



American Sephardi Federation

with Sephardic House

Iraq

Focus on the History of Babylonian Jewry

Babylon is **one of the birthplaces of the Jewish people** from the earliest of times, and the place where the **foundations of Judaism** as we know it were constructed. The area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, approximating modern day Iraq, can lay claim to a greater part of the history of the Jewish people, as a nation and as a religion, than any other place. Not only was it from there (Ur) that **Abraham emerged as the founder of our people** on his journey to Canaan, but it was there that the Jews had autonomy as a people for over 1,000 years, that the **Babylonian Talmud** was created, forming the framework for rabbinic Judaism, and that the synagogue and the love of learning were developed.

Today's Iraq and the war of "liberation" are a topic of conversation for people around the world. However, the fact that this is the site where the oldest, longest surviving, and certainly **one of the most influential Jewish communities in history**, resided until recently is **never mentioned** and generally forgotten. At one point in history, the number of Babylonian Jews was estimated at over a million. They were later decimated by wars, a hostile Muslim population and plagues. However, under the Ottoman Empire, and with Baghdad's special position in its midst, conditions improved significantly for the Jews, who also communicated with the Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Many reached influential positions in the government, in business and in the fields of education, culture and science.

In 1917, the British entered Baghdad, where the Jews constituted 40% of the population, which amounted to circa 200,000 people. The Jews resisted being considered a small minority in an artificially created country, Iraq, and losing their Turkish nationality. Despite assurances from the British, who appointed the Emir Faisal as the first King of Iraq in 1921, their minority status resulted in more discrimination. Their conditions worsened when Faisal's son took over in 1933. Iraq had only achieved real independence a year earlier, when it was formally admitted into the League of Nations, and was seeking international support. Due to the influence of Nazi propaganda, Jews began to find access to government jobs and institutions of higher learning severely restricted. Zionist activity abroad produced a nationalist backlash at home, and Jews found themselves having to make numerous declarations of loyalty in order to appease a mounting hostility. A pro-Axis government took power in the spring of 1941 with the support of the Iraqi army, and British troops were denied access to military bases. When the British forces arrived in the capital, the new government fled, but the British remained outside the city for several days while the Muslim population set upon the Jews. In only a few days, about 180 were killed, and many more were injured, until a curfew was finally imposed. This mass murder is remembered as the *Farhud*, and was surely inspired by Nazi ideology, which by then was firmly rooted among the Muslim population.

A lull of a few years ensued, but with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the poor showing of the Iraqi troops against it, the Jews found themselves facing government victimization and extortion, including the confiscation of property and the imposition of fines based on trumped-up charges. The few who left the country were required to pay huge sums of money, and many started to escape illegally across the mountains. Eventually, the government introduced a law allowing Jews to leave upon the surrender of their nationality, and the loss of their assets, declaring that Palestinian refugees would be occupying the homes vacated by the Jews. Massive airlifts to Israel, under the codename "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah," took place in 1951, and most of the Jews in Iraq got out with little more than the clothes on their backs. By 1952, over 130,000 had left and 6,000 remained.

In 1969, following the further embarrassment suffered by the Arab armies in the Six Day War, nine innocent Iraqi Jews were accused of spying for Israel, publicly tried and hanged in Baghdad. This occurred six months after the Baath Party seized power with Saddam Hussein as a "right hand". Later, amazingly, the same Saddam Hussein – in his "mad" drive for greatness, for himself and for Iraq, and in pursuit of the dream to "recreate Babylon" – came to believe that he needed the Jews back. Through diplomatic sources and ads in the *International Herald Tribune*, in the late 1970's he officially invited the Jewish community to return. It was surely not surprising that none answered his call.

Today, after the invasion of Iraq and the evacuation of the few remaining Jews, there is not even a handful left in the country. It is noteworthy that with the establishment of a new constitution and a new government, the Jews are the only people that are not afforded the right to return, to reclaim their citizenship and/or the vast assets lost before and during the rule of Saddam Hussein.

Earlier this year, on January 4, 2006, **the last President (1971-74) of the Jewish Community in Iraq, Meir Basri**, passed away in London at the age of 94. He was revered and commemorated not only by the Babylonian Jewish Community at large, but also by the Iraqi Muslim communities in London and elsewhere, as well as in Iraq by the Iraqi local press. He was a man of letters, a poet, a scholar, a writer, a historian and a business man. These joint expressions of admiration and love for a highly respected scholar and beloved poet were a wonderful reminder of the longstanding sentiments and values shared by the Muslims, Jews and Christians of Iraq. It is almost impossible to imagine the rebirth of a great Iraq in the future without the coexistence of Jews, Christians, Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis living and working side by side.

Today, the Babylonian Jewish community is roughly estimated at about 300,000. About 280,000 Iraqi Jews are living in Israel, while the remaining 25,000 live mainly in the US and in the UK. Most members of this community until this day show great pride in preserving their heritage and customs, including a distinctive Judeo-Arabic dialect, a Jewish language just like Yiddish and Ladino, written both in Hebrew and Arabic script.

In addition to the great impact they have had on the Jewish religion and thought throughout the Diaspora, Babylonian Jews established themselves as great businessmen, merchants, traders and politicians with profound impact throughout the Middle East and Asia. These include names like **Kadoori** in Hong Kong, **Marshall** in Singapore, **Sassoon** in India and China, **Zilkha** in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and the US, **Saatchi** in England, and so many more...

Where it began...

It all began when the powerful Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Kingdom of Judah, and eleven years later destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple (586 BCE). Most of the inhabitants were deported to Babylonia. Within forty-eight years of the destruction of Jerusalem, Babylon was conquered by the Persian King Koresh, *Cyrus the Great*, who allowed the Jews to return home and rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Forty thousand left, but the majority stayed in Babylon.

The Jewish community of Babylon strongly contributed towards the rebuilding of the structures in the Land of Israel. The High Priest Joshua, thought to be the Deutero-Isaiah, and the Prophet Ezekiel are buried in Babylon. The Babylonian *Ezra the Scribe* gave Judaism the decisive impulse that eventually produced the Pharisaic movement and the rabbinical system. He changed the Hebrew alphabet, operating towards making the Torah the central force in Jewish life. It is said of him that if the Torah had not been given to Moses, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving it. His shrine stands in Southern Iraq.

In the year 363, the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate offered Babylonian Jews the opportunity to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem in exchange for turning against their Persian rulers. They refused. As a result, a Jewish position called the *Resh Galuta* (Aramaic for "Head of the Exiles," or Exilarch) was established, to govern over all Babylonian Jewry, including the Parthian empire. The holders of the office traced their lineage back to King David, passing the position within the family, mostly from father to son, for nine hundred years.

Among the Jews of Babylon, knowledge was deemed an important acquisition. A man's standing in the community began to depend not on family and wealth, but on intellectual endeavor and achievement. The synagogue had eliminated the need for priestly mediation, and education made the Torah available to all. In the Land of Israel, Jews read the whole Torah in the synagogue over a three year cycle, while the Babylonian yearly cycle later prevailed in the Diaspora.

Although the great *Hillel, the "Babylonian,"* used to go to Jerusalem to study, the center of gravity of Jewish learning gradually shifted to Babylon. In 219 CE, Rav returned to Babylonia to found the Academy of Sura, where the *Amoraim* worked to complete the *Mishna* for many generations (about three centuries). The ensuing *Gemara* (from the Aramaic word for "completion") was developed in two versions: the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. But it is the latter that it acquired a greater influence on Judaism, partly because it focused more on issues pertaining to life in the Diaspora.

One of the main activities of the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha, and their leaders, the Geonim, was answering queries (*sheelot*) coming from Jewish communities near and far. These answers were given in *teshuvot* ("*responsa*"). The questions touched on the whole range of law, describing the plain meaning of Talmudic phrases or the order of prayers, or points of dogma or history. The answers were often read in public, in synagogues and schools, with copies made and carried to other communities. Many Geonim in the four centuries after the Muslim conquest had a great reputation throughout the Jewish world, such as Sa'adia Gaon of Sura (10th Century), whose works include the *Book of Seasons*, about the Jewish calendar, an Arabic translation of the Bible for the common people, and a philosophical justification of Judaism. Another notable Gaon was Samuel Ibn Al-Dastur who also had a daughter who was so learned that she taught the students, but had to do so from inside a building through a window, so the students below could not see her.

Though the Jews' experience of Islam was generally positive, like all non-Muslims, they suffered when their rulers were of a more fanatical disposition. Distinctive and unusual clothing to humiliate them was occasionally implemented. The Caliph Haroun el Rashid, for example, fought against the Khazars (who had converted to Judaism), but when he met military setbacks he took it out on the Jews of Iraq.

In 1401 Tamerlane, the last and greatest of the Mongols, conquered Baghdad with great loss of life, including Jewish casualties. The Mongol occupation of Iraq brought about the downfall of Babylonian Jewry as a force in the Jewish world. After turbulent times and a succession of rulers, the Ottoman Sultan, Selim the Grim, conquered much of Mesopotamia in 1516, and in 1535 the greatest Ottoman, Suleiman the Magnificent, entered Baghdad accompanied by a number of Jewish scholars and physicians. One of his predecessors, Bayezid II, had encouraged Sephardic Jews recently expelled from Spain to settle in his empire, wondering how the King of Spain could call himself wise and allow such an important and useful part of his population to leave. Suleiman was warmly welcomed by Baghdad's small Jewish community. The Ottomans were on the whole very tolerant of minorities including the Jews.

By 1950, the Jewish population of the area of Babylon was about the same as it had been 2,500 years earlier, when Koresh conquered Babylonia. But it had been many times larger during the intervening periods.

Inauguration of the Shamoan School in Baghdad (1924)



1924 – A picture taken on the occasion of the first visit of Elia Shamoan to his School in Baghdad, following his return from Shanghai surrounded by prominent members of the community, which was at its zenith, around Chief Rabbi Hakham Ezra Dangoor.

From left to right: First row (sitting): ---; Sion Nisan; ---; Abraham Hayim Somekh; Sasson Daniel; Menahem Daniel; Chief Rabbi Ezra Dangoor; Elia Shamoan; Sasson Murad; Sasson Shamoan; Abraham Hakham Nissim.

Second row; Yamen Cohen; Shimoan Moulaim Nissim; ---; Ezra Chitayat; Joseph Hakham Isaac; ---; ---; Salman Yehouda; ---; Shaoul Khazma.

Third row: Ali Ghalib Azawi; Sayid Jawad; Baroukh Khazma; Salih Yehouda; ---; Ezra Sehayik; Joseph Murad; Hougui Twena; Ezra Abdalla.

Fourth row: David Abou Roubein; Abd El Sattar; Moshe Soffer; Ezra Twena; Reouben Zelouf; Mouhamad Fatian; Moise Mayer; Rouben Y Zelouf; Gourgi Sehayik; Jacob Moulaim Nissim.