

DR. HILLEL FARHI

(1868-1940)

Dr. Hillel Yaacob Farhi (1868-1940) was a man of unbelievable conviction and determination. He strove for the betterment of his fellow man in every possible way. For those of us who did not personally know this remarkable individual; his desire to be of help, and support his fellow man is most evident in his translation of the daily Jewish prayer Book into the Arabic language. This was no easy task as this was never previously attempted and as such he did not even have a template to work from.

Dr. Farhi was born in Damascus, Syria studied in Beirut, Lebanon and London in the United Kingdom, and resided in Cairo, Egypt. He was a descendant of a very old and illustrious Sephardic family with branches throughout the world. He had a lot of expectations to live up to, so he was determined to make his prayer book the most complete and correct one available, while at the same time following the liturgy of Sephardic Jewry the world over. What he had accomplished reflected on him and on the entire Farhi family. It should be noted that while most modern Sephardic Siddurim published in Israel in the last half a century or so follow more of an Iraqi Kabbalistic tradition and style, Siddur Farhi follows the traditional prayer text as used for centuries by the Jews of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, North Africa, etc... This is yet another factor that demonstrates Dr. Farhi's keen sense of adherence to tradition and determination to transmit that heritage to subsequent generations.

In addition to being a medical doctor, Hillel Farhi was a linguist of both the Arabic and Hebrew languages. Any of his translations could and would be nothing less than perfect. His translation of the Siddur is not just literal; it is poetic and never is the flavor or the nuance of any original phrase ever compromised. Furthermore he wanted that such a special and unique book which was to be used by his co-religionists to get closer to God be portrayed with the finest legible features. To that effect, he utilized fine print on high quality paper in a large format that would be easy on the eyes of both beginners as well as the elderly.

This initial volume of prayers by Dr. Farhi was momentous and received the approval of the Chief Rabbi of Egypt Refael Aharon Ben-Shimon, of Rabbi Massoud Hai Ben-Shimon representative of the Cairo Bet Din, of Rabbi Abraham Abikzir representative of the Alexandria Bet Din, as well as poetical accolades from Mourad Farag, Esq. the great Karaite attorney, among others.

This translation had opened the world of religious service to thousands of jews who while familiar with the Arabic language, never had the opportunity to learn the Hebrew language and therefore understand the meaning of the prayers. The rabbis could not praise him enough for issuing this siddur with translation. He was hailed as a healer of the souls and spirits for each and every member of the jewish nation who used this book! The people could finally pour forth their prayer with true feeling and meaning before God. This siddur helped the masses to approach God with much more concentration and fervor than before in both times of sorrow and happiness. The rabbis prodded him not to stop at this work of authorship but to publish many more tomes. He grabbed the reins and took charge like no one else could. He published mahzorim in Arabic for the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well a number of editions of the passover haggadah in Arabic with a running commentary. He put out a variety of works, many to remain in manuscript form for publication at a later date.

Dr. Farhi's book of daily prayer reflects his respect for his fellow men, as well as for the sephardic jewish tradition and his acute linguistic accuracy. His Arabic translations led him to correct the Hebrew text when he felt that a typographical or printer's errors had crept in through the centuries. Constantly checking with contemporary rabbis, he added to the end of his siddur a twenty four page appendix to clearly explain the grammatical problems with certain Hebrew and Arabic terms and suggest some sound corrections. This approach allowed additional teaching of the laws of the Hebrew grammar hence deepening the understanding of jewish tradition. This prayer book has always been one of my favorites. I have traveled the world in search of it and presently own four copies that I paid dearly for. Even though I am american-born, I taught myself Arabic just so I could read this very book. By republishing this work in the true spirit and deeds of his late grandfather, Mr. Alain Farhi has afforded each reader the opportunity to share in this original 1917 work. I urge everyone to obtain a copy of this siddur. It is a true treasure that will be used by you and your family on a daily basis, while at the same time is a very valuable addition to your collection of religious jewish writings.

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