Academic Biography

My scientific research centers on the Neo-Aramaic dialect spoken by the Jews of Saqqez in Iranian Kurdistan, the language of biblical translations and other canonical texts in this dialect and the written Hebrew of this Jewish community. These aspects have remained unexplored by previous researchers. I publish and attend local and international conferences in this field and am dedicated to the advancement of Jewish Neo-Aramaic scholarship and research for the benefit of future generations.

I speak the Saqqez dialect, which I learned from my late parents, who immigrated to Israel with the members of their community in 1951. (I wrote about this immigration in a scholarly journal. The article is undergoing minor revisions, as requested by Prof. David Minshari of Tel Aviv University, and will be published in a book authored by him on Jewish immigrations from Iran.)

Saqqez is one of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects, which belongs to the four groups of Neo-Aramaic languages. The others are Western Neo-Aramaic [Maaloula], Central Neo-Aramaic [Turoyo], and Neo-Mandaic.) Along with other Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects categorized as Northeastern Neo-Aramaic, the Saqqez dialect is not being passed on to younger generations and is at risk of extinction.

My research owes its existence entirely to the Neo-Aramaic bible I had the privilege of studying at Hebrew University under the guidance of my esteemed teacher and mentor, the late Prof. Gideon Goldenberg, Israel Prize laureate in 1993 for Hebrew Language and General Linguistics, a researcher of Semitic languages. He was also the distinguished student of the late Prof. Haim (Hans) Jakob Polotsky, recipient of the Israel Prize in Humanities (1966), who dedicated a significant part of his research to the study of living Semitic languages, with a particular focus on Neo-Aramaic.

My doctoral thesis was the first comprehensive grammatical analysis of this Neo-Aramaic dialect, which had been previously unexplored in the literature. My doctoral research, which received a grade of “excellent,” was mentored by the late Prof. Gideon Goldenberg. As part of my research, I collected numerous high-quality field recordings of interviews with individuals who spoke the Saqqez dialect in their daily life with their partners, friends, and family. Below, I will provide several quotes from evaluations of my doctoral thesis, from a letter to the Authority for Research Students at The Hebrew University (13/5/1998):

(1) Prof. Gideon Goldenberg: “The strength of this work lies in its meticulous recording of a broad scope of data, the precise formal analysis and its clear grammatical presentation, the concise presentation of the phonological analysis, and the clear and comprehensive characterization of the system of forms and the key aspects of both syntax and sentence structure.”

(2) The late Prof. Shlomo Morag, teacher and mentor, 1996 recipient of the Israel Prize for Jewish Studies, and founder of the Language Traditions Project at The Hebrew University: “In the face of an intricate linguistic context, the author adeptly addressed challenging questions and succeeded in providing a thorough and precise description of the dialect’s linguistic system structure. In terms of analysis and description, this is a masterful essay.”

Exploring the Saqqez dialect is a pivotal step in constructing the dialectical mosaic of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic, mapping the central isoglosses that delineate its branches and outlining its comprehensive grammatical and lexical profile.

The outstanding researchers of Jewish Neo-Aramaic spoken dialects are Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Regius Professor of Hebrew and Professor of Semitic Languages at University of Cambridge, along with three international researchers of Neo-Aramaic originally from Israel: Prof. Hezy Mutzafi of Tel Aviv University, Prof. Shmuel (Steve) Fassberg and Prof. Eran Cohen (the outstanding student of Prof. Gideon Goldenberg) of Hebrew University. Their linguistic studies are published almost exclusively in English.

My teacher and mentor, Prof. Yona Sabar, born in Zakho in Iraqi Kurdistan, emeritus professor at University of California, Los Angeles, is an international scholar of Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects and the Kurdish Jews’ traditional branches of written and oral literature. His many linguistic studies are published in Hebrew for the most part, with only a few in English. Upon completing my PhD dissertation, I deemed it fitting to follow in the footsteps of Prof. Sabar and have dedicated my research to exploring the language of biblical translations and other canonical texts translated into the Saqqez dialect.

I began by collecting rare and valuable manuscripts written in Hebrew and in the Neo-Aramaic Saqqez dialect from members of the Saqqez’s Jewish diaspora. The son of one of the community’s sages even complied with my request to commit additional texts to writing. (The writings are described in two articles I authored, which were published in scholarly journals.) As I explored the manuscripts available in the National Library of Israel and the Yitzhak Ben Zvi Institute, I discovered additional manuscripts belonging to this diaspora community. The manuscripts I collected encompass a diverse array of texts, including both translations from Hebrew and originals in Aramaic: (1) Translations into the Saqqez dialect include: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Jonah, Ruth, Job and Daniel, passages from the *haftara*, the Aramaic translation of Song of Songs, the second translation of the Book of Esther, the Tractate of the Fathers, the Passover *haggadah*, verses for Purim, Passover, *selichot*, the High Holidays, lamentations for *Tisha B’Av*, *Patach Eliiyahu* from the Book of the Zohar. (2) Bilingual texts, in Hebrew and the Neo-Aramaic Saqqez dialect, include: epic songs about the binding of Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, and Moses, and poetry about young students learning Torah. (4) Bilingual panels in Hebrew and the Neo-Aramaic dialect of the Saqqez Jewry include: a glossary to the Bible and some prayers from the siddur, verb conjugation tables, and noun tables arranged according to semantic fields.

These texts were documented by the community’s sages and their students. The texts played a significant role in the foundational Jewish education of children, and were specifically catered to community members with limited Hebrew proficiency and inability to comprehend original Hebrew texts. (I wrote an article about traditional Jewish education in Iranian Kurdistan, which was submitted to a scholarly journal.)

These manuscripts had not been studied or published previously. The focal point of my research is studying these manuscripts, presenting them at local and international academic conferences, and publishing articles about them in academic journals. The manuscripts hold immense significance as rich sources for studying the linguistic, literary and religious heritage of this Jewish diaspora. Their linguistic importance is particularly profound, as they contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the linguistic foundation from which contemporary Jewish Neo-Aramaic has evolved.

Thus far, I have researched and published several manuscripts: three chapters from the book of Genesis in the Saqqez dialect; the book of Jonah translated into three Neo-Aramaic dialects; *Megillat Ruth* in the Saqqez dialect and in the dialect of the Jews of Rawanduz. I have also published liturgical poems in the Saqqez dialect: *Et sha’are ratzon, Mi kamocha, Im efes rovea haken, Yashen al teradem,* and *Yairuni raayonai*, andtwo bilingual works in Hebrew and the neo-Aramaic Saqqez dialect: The Binding of Isaac and Joseph and his Brothers. I will cite excerpts from four different opinions regarding my publications:

(1) “It was with great interest and attention that I read the article titled ‘Joseph and his Brothers’ – a bilingual work in Hebrew and the neo-Aramaic Saqqez dialect. I am delighted to share my opinion that this article makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the literary intricacies within the studied dialect and certainly merits publication in [the linguistic journal] *Helkat Lashon*. This register is comparatively less documented than the spoken language and is characterized by a range of lexical archaisms, predominantly of original Aramaic elements inherited from an early linguistic layer prior to the contemporary modern layer.”

(2) Review of another article: “I am delighted to endorse the publication of the aforementioned article in *Carmelim*, (the article is suited for publication in any other Hebrew platform as well). The article enriches our understanding of the dialect, literature and culture of the Saqqez Jews, as part of the broader cultural landscape of the Kurdish Jews. Notably, the text and its translation are thoughtfully accompanied by notes and bibliographic references to the literature, particularly pertaining to the Binding of Isaac, which offers a valuable addition that extends beyond the study of Neo-Aramaic. The article presents a novel interpretation of the “Binding of Isaac” as told by the Saqqez Jewry, as this work had only been previously known in the version of the Jews of Urmia. The Saqqez version is bilingual, written in Hebrew mixed with Neo-Aramaic phrases and in the literary register of the Saqqez dialect, in contrast with other versions that are, as far as I know, in Neo-Aramaic. This literary register diverges from the spoken language through its utilization of archaic language elements, primarily evident in the vocabulary. These archaic features offer a unique glimpse into the characteristics of a historical layer that predates the modern-day spoken Saqqez dialect.”

(3) One of my studies was dedicated to exploring another Neo-Aramaic dialect. The following is an expert review of the study: “The submitted article is highly deserving of publication. It significantly enriches our understanding of the dialect of the Jews of Rawanduz and their literature, and its place in the folk literature of Kurdistan’s Jews. Particularly, the article expands our knowledge concerning the literary-translational register in Neo-Aramaic of Rawanduz’s Jews. While this dialect received a comprehensive examination published in 2008, a complete text accompanied by rigorous scientific review and linguistic analysis had yet to be published. The article presents a translation of *Megillat Ruth* in the style of the Rawanduz Jews, and thus provides a significant contribution to translations of *Megillat Ruth* known to us in other Neo-Aramaic dialects. In the Rawanduz dialect, as in all Jewish Neo-Aramaic, the literary register is distinct from the spoken language in crucial archaic language lines, predominantly as relates to vocabulary, which are important to study. These archaic lines are inherited from an early historical layer predating the contemporary Rawanduz dialect spoken today.”

(4) An additional review: “I was delighted to read the excellent article about the liturgical poem ‘*Im efes rovea haken,’* in its translation into the Neo-Aramaic dialect of the Saqqez Jews. This article renews, enriches and deepens linguistic knowledge concerning the literary work in the studied dialect and sheds light on characteristics of the dialect’s literary-translational register.”

I am also in possession of a collection of texts written in Hebrew by the sages of the community. Among them are liturgical poems, guides for learning Hebrew as a living language, Hebrew letters, Hebrew exegesis that integrate words from the Saqqez dialect and more. These texts have remained unexplored, and my intention is to study and publish them in scholarly journals.

The tasks that lie ahead are many. I am currently engrossed in researching a translation of *Masekhet Avot* into the Saqqez dialect. Thus far, no translations of this text into other Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects have been published. I plan to continue studying the remaining manuscripts in my possession, with the goal of publishing them in a language that can be readily understood by researchers from diverse fields: linguistic researchers including scholars of Neo-Aramaic, scholars of the Bible and its translations, literature researchers and others. This initiative will prepare the groundwork for me to develop a dictionary and a grammar dedicated to the language of these translations. Attached please find a letter by my esteemed teacher and rabbi, the late Prof. Gideon Goldenberg, from 16/11/1997, which highlights the importance of my work.

Upon my retirement in 2024, I will have the privilege of dedicating most of my time to fulfilling my research plans. A promotion to the rank of professor will grant me vital resources and support as well as the authority needed to propel my research goals forward. Moreover, it will elevate the visibility and impact of this work within the academic community. Such a promotion would be a testament to the contribution of my research to the realm of Jewish Neo-Aramaic and should positively contribute to the reputation of David Yellin College.

Postscript: I have published five articles in scholarly journals that diverge from my primary field of research. One article delves into David Yellin Street and its environs, a subject close to my heart as my parents’ house is on this very street; the second article pays tribute to my esteemed teacher and rabbi Prof. Shraga Faivel Meltzer, a Bible scholar, who was also incidentally the principal of the elementary school I attended; three additional articles XXX. These schools were founded before the establishment of the State of Israel. This is my humble gift to David Yellin College, an institution which I esteem deeply.