fashion-as-revealing-and-concealing>.

¹⁷ Victoria and Albert Museum, “Inside Victorian Whaleboned Bodices and Leg of Mutton Sleeves | Fashion Unpicked,” YouTube, October 9, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOxD8Zborw0>.

¹⁸ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 277.

dramatically exposing the cleavage. In the third, shimmering, brocaded silk and metal gown, the square-cut opening also dips, enhanced even more by a seam of embellished flowers. All three garments balance the desire to hide and show at the same time. Modifications to the *dar'a qasa* from the *entari*, while not specifically exposing bare skin, nevertheless draw the beholder's attention to the female body in the same way these Westernized examples do.

Another Baghdadi *dar'a qasa* designed for a nineteenth century Jewish wedding ceremony in India depicts a similarly suggestive breast panel (figs. 8a-b).¹⁹ Its translucent cotton chemise appears stitched into an inverted heart-shaped opening which snugly cups the wearer's breasts. Underneath, a multi-colored bodice intentionally peeks through, drawing the beholder's eye but also limiting our gaze at the same time. Flower-shaped gold buttons fasten the dress together. A red cord outlines the opening of the panel. These revealing qualities are similar to the dramatic cinched ruffle and double-panelled, tel-embroidered design of the Henna Dress. In both garments, these flourishes would have evoked feelings of femininity, sensuality and perhaps even sexuality, for the wearer and the viewer, sensations that would be problematic within the traditional Jewish community.²⁰

Among rabbinic enclaves at that time, the Europeanised style raised questions and stirred controversy. One famous Baghdadi Rabbi, Yosef Hayyim, was critical of the open-fronted costume and of women breaking halakhic codes of modesty (*tzniut*), guidelines that the dress seems to challenge (figs. 9a and 9b).²¹ The legal restrictions Rabbi Hayyim drew on are part of the written Torah and oral Talmud, passed down generationally over millenia and intended to curb men's sexual desires. (There were codes of behavior for men as well, but the modesty

¹⁹ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 274.

²⁰ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 147.

²¹ Emmanuel Bloch, "Immodest Modesty: The Emergence of Halakhic Dress Codes," *Studies in Judaism, Humanities, and the Social Sciences*, 2018.

guidelines were really intended to affect women's behavior.) In response to the growing trend towards Europeanized fashion among Jewish and Muslim women, the rabbi wrote a book in 1906 entitled *Laws for Women* (in Hebrew, *Hukkei Ha-Nashim*) encouraging his readers to resist the popular fashions²²—

A woman must dress in a modest manner. This means that no part of her body other than her face, hands and neck may be exposed. The rest of her body must remain carefully concealed. Parts of the body which are covered with see-through material are not considered concealed.²³

Hayyim specifically emphasized that dresses which are “open down the front and at the sides” were not appropriate, because they had a “provocative effect” on men.²⁴ Other regional scholars chimed in. The influential Rabbi Hayyim Palaggi, who lived northwest of Baghdad in Ottoman Izmir among a melting pot of Muslim Turks, Greeks, and Jews, believed women who alter the traditional style were committing “an act of apostasy.”²⁵ If Jewish women dressed like people of other faiths, he claimed, they would be making God angry. He was also following the biblical words from Leviticus 18:3: “nor shall you follow their laws.”²⁶ Palaggi shunned the more sumptuous Europeanised-style. He believed it infringed on the halakhic rules not to imitate non-jewish neighbors' customs (*chukath hagoyim*) and never to mix wool and linen (*sha'tnez*), since Iraqi Jewish men's coats in particular were often made of felted wool.²⁷ Rabbi Asher Sovo of Salonika, Greece also agreed. In his own writings and sermons, he tried to discourage Jewish women from dressing like Europeans and pushed them to always cover their hair and heads.²⁸

On the other hand, there were powerful rabbinic voices who embraced the Tanzimat of 1839-1876. This earlier legislation was instituted by Ottoman Sultans to counter and reverse

²² Yossef Chaim, *Laws for Women* (Salem Books, 1906), 98.

²³ Chaim, *Laws for Women*, 96.

²⁴ Chaim, *Laws for Women*, 98.

²⁵ Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, 132.

²⁶ Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 217.

²⁷ Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 219.

²⁸ Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, 133.

punitive sartorial and sumptuary restrictions against non-Muslims in order to embrace a more modern, Europeanized identity.²⁹ For several centuries before, European Jews had been forced to wear pointy yellow hats by the Pope in the sixteenth century and a symbol of the Ten Commandments by the British monarchy during the thirteenth century.³⁰ Ottoman Jews were also forbidden from wearing white turbans, yellow slippers or any colorful clothing. Instead, they were required to wear dark blue or black dresses and black shoes.³¹ In addition, when entering public bathhouses, they had to wrap themselves with a special towel and wear a bell around their necks to let Muslims know they were coming. Traditional Jewish attire like fur hats and women's wigs (*sheitels*) was also banned.³²

Even though Jews and Christians were historically considered non-believers by Muslims from the tenth century onward, they were also granted protections throughout the Ottoman Empire and given a special name (*dhimmi*) due to the fact that they were religious people of the Book.³³ While Tanzimat reforms were considered progressive—lifting the discriminatory laws of the past—they also created a uniform Ottoman look for all subjects, especially women. In this way, they created a different problem by erasing individuality and, from the rabbinical point of view, a separate, important Jewish identity. Nevertheless, Ottoman rulers lifted color restrictions on Jewish attire, allowing Jews to wear green in their robes and white in their headwraps, two of the holiest colors in Islam.³⁴ They also abolished restrictions on jewelry, gold and silver

²⁹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “Tanzimat | Ottoman Reform Movement | Britannica,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tanzimat>.

³⁰ Svenja Bethke and Gil Pasternak, “Jewish Dress through Visual Sources: An Introduction,” *Textile* 21, no. 3 (December 19, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2022.2150360>, 563.

³¹ Mercedes Volait, “Chapter 5 Guise and Disguise before and during the Tanzimat,” in *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse in Cairo and Damascus 1850-1890* (BRILL, 2021), 209.

³² Joseph R. Hacker, “Jews in the Ottoman Empire (1580–1839),” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 7, the Early Modern World*, ed. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 838; Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe: From the Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem*, 19.

³³ Julia Phillips Cohen, “Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage,” *The American Historical Review* 119, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/119.2.364>; Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 3.

³⁴ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 19; Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 217.

embroidery and skull caps (*yamulkes*).³⁵ The Grand Vizier Reşid Pasha even succeeded in persuading Istanbul's Chief Rabbi Yakir Geron to tell Jewish women to stop wearing bulbous, oversized headwraps (*hotoz*), which distinguished them from non-Jews, as seen in this image of a Jewess from Basra, Iraq in the 1870s (fig. 10).³⁶ As a result, in dozens of archival family portrait photographs featuring rabbinic and secular Iraqi Jews, the viewer can see a turning towards Western-influenced dress and a turning away from traditional Muslim and Jewish *entaris* (figs. 11a-b).³⁷ Many of these photographs were either saved in family albums, displayed for visitors in the home or exchanged like a postcard with neighbors.³⁸ They were called 'cartes de visite' and mass-printed inexpensively.³⁹ The photographs showed "who they wanted to be and how they wished to be remembered."⁴⁰

Like the Ottoman rabbis, some Jewish journalists also criticized women who tried to dress European and labeled them "fake Turks."⁴¹ They seemed to suggest that costumes like the Henna Dress represented a kind of "code-switching" and pretending to play the part of a European lady.⁴² A Jewish journalist from Salonica, Greece wrote "civilization has made a fool's bargain with us. We have drunk our fill of its poisoned cup without taking any of its goodness."⁴³ The editor of *El Tiempo*, a Judeo-Spanish daily paper in Istanbul, wrote about the dangers of European societal and "moral defects" which he felt Ottomans were copying as the ideal, trying on a new cultural and sartorial identity.⁴⁴ American Jewish scholar Cyrus Adler wrote letters in

³⁵ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 20.

³⁶ Getty image, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/illustration/jewish-woman-in-traditional-dress-of-basrah-royalty-free-illustration/1838403289>

³⁷ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 298.

³⁸ Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (Yale University Press, 2010), 127.

³⁹ Klein, "Dressing Up: 'Reading' Costume in the Photograph Albums of Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Jews," 574.

⁴⁰ Klein, "Dressing Up: 'Reading' Costume in the Photograph Albums of Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Jews," 574.

⁴¹ Cohen, "Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage," 373.

⁴² Cohen, "Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage," 389.

⁴³ Cohen, "Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage," 374.

⁴⁴ Cohen, "Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage," 374.

the 1890s inspired by his travels through the Ottoman Empire where he witnessed Jewish men switch from *entaris* on weekends and holidays to Western clothing during the week.⁴⁵ This “self-selective Orientalism” probably only complicated and confused their identity. Were they traditional, observant Baghdadi Jews or Europeanised Jews becoming more and more comfortable wearing the clothing of a global empire? Could they be both at once? As a result of the nineteenth century sumptuary legal reforms, affluent families like the Mu’allems were mixing multiple identities, traditionally sewing the Henna Dress by hand but in the new Europeanized-style for the first time.⁴⁶

Ottoman Influences on the Dress’s Material Culture

Just as issues of modesty and religious norms are wrapped in its threads, so are signifiers of the family’s socioeconomic status in the Ottoman world. For its sweeping shape, elegant contours around the neck and waistline, resplendent silver decoration and finest quality of materials—silk, satin, and lace—could only have been purchased by a certain class of Baghdadis.⁴⁷ According to Esther Juhasz, the Curator of the Israel Museum which currently houses this 134-year-old relic as part of its larger textile collection, the costume is handsewn by Dakhla’s mother. It is a combination of “silk satin weave, lace ribbons, tinsel embroidery and tulle underdress with metal-thread embroidery.”⁴⁸ The dress measures 130 centimeters long and 225 centimeters wide, giving the beholder a sense of how petite the figure of its wearer must

⁴⁵ Cyrus Adler, *Selected Letters*, ed. Ira Robinson, vol. 1 & 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985), 1:31; Esther Juhasz, *Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (The Israel Museum, 1990).

⁴⁶ Nancy Micklewright, “Tracing the Transformations in Women’s Dress in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul,” *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 13, no. 1 (January 1987), <https://doi.org/10.1179/036121187803657372>, 33.

⁴⁷ Yedida K. Stillman and Nancy Micklewright, “Costume in the Middle East,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 26, no. 1 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026318400025025>, 13; “Satin Fabric: History, Properties, How It’s Made,” American Textile History Museum, 2023, <http://athm.org/fabric/satin/>.

⁴⁸ Juhasz, *The Jewish Wardrobe*, 300.

have been and how voluminous the material surrounding her body was. Designed for Dakhla's henna ceremony the day before her wedding, the red stripe in her dress would have evoked the reddish-brown color of the dye paste on her palms, a ritual that has deep roots in both ancient Egyptian culture and later in India originating during the Mughal Empire in the early part of the sixteenth century.⁴⁹ The ceremony is meant to bring good fortune, prosperity and fertility to the marriage.⁵⁰ Red is a common color choice for henna ritual clothing as it symbolizes “wealth and dignity.”⁵¹

Juhasz determined that the silk weave which comprises most of the garment would have likely been fabricated in Ottoman Syria, Iran or India, as the latter was a major textile production hub, and Syria and Iran, also important silk suppliers, border Iraq geographically. Through sericulture, a process several millennia-old originating deep in the fields of mulberry trees throughout Asia, silkworm farmers would have harvested raw silk from the cocoons of the *Bombyx mori* moth. They would have taken long strands of the strongest fiber filaments. In a technique called throwing, they would have twisted, wound, cleaned and doubled the yarn to make it as resilient as possible before dipping it into a dye vat to achieve the desired color.⁵² In the case of the Henna Dress, yarn was likely dipped gently, because the cream-colored weft is so light. The finished, shiny silk would have been wound on spools or bobbins and then woven on looms.

⁴⁹ Tammana Begum, “The Henna Plant: Transcending Time, Religion and Culture,” Natural History Museum, London, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/the-henna-plant-transcending-time-religion-and-culture.html>.

⁵⁰ “Henna Party: Celebrate Middle Eastern Jewish Wedding Traditions,” The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, 2024, <https://magnes.berkeley.edu/program/henna-party-celebrate-middle-eastern-jewish-wedding-traditions/>; Rachel Sharaby, “The Bride’s Henna Ritual: Symbols, Meanings and Changes,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, 2006;

⁵¹ Ozlen Ozgen et al., “Henna Ritual Clothing in Anatolia from Past to Present: An Evaluation on Bindalli,” *Textile Society of America*, 2020, 4.

⁵² Victoria and Albert Museum, “The Mystery of Silk: A Brief Global History of the Remarkable Material,” YouTube, April 22, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbsS5IVHqqo>.

It is not known whether this stripe patterned weave was created on a hand loom or power machine. But if the material came from somewhere in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the century, the silk was probably hand-loomed, the dominant method regionally since power looms were only starting to take hold in Europe and America at that time.⁵³ In addition, the hand loom method would have produced a finer quality weave executed by skilled craftsmen in a more domestic setting, even if it was a more time-consuming process.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the dress is opaque, which suggests closely-packed threads from a hand loom. The satin weave is smooth and would have been quite expensive to purchase, more evidence of the Mu'allems' economic status. The fabric would likely have travelled to Baghdad on camels and caravans along the silk roads, trading routes that criss-crossed the Empire, then into the hands of one of the city's many textile merchants. According to a pamphlet published by the International Silk Jury at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 that traced, recorded, and compiled global data on silk production, tens of millions of pounds of silk were exported annually at the turn of the nineteenth century from all over Asia (fig. 12).⁵⁵ As a result, Dakhala's mother would likely have had many hundreds of samples to choose from in Baghdad, a city that stood at the nexus of trading routes.⁵⁶ It had become a hub for selling and buying all the finest textiles in the Muslim world.⁵⁷

The dress' *matière*—both the “material surface” (silk) and “material structure” (fitted bodice; low front panel, wide skirt)—closely resembles a similar Persian robe on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, despite the latter dating from the eighteenth century (fig. 13).⁵⁸ The

⁵³ Robert Allen, “The Hand-Loom Weaver and the Power Loom: A Schumpeterian Perspective,” *European Review of Economic History* 22, no. 4 (November 2018), 381.

⁵⁴ Franklin Allen, *The Silk Industry of the World at the Opening of the Twentieth Century*, 1904, 28.

⁵⁵ Allen, *The Silk Industry of the World at the Opening of the Twentieth Century*.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Mudhaffar, “Studies on the Civilizational Importance of Silk Roads and Silk Production in Iraq,” 2.

⁵⁷ Yedida Kalfon Stillman, *Arab Dress: A Short History from the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times*, ed. Norman Stillman (BRILL, 2003), 51.

⁵⁸ Jennifer M. Scarce, *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 157; Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 45.

detailed stages of the comparanda's fabrication shed considerable light on how the Henna Dress was sewn.⁵⁹ Despite the historical time gap, the order of the construction in the eighteenth century "continued to be used in nineteenth century garments" thus making it a credible comparison.⁶⁰ In Dakhla's dress, a center seam on the long skirt is visible to the eye despite thin, vertical stripes which nearly camouflage it. Similarly, we can see seams in the striped pattern around each wrist moving in a counter direction from the rest of the sleeve's lines as well as the overall dress. These seams show that the Henna Dress was sewn together out of many individual pieces. The bodice, sleeves and high-waisted skirt were all made from pieces of the same textile—weft-faced cream silk with warp threads of red, creating an overall delicate pattern of vertical stripes from head to toe. The borders of the jewel neck, wrists, waist and bottom sleeve are edged with thin bands of deep, indigo-blue silk ribbon, including the thicker, ruffled opening of the bodice, which would have been hand-stitched afterwards using tinsel embroidery (figs. 14a-c).

The top of the dress appears to be broken up into three sections similar to the Persian one with two front pieces that expose the lace panel and one complete back piece "secured by strings."⁶¹ It seems probable that the shoulders of the Henna Dress are first attached to the bodice, then the waist band, next the sleeves in two parts—upper and lower, because seams are visible—and finally the full skirt sections. They would have been sewn separately into a pleated, gathered waistline. Two cream-colored lace ribbons are fashioned into a horizontal band, probably imported from Italy, one of the main producers of fine lace. Either hand-sewn with a needle or bobbin, the lace pieces would have been a highly expensive embellishment, meant to

⁵⁹ The connection between the Iraqi dress and Persian dress is my own finding.

⁶⁰ Scarce, *Women's Costume of the near and Middle East*, 160.

⁶¹ "Woman's Dresses (Dar'a Qasa)," The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/533593-0>.

show off the family's awareness of finery.⁶² They wrap the dress at the midsection as well as the bottom and may have been sewn using a double running stitch. This stitch is often present when the pattern involves lines—as it does in the Henna Dress example—and was used for centuries as a filling stitch throughout the empire. It secures the same indigo-blue silk fabric that encircles the décolleté. The lace bodice is delicately hand-sewn by Dakhla's mother with metal threads to create an abstract, whimsical, vegetal motif that has an irregular, meandering pattern (fig.15). The panel itself appears to be sewn in two parts, layered one on top of the other in the formation of a bib edged with glittering tinsel (*tel*).

It is possible that Dakhla's mother was a professional embroiderer, since the dress is quite detailed. Many Jewish women learned the complicated technique of *tel* embroidery—threading metallic pieces of tinsel through a special flat needle—whereas many Muslim women typically did not.⁶³ This generational skill was passed down from mothers to daughters and was often used to decorate ritual objects like challah covers and Torah binders (*wimpels*). After an expensive wedding, an embroidered garment could be recycled into a Torah curtain and given to a synagogue. “The more elegant and unique a Torah textile is, the more likely it originated from a wedding dress.”⁶⁴ Upon closer inspection of the blue waistband, nearly hidden in plain sight against its dark background, is a motif that closely resembles the repeated pattern of a fleur-de-lis (fig.16). While there is no direct connection between this ornamental, lily symbol and the Ottoman Empire, the motif is commonly used in European armory especially in France to symbolize purity and the Virgin Mary.⁶⁵ One could speculate its presence corroborates the desire

⁶² Melinda Watt, “Textile Production in Europe: Lace, 1600–1800,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003, <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/textile-production-in-europe-lace-1600-1800>.

⁶³ *Shimmering Gold: The Splendor of Gold Embroidered Textiles* (Eretz Israel Museum, 2007).

⁶⁴ Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, “Jewish Ritual Objects,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, April 16, 2025, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-1009>.

⁶⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Fleur-De-Lis | Emblem,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fleur-de-lis>.

to imitate the West. It also suggests that the origin of this particular material must have come from outside the Empire, perhaps from France—another example of European and Ottoman worlds colliding in folds of fabric.

How the European World Impacted the Dress's Journey

The Henna garment bridges multiple worlds—from rural farms and urban markets to four global cities—Baghdad, Teheran, London and Jerusalem. It journeyed from humble beginnings as silk worm larvae on a mulberry tree in rural areas of the Ottoman Empire to finished rolls of fabric in a city filled with Muslim merchants, Jewish moneylenders, wealthy entrepreneurs and textile tradesmen. The fabric was probably carried in pieces to the home of the Mu'allems in Baghdad. Perhaps they purchased it from a seller or textile broker at one of the open-air bazaars. Muslims, Jews and Christians seemed to peacefully “coexist” in this balanced economic ecosystem with Ottoman dress reforms making it possible for garments like the Henna Dress to be made and worn. One scholar called this period, “the history of the mundane” because of its “collaborative and amicable” environment.⁶⁶

But like its smooth material, the dress perhaps glosses over the other side of the Jewish story, specifically the fact that most of the Baghdadi population lived very differently than the aristocratic Jewish families. Ordinary Jewish Iraqis were not starting banks, schools, trading companies and textile factories in the global art and culture capitals of Shanghai, Bombay, London and Iraq. They were not businessmen socializing with other elites. And they were not draped in resplendent wraps moving between different worlds.⁶⁷ Most Iraqi Jews in the late 1800s were poor. By 1910, sixty percent of Baghdadi Jews were destitute, and five percent were

⁶⁶ Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, 3.

⁶⁷ Farago, “‘The Sassoons’: A Family Romance at Global Scale,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2023; Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, 39.

homeless.⁶⁸ One can speculate that the Mu'allem family fell somewhere in between these two extremes based on the intricate design and fine materials of the Henna Dress. Was Dakhla's family trying to blend in, fearful of racialized persecution and perceived otherness? Or were they genuinely excited to be fashioning a dress as part of their family's journey towards becoming more modern? Historian Susan Niditch explains that "there are complicated connections between clothing and identity, and we can acknowledge the effort of Jews both to distinguish themselves from their non-Jewish neighbors and to be like them at the same time." During the 1930s and 40s though, socioeconomic and religious conditions in Iraq would start to decline for all Jews—rich and poor—due to the country's unsteady political state and a military coup.⁶⁹ Dakhla's children fled to Iran in 1948, taking the textile with them. From Iran, they would escape again from Khomeini's brutal dictatorship. They resettled for a second time in London. Currently, the costume is at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, donated by Dakhla's children.

Behind the faces of the Abudi and Dangoor women who, like Dakhla Mu'allem, are wearing westernized dresses for their special occasion portraits, it is hard to know their inner thoughts (figs. 11a-b). After the photograph was taken, they might have hung up their elegant garments or packed them away as Dakhla did when her wedding was over, for safe-keeping. Then these women might have draped their bodies in full-length coatdresses, wrapped their head with a scarf, pulled a black horsehair veil across their faces (*kheliyya*) and gone to visit a neighbor or to the market. In other words, they would have returned to their daily lives and put on traditional clothing to cover themselves completely (fig. 17).⁷⁰ The reason for this change was that *entaris* were traditionally worn in public everyday; *dar'a qasas* were ceremonial attire for

⁶⁸ Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 31.

⁶⁹ Majid Khadduri et al., "Iraq - World War II and British Intervention, 1939–45 | Britannica," Britannica, December 14, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq/World-War-II-and-British-intervention-1939-45>.

⁷⁰ Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 221.

family portraits or pre-wedding rituals.⁷¹ This transition between vastly different outfits and worlds—public and personal—must have stirred these young women’s emotions. Even though full coverage was originally a Muslim custom, Jews did it too for the same reason they also put on Westernized dresses—to try and fit in to multiple worlds.

Ironically, while many Ottoman Jewish women were trying on this more modern self-identity with the *dar’a qasa*, there were European female travellers to the Ottoman Empire equally intrigued by the costumes of their “Oriental neighbors.”⁷² For example, Edith Sykes, the Victorian wife of British diplomat Mark Sykes, travelled with her husband in 1906 and kept a diary about the appearance of women she encountered, especially in parts of the Empire beyond Baghdad like Morocco and Istanbul where some women were part of royal harems (fig. 18). Their style of dress evoked a kind of reverse fascination in the explorer. Sometimes Ottoman costumes appeared alluring and glamorous to her; at other times, bizarre and off-putting. On September 17, 1906 she observes—

...two of them being in the usual cotton dressing gowns, the third young and plump evidently a fresh addition to the harem, being dressed somewhat more picturesquely.⁷³

Describing a Kurdish woman approximately one month later, Sykes writes—

...a tall, handsome if fierce-looking Kurdish woman of about 50”, who was “dressed in a bright emerald green satin skirt, a blue velvet jacket with red plush cuffs and collar, on her head was a black handkerchief with a row of gold coins across her forehead...”⁷⁴

In another entry from October 9th, Sykes admires the Kurdish dress style to such an extent that she does not even appear shocked by the polygamy in her midst.

A good-looking girl who I think was the daughter of the Shaykh’s other wife brought coffee and cigarettes; she was gracefully dressed in a loose green shirt, silk robe, round

⁷¹ “Entari,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451160>.

⁷² Muller-Lancet, *Jewish Ethnographic Costume*, 225.

⁷³ Özge Aslanmirza, “Footsteps of a Victorian Woman in the Ottoman Middle East: Edith Sykes’ Travel Notes,” *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yılığ*, no. 31 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.17518/canakkalearastirmalari.944481>, 53.

⁷⁴ Aslanmirza, “Footsteps of a Victorian Woman in the Ottoman Middle East: Edith Sykes’ Travel Notes,” 54.

her waist a very handsome gold and silver belt, on her head a purple gauze handkerchief with gold coins on her forehead.⁷⁵

The night of the henna ceremony, Dakhla also would have been surrounded by a joyous group of women (*daqqaqat*), which was part of the ritual. They would have been singing, drumming and painting her palms. Perhaps they were also dressed in a mix of traditional and Westernized attire. Many or all would have been familiar to her—friends, neighbors and female relatives (fig. 19). But the following night after the wedding ends, at barely eleven-years-old, Dakhla would have removed her dress alone and had sex with a full-grown man. The juxtaposition of these stark images—the labor of a loving mother sewing her daughter’s dress from the finest imported materials in the world and a child lying in bed with a much older male stranger—is disturbing. In that sense, the complex garment also embodies the unseen: a child whose childhood disappeared the moment she took off the dress (a double vanishing) and the “hidden labor of seamstresses” including her own mother who loomed and embroidered this textile.⁷⁶ Therefore, as much as the Henna Dress looks forward, Westernized and modern to the beholder, it forever holds mystifying traditions in its folds of fabric—the dyeing of a young girls’ hands to make her more fertile and the stain of her marital vow.

⁷⁵ Aslanmirza, “Footsteps of a Victorian Woman in the Ottoman Middle East: Edith Sykes’ Travel Notes,” 54.

⁷⁶ Thomas, “Embodying Imperial Spectacle: Dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899—1905,” 370.

IMAGES



Fig. 1
Baghdadi school girls in Western dress, 1900
Courtesy: Babylonian Heritage Center Archive
Or Yeuda, Israel
No accession number



Fig. 2
Henna Dress from Baghdad, Iraq (*dar'a qasa*), 1891
Silk satin weave, silk and lace ribbons, tinsel embroidery
Handsewn dress belonging to Dakhla Rachel Mu'allem
Israel Museum, Jerusalem
B833.0099



Fig. 3
Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress
 Travelling exhibition from The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
 The Jewish Museum, New York, 2017-18
 Henna Dress in foreground



Fig. 4a
 The Sassoon family, Baghdad, Iraq 1919
 Ezra and wife Masouda Sassoon,
 Son of patriarch David Sassoon
 Courtesy: Sassoon Family Archive



Fig. 4b

David Sassoon with his three eldest sons,
Elias David (b. 1820), Albert David (Abudullah b. 1818),
and Sassoon David (b. 1832)
Sotheby's Collection



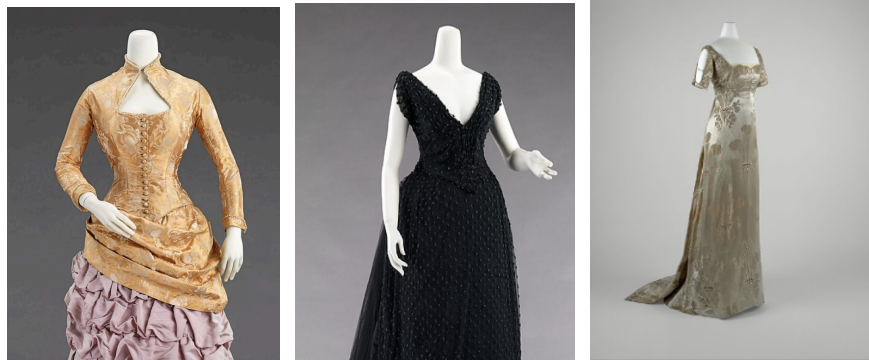
Fig. 5

Uçetek Entari from 19th century Bursa,
Northwest Turkey
Cotton, silk, metal wrapped thread; embroidered
H. 54 1/2 in. (138.4 cm); W. 63 3/4 in. (161.9 cm)

C.I.46.9.66



Fig. 6
Close up, Sleeve of Henna Dress
Baghdad, Iraq 1891
Israel Museum, Jerusalem
B83.0099



Figs. 7a-c
Array of dresses demonstrating late 19th/early 20th c. décolleté style
7a: Left: American evening dress, c. 1880. Medium: silk; #2009.300.654
7b: Center: French evening dress, c. 1885. Medium: silk; #2009.300.3304a-c
7c: Right: French evening dress, c. 1911. Medium: silk/metal; #C.I.57.17.3
Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute



Figs. 8a-b

Similar Front Breast Panel to Henna Dress, late 19th c.

Left: Full garment Right: Close-up detail of breast panel

Woman's Festive Coat dress (*dar'a qasa*) worn by Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta, India

Brocaded silk, gilt metal threads, lace and couched cords, braided and metal buttons; chemise: cotton, lace
B85.0006



Fig. 9a

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (1834-1909)

Baghdad, Iraq

From: Jewish Women's Archive

Date: Unknown

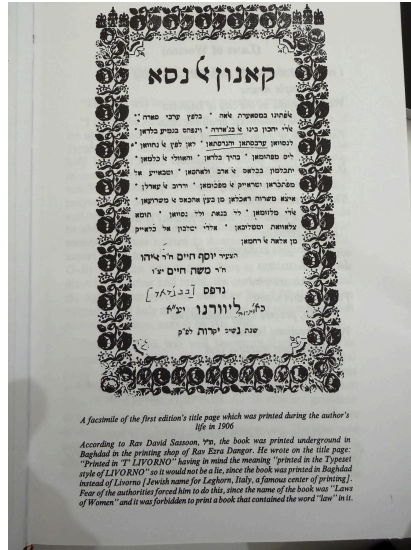


Fig. 9b
 Facsimile of *Rules For Women*
 Title Page of First Edition, 1906
 Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's strict guidelines on Jewish women's dress
 Reprinted by Yeshoua Salem of Salem Books



Fig. 10
 Image of Jewess
 Basra, Iraq, 1870s
 Source: Getty Images
 Public Domain



Figs. 11a and b

Various family portraits of Iraqi Jewish women in transitional dress

Left: The Abudi Family, Baghdad 1909; Beit Hatfutsot, Photo Archive, Tel Aviv. Right: Baghdadi Family of Chief Rabbi Hakham Ezra Dangoor, 1910

Courtesy: Getty Images, Hulton Archive, #1198918



Fig. 12

Pamphlet, The Silk Industry of the World at the Opening of the Twentieth century

Detail of cover; written by Frank Allen,

Secretary of Silk Association of America, 1904

Published for the Scientific American Compiling Department

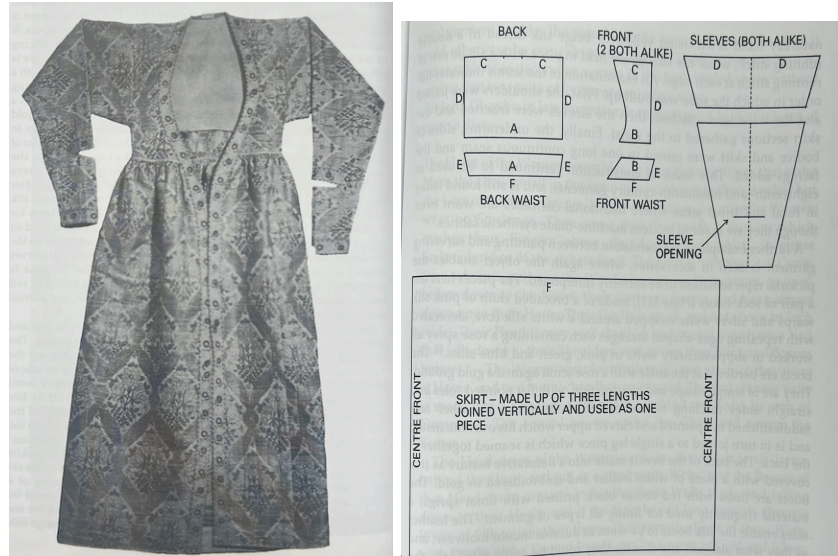
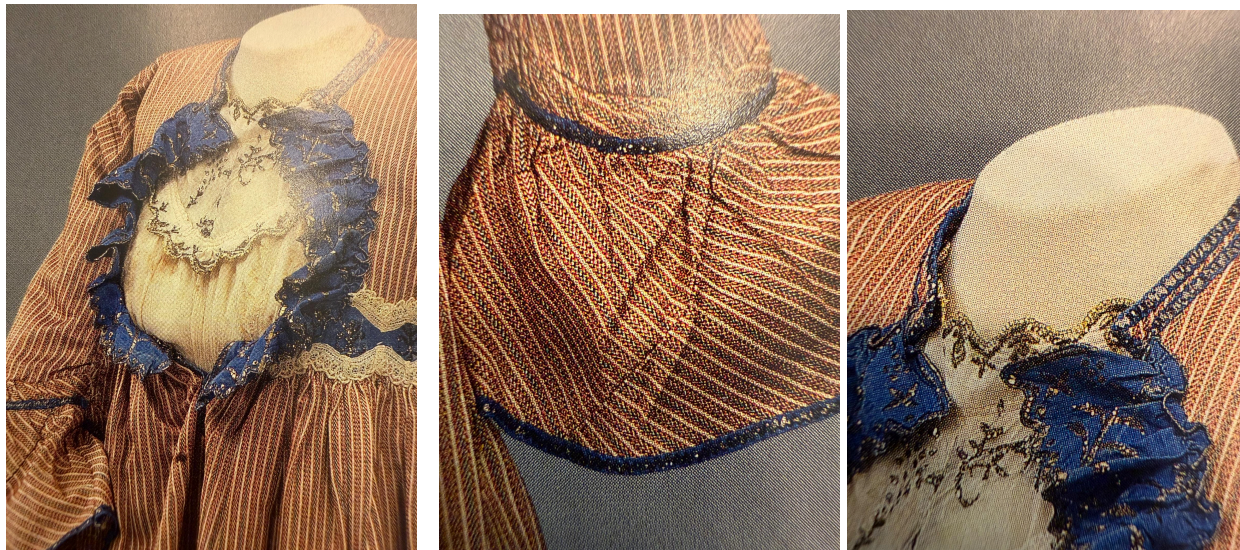


Fig. 13

Diagram detailing construction of Persian robe,
17th- early 18th century with similar design to Henna Dress
From *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East*, pp. 158-159
By Jennifer Scarce



Figs. 14a-c

Various close-ups of Henna Dress

L130, W 225 cm

Courtesy: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Gift of Dakhla Rachel Mu'Allem's daughter, Naomi Inbar

Ramat Gan, Israel

Accession #:B83.0099



Fig. 15
Close up of whimsical vegetal motif,
Tinsel hand embroidery
Henna Dress



Fig. 16
Repeated fleur-de-lis,
Waist and hem band in Henna Dress



Fig. 17

Outdoor traditional woman's wrap
Baghdad, Iraq. Late 19th-early 20th c.
Silk, gilt metal thread, tapestry weave
L 180, W 206 cm; Gift of Helene Simone
In memory of her mother, Louise Zilka
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
B79. 0241



Fig. 18

Lady Edith Sykes
Riding a horse in the Middle East, 1915
Courtesy: Heritage Images, #19658787



Fig. 19

Rare image of daqqaqat, all-female group
performing henna and music rituals at Iraqi Jewish wedding ceremony, early 20th century

Photographer: Unknown

Oster Visual Documentation Center of Beit haTfutsot

ANU: The Museum of the Jewish People

www.bh.org.il

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