



American Sephardi Federation

with Sephardic House

For Immediate Release

September 14, 2006

Contact: Francesco Spagnolo
Tel: 212-294-6150
fspagnolo@asf.cjh.org

BACK TO BABYLON 2600 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN IRAQ

A four-day program exploring the venerable and multi-faceted culture of Iraqi Jewry

Thursday, November 2 – Sunday, November 5 2006

Center for Jewish History 15 West 16th Street New York

New York, September 12, 2006 – On November 2nd 2006 the *American Sephardi Federation* will inaugurate a new major Program Series on the *Historic Jewish Communities in the Islamic World* by presenting **Back to Babylon: 2600 Years of Jewish Life in Iraq**, a four-day program exploring the venerable and multifaceted culture of Iraqi Jewry with film screenings, a concert, a conference with scholars from Israel and North America and an Iraqi-themed community Shabbat celebration. **Two wonderful exhibitions** including one with *old photographs of Jewish life in Iraq* and a *unique exhibition of art and artifacts from private collections* will be on display until March 2007. All events will take place at the **Center for Jewish History** at 15 West 16th Street in New York City on November 2 – 5, 2006, and at Congregation Shearith Israel at 2 West 70th Street on Friday, November 3, 2006.

With Iraq so dramatically present before the eyes of the world, the American Sephardi Federation, in pursuing its mission to preserve and promote Sephardic culture, will offer its diverse audience a unique chance to go *beyond the headlines*, and to uncover one of the most fascinating chapters in Jewish history. The vibrant approach of ***Back to Babylon: 2600 Years of Jewish Life in Iraq*** will engage the community at large by surveying how, for over two millennia, Iraqi Jewry experienced all the major achievements and challenges that characterize Jewish culture: the preservation of religious traditions and the formation of a distinctive secular Jewish identity. ***Back to Babylon: 2600 Years of Jewish Life in Iraq*** is dedicated to the memory of the late Meir Basri ^{z"l} (1911-2006), the last President of the Jewish Community in Iraq: a man of letters, a poet, an economist, and a historian, whose death in London earlier this year was mourned by Iraqi Jews and Muslims alike.

The relationship between the Jewish people and Mesopotamia is a central aspect of Judaism. Abraham left the land between the Tigris and Euphrates in order to “discover himself” as the forefather of Israel. Yet, it was the road back to Babylon, after the Temple of Solomon was destroyed in 586 BCE that led the Jewish people to establish the Rabbinic tradition, the Talmud and synagogue liturgy. Babylon/Baghdad became an essential Jewish political site, the epicenter of an international and multicultural network. It was also the scene of major historical conflicts, including the *Farhud* (a pogrom in 1941), the reaction of the Arab world to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the public hanging of innocent Jews in the wake of the Six Day War. The community declined in the 1950's, when most of its members fled their homeland, but was replaced by a vibrant international network spread throughout the globe. There is no doubt that the time has come to remind both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds of the remarkable history of Babylonian Jewry.

The calendar of events includes:

- **Thursday, November 2:** Opening of the exhibitions *Baghdad Revisited: Iraqi Jewish Art and Artifacts from Private Collections* and *By the Rivers of Babylon: Photographs from the London Jewish Museum*; Screening of *The Jewish Community of Babylon* and a panel discussion on the last days of the Iraqi Jewish community (Center for Jewish History)
- **Friday, November 3:** An Iraqi-themed community Shabbat celebration and dinner (Congregation Shearith Israel).
- **Saturday, Nov. 4:** *Sounds of Baghdad. An Iraqi Jewish Musical Journey* with Israeli world music maverick Yair Dalal.
- **Sunday, November 5:** A symposium with distinguished scholars from Israel and North America, addressing the origins of the Judeo-Arabic civilization in Mesopotamia, the formation of the Babylonian Talmud, the Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic literature of Iraq, Iraqi-Jewish visual arts and the vestiges of Jewish past in Iraqi Kurdistan. (Center for Jewish History)

PHOTOGRAPHS, BACKGROUND MATERIALS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON REQUEST AND AT

www.americansephardifederation.org/sub/events/featured.asp

The **American Sephardi Federation** (ASF), founded in 1973 to support American Sephardic communities, promotes awareness and interest in Sephardic culture as an integral part of Jewish and American history. ASF maintains the only Sephardic Library & Archives and permanent Sephardic exhibition gallery in the U.S., provides rich educational and cultural public programs and publishes scholarly books, memoirs and **The Sephardic Report**. Its activities also include the annual **NY Sephardic Jewish Film Festival** and the **Broome and Allen Scholarship Fund** for Sephardic studies and scholars. ASF also supports the **Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC)** efforts to further knowledge about the human rights violations suffered by close to 900,000 Jewish refugees from Muslim countries. At www.americansephardifederation.org one can access our catalogue database of over 5,000 book titles and 33 periodicals and an online bookstore featuring historical books, videos and DVD's of Sephardic interest. The American Sephardi Federation was one of the founding partners of the **Center for Jewish History**.

The Center for Jewish History, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is home to the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Before becoming part of the Center, all five partners were long-established and highly respected individually for their vast contributions to the preservation and presentation of specific aspects of Jewish history and culture. Together they provide a combined resource and a synergy never before available to scholars, art enthusiasts, genealogists, and many other visitors interested in delving into the Jewish experience, Jewish achievements, and the Jewish identity.

**BACK TO BABYLON
2600 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN IRAQ**

BOOKING INFORMATION:

Thursday, November 2 Evening Lectures & Films: \$25 general / \$20 ASF members and students
@ Center for Jewish History 15 West 16th Street New York City

Friday, November 3 Shabbat Dinner: \$60 general / \$40 students / \$20 children
@ Congregation Shearith Israel 2 West 70th Street, New York City

Saturday, November 4 Concert: \$20 suggested donation
@ Center for Jewish History 15 West 16th Street New York City

Sunday, November 4 Conference and Lunch: \$30 general / \$25 ASF members and students
@ Center for Jewish History 15 West 16th Street New York City

4-Day Package with Discount: \$130 general / \$100 ASF members and students

Back to Babylon

2600 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN IRAQ

Opening Program of the Inaugural Series *Historic Jewish Communities in the Islamic World*

The American Sephardi Federation

with Sephardic House

cordially invites you to

Back to Babylon 2600 Years of Jewish Life in Iraq

November 2 - 5, 2006

A four-day program exploring the venerable and multifaceted culture of Iraqi Jewry.

Dedicated to the legacy of Meir Basri^{z"l}, last President of the Jewish Community in Iraq

Exhibitions

Baghdad Revisited

Iraqi-Jewish Art and Artifacts from Private Collections

By The Rivers of Babylon

Photographs from the London Jewish Museum

Leon Levy Galleries

Center for Jewish History

15 West 16th Street, New York

Opening November 2, 2006

Inaugural Benefit Dinner

Thursday, November 30, 2006

The Pierre

New York City

Honoring Leaders of the Iraqi-Jewish Community

Keynote Speaker Ezra K. Zilkha

Invitations will be sent under separate cover

Thursday, November 2
6:30 PM – 9:00 PM

Tribute to the Late Meir Basri^{z"l} *Last President of the Jewish Community in Iraq*

Professor Shmuel Moreh
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Meir Basri: A Filmed Interview
with Carole Basri

Screening of
The Jewish Community of Babylon
(Israel 1989)
Q&A with filmmaker Salim Fattal

The Farhud in Baghdad, 1941
Background and Consequences
Naim Kattan
Université du Québec, Montreal

Under Color of Law
The Ethnic Cleansing of Iraqi Jews
Carole Basri
University of Pennsylvania Law School

~~~

Friday, November 3  
4:30 PM

Shabbat Services  
followed by  
Shabbat Dinner and *Zemirot*  
in the Iraqi Tradition

*My Little Baghdad:*  
*Growing Up Iraqi in Israel*  
A talk by Professor Zvi Ben-Dor  
New York University

Congregation Shearith Israel  
2 West 70<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York City

~~~

Saturday, November 4
7:30 PM

Sounds of Baghdad
An Iraqi Jewish Musical Journey
with Yair Dalal

Sunday, November 5
11:00 am – 4:00 pm

CONFERENCE

Moderator

Professor Shmuel Moreh
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Morning Session: 11:00 – 12:30

Iraqi Jewish Cosmopolitanism and the
Compilation of the Babylonian Talmud
Professor Yaakov Elman
Yeshiva University

The Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Civilization:
Social and Cultural Life of the Jews of Iraq
Professor Norman Golb
University of Chicago

Luncheon

Afternoon Session: 1:30 – 4:00

The Emergence of Modern Hebrew
Literature in Iraq: 1735-1950

Professor Lev Hakak
University of California, Los Angeles

Vestiges of the Jewish Past
in Iraqi-Kurdistan

Impressions from Two Recent Visits
Professor Yona Sabar
University of California, Los Angeles

Visual Arts among the Jews of Iraq
Professor Shalom Sabar
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

~ Dietary rules observed for all meals ~

PROGRAM COMMITTEE

Shlomo Bakhsh
Carole Basri

Abraham & Yvonne Cohen
David E. R. Dangoor
Stella Levi

Maurice Shohet
Florence Amzallag Tatistcheff
Ezra K. Zilkha

ACADEMIC ADVISORS

Jane S. Gerber
Shmuel Moreh
Norman A. Stillman