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The Jews of Baghdad, 1985.

THE JEWS OF BAGHDAD
Daniel Jeremy Silver
March 3, 1985

The Exodus is celebrated on the Passover. The giving of the law through Moses on Mt. Sinai is celebrated on Shavuot. The wilderness trek through Sinai was Trans-Jordan's celebration on Sukkot by the booths symbolic of the temporary lean-to's used on the way. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are holidays which grew up around the Temple in Jerusalem. Purim is the only holiday which is the creation of that important Jewish community which developed in the east, the area which comprises Iraq and Iran. This area and its Jewry was for many centuries the heartland of Jewish intellectual and cultural life. I speak of the first millenium of this era, but if we could have visited Baghdad fifty years ago we would have found ourselves in a sizeable Jewish community, a community somewhat larger than the present Jewish community of Cleveland and one which had existed for well over a thousand years.

In the late 1930's perhaps of the quarter million citizens of Baghdad, over 70,000 were Jews. That Jewish community had 36 synagogues, four yeshivot and 52 Jewish day schools. The population was pious and active and consisted mostly of small shopkeepers and artisans with a sizeable elite of bureaucrats and traders. In practice it was traditional, that is halachic according to Sephardic norms, and this practice was overlaid with that layer of folk custom and superstition which was usual in oriental communities. The rabbis were called hahamim. Haham means a wise man. The Great Synagogue, the Slat il Khbri, was built on a spot which Jews believed had been selected by King Jehoakin in the year 586 B.C.E. for the city's first synagogue. Jehoakin had the misfortune of being King of Judah at the time when the armies of Babylon came, conquered Jerusalem and razed The Temple. He had been exiled along with those of the nobility. Local legend had it that Jehocakin had bujilt here a synagogue out of materials brought from The Temple in Jerusalem. If this were the case, their Great Synagogue would have been not only the oldest but the original synagogue. To be sure, this is lore, not fact.

Baghdad was originally a farming village in an area where the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers run within 25 or 30 miles of each other. Archeologists have found remains here of a village which dated back to the third millenium B.C.E. and indications that this settlement remained small until the eighth century of our era when, in 750 C.E., the Abassid caliphs chose Baghdad as their capital.

The contributions of eastern Jews to the unfolding of our civilization are only now beginning to receive their due. Many of the classic elements of rabbinic Judaism were shaped by eastern Jews. This is particularly true of the Jews who lived in a small area of land which lies between the two great riverways of west Asia - the Euphrates to the west, the Tigris to the east - at that point in mid Iraq where the rivers run close to one another. Baghdad is here in the center of an area which in antiquity was criss-crossed with canals and which was, therefore, open to large-scale river transport. Cargo went from here down to the Persian Gulf and on to India, the Far East and the Horn of Africa or up the Tigris into Turkey or the Euphrates into Syria from where it could be shipped to the Mediterranean or the heartland of Russia.

This is the world Jews have for ages called Babel, Babylonia, giving to it the historic title of that early Babylonia which played such a role in our history and where kings created the first indigencous settlement of Jews by hailing her lords of Judean exiles. The prophets Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah preached to these exiles in the sixth century. Daniel is described as a courtier at the court of the Babylonian King, Nebopolassar. Nehemiah and Ezra, courtiers of the Persian kings who supplanted the Babylcnians, were provided with imperial edicts which allowed them to return to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem. In point of fact, the Torah as we now have it, is probably a creation of the Jews of Babel. The exiles took with them the traditions and around the year 400 B.C.E. Ezra brought back one of the edited scrolls to Jerusalem and established it as that community's central discipline. Purim, too, is a result of the creativity

of this eastern Jewry.

Eastern creativity did not end with Biblical times. Rabbinic Judaism, the traditional Judaism of our own day, emerged in the Holy Land in the first and second centuries, but it flourished particularly in Babel in the first millennium where Jews created our first Oxforbs and Cambridges in towns called Nisibis, Nehardea, Sura and Pumpedita, all towns within a day or two's walk of modern Baghdad. It was in these academies that the discussions took place whose conclusions now form the body of the basic text of halachic Judaism, the Babylonian Talmud.

The Muslims, Arabs whose conquests in the seventh century forever changed the world had at first tried to key their imperial capital close to their ancestral home, the Arabian Peninsula; first at Kufa and then at Damascus. But they quickly discovered what most emperors before them had known, that effective rule requires ease of communication and that there was no better place for swift contact with areas as diverse as Turkey, Egypt, North Africa and India than Babel. So when the Abbasid Dynasty came into power they moved the seat of power to a newly-built round fortress just outside the old town of Baghdad, and for several centuries the control of much of the world was centralized here.

There were Jews in Baghdad before 750 C.E. The Talmud names a third century sage as Samuel Al Bagdadi. Samuel Al Bagdadi may have lived elsewhere, but he was certainly born in Baghdad. The community was certainly a small one until the establishment of the caliphate in Baghdad when Jews were drawn to this great capital.

We Jews look at the world through our democratic prejudices, and I am all in favor of our democratic prejudices, but they tend to make us rather condescending about those countries like England where concerns of lineage, blood and family are important. Actually, few communities were any more lineage-proud than our own. During Talmudic days the Jews of the East, of Parthia and the Sassanian Empire were governed by a Resh Galuta. Resh means head, galuta is

can be translated head of the exile or exilarch. This worthy claimed to be, as did all of his successors, a direct descendant of King David. Indeed, that was the basis of his authority. Jews were willing to give their allegiance to the House of David because the House of David was all tied up with their messianic hopes.

King David became king in Jerusalem in the year 1000 B.C.E. The last Resh Galuta was deposed in Baghdad in the year 1253 C.E. when the Mongols swept down from central Asia and overwhelmed the caliphate. For 2,253 years Jews were concerned with the authenticity of a single dynasty. To this day the House of David remains the longest-lived dynasty ever to be granted suasive or real authority by any people known to history - 2,253 years.

His court was lavish and highly formal. A number of traders in the Middle East during the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries had left us memories of its ceremonial. The Resh Galuta sat enthroned and crowned. He was invested in his office by an elaborate coronation ceremony during which representatives would bow and present gifts and the two presidents of the major academies, Sura and Pumpedita, would, like the Anglican Bishop of Canterbury at the investiture of an English sovereign, perform the authorizing liturgy. The Persians, and later the Muslims, were delighted to have a single representative of the Jews. This system facilitated the governance of the various communities which comprised their empire; and the Jews were pleased to have a descendant of the House of David represent them because he personified their messianic expectations.

Ceremonial also surrounds the operation of the great academies. Sura and Pumpedita were originally in separate locations, about two days' walk from Baghdad. Each was headed by a Gaon. The title means 'the honored one.' The business of the academy was the teaching and elaboration of Talmudic law. We think of a university as a place of levis, sweaters and informal discussion. These academies were formal operations. The seventy scholars who were, in effect, the faculty sat in seven rows of ten in a careful order of precedence. During

discussion, the senior man in the bottom row spoke first and then the rest in order of seniority. You can imagine how much weight was given to the youngest, the seventieth, to speak.

The Talmud is a jumble. It consists of a series of shorthand notes of the discussions in the earlier academies of the Sassanian period. As Jewish life spread under the wide-spreading culture of the Arab world, there was a need to know what conclusions were to be drawn from these discussions. These academies brought together and published themes on the concerns to Jewish life. Many of the far-flung communities lacked anyone trained in halacha; yet, they needed to know what was required: how do we worship; whose decision is to be followed; how do we observe the sabbath; the dietary laws? They would send questions to these academies and the academy would answer. Sometimes the answers sent back by the Gaon and his faculty were simply a sentence or two or a single paragraph. Sometimes they wrote extended essays which drew together a whole area of interest and concern. These She'elot v Teshuvot represent the first step in a continuing process of codification which was carried by the rabbi for the next thousand years.

By the ninth century the Oxford and Cambridge Universities of Babel had moved in from the countryside to London, to Baghdad; Baghdad had become and would remain for several centuries the power center and the center of authority of world Jewry. This was a very special brand of Judaism, a Judaism which was pious, heavily messianic and deeply influenced by its Muslim and Eastern environment. A radical linguistic transformation took place after the Arab conquest. Heretofore, the Jews of the Middle East had spoken either Aramaic or Greek, but within a generation they were speaking Arabic. Now Arabic became their daily speech and, to a surprising degree, the language of their literature and even of their rabbinic manuals.

Arabic practices exerted a compelling influence over Jewish life.

Since this is Purim, let me cite an example as it relates to the holiday. On Purim a mother with a child born within the year would bring the child to the synagogue. The infant would carry a pushka, a little charity box, in his hand; and the mother, it didn't matter whether she was wealthy or poor, would present this pushka to everybody and those present would offer a coin. What's behind this custom? One line of explanation had it that since Purim was a gift-giving time the whole congregation in this way welcomed a new-born into the warmth of the community. Actually, the basis of this custom is more complex and reveals something of the fears and the anxieties and the cultural limitations of this world. The Megillah concludes with a letter sent by Mordecai to all the Jewish communities in which he tells them that the fourteenth day of Adar is to be celebrated as a great feast day, a day of joy, of sending of gifts to one another, to the evyonim, the poor.

If you take the aleph of evyonim, a silent letter; and transpose the aleph into an avan, the other silent letter in the Hebrew alphabet, you get a reading which tells us that gifts are to be sent to those who are thick-skinned. Who are the thick-skinned? The thick-skinned are the demons, the spirits of the night. The begging custom was a way of giving money to the demons in order to protect the child from their mischief.

About a half hour walk from the center of Baghdad you come to a shrine which lies in the middle of a grove of sycamore trees. Beneath the shrine's cupola lies a catafalque. This coffin is reputed to contain the remains of a High Priest, Joshua Ben Yehozedek. If you are up on the trivia of Biblical history, you will know that when, around 510 C.E., the Jews were first permitted to return to Jerusalem, a prophet, Haggai, commissioned Joshua Ben Yehozedek to rebuild The Temple. Even after he was associated with the messianist dreams of the Jewish people, no one has ever explained how Joshua, who lived and died in Jerusalem, happened to be buried in Baghdad. But ask the locals and they

will tell you that this is his grave. To this day each new moon Jews of Baghdad come to offer prayers at this shrine. In so doing they duplicate a practice which is pervasive in the Muslim world: attendance at the grave of saints and miracle workers where prayers are offered to these intercessors who, presumedly, in turn will present the prayers to God. Islam, theoretically, is a pure monotheism, but as it spread throughout the world it adjusted to the paganisms and the folk traditions of many other communities, almost all of whom had some tradition or saint intercessor.

The supposed grave of the prophet Ezekiel was also in the vicinity. There was also a grave of Ezra which played an interesting role in local burial customs. When a person died they would be buried in a cemetery just outside the city, but at some future pilgrimage time the family would exhume the body and transport it to the grave of Ezra or those of Ezekiel or Joshua for reburial. These were looked on as places where resurrection would take place and as holy places where the dead would be carefully protected. Such was the interplay of Muslim and of Jewish folk traditions that throughout the Middle East and North Africa Muslims often made pilgrimage to the shrines of Jewish saints and Jews often attended the shrines of Muslim saints. They shared the piety to the grave of the local holy man and sought there the answer to their prayers.

After a heyday which lasted from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, Baghdad and Bavel's Jewry fell on to hard times. The Muslim ultimately expanded beyond the ability of the Baghdad caliphs to control the extremities. Discussion was inevitable. What happened to the Muslim empire was not unlike what happened to the Roman Empire. Rome split into East and West. Islam split rule between Baghdad and Cordova, and each of these empires soon split into smaller pieces. In North Africa a Berber dynasty gained ascendancy. The Fatamids seized rule in Egypt. There was the interruption of the Crusades of the economy and communication. Increasingly, Baghdad subsided into a provincial center. In the

thirteenth century it was overrun and pillaged by the Mongols. Over the next three centuries it was a price fiercely contested between Shiite caliphs of Persia and the Turks. It was a time of troubles and tears.

Since we're in the Purim season it's interesting to note that Baghdad's Jews celebrated not one Purim as we do but three Purims. In addition to the familiar holiday, there was a Purim in the summer on the eleventh of Av and another in the late fall on the sixteenth of Tebet. Each celebrated the deliverance of Baghdadi Jewry from serious and unexpected danger. History never really repeats itself, but in both cases the danger they faced was that of Shiite fundamentalism erupting from Iran.

In 1638, three years after another Persian Shiite caliph by the name of Tbhmasp gains control over Baghdad and threatened the Jews with death unless they converted. The Ottomans under Murad IV reconquered the city. The anniversary of Murad's conquest became a Purim.

In the seventh century, a Persian Shiite dynasty, the Safavid, gained control of both Damascus and of Baghdad and threatened these Jews with extinction. Fortunately, the Ottoman Turks under Muhamed in 1733 conquered Baghdad from the Shiite Safavid Dynasty and ever after the Jews celebrated the day of his conquest as a great day of deliverance, of Purim.

Baghdad's Jews managed to survive the Middle Ages - but barely. The situation began to look up in the nineteenth century as European colonialism brought commerce, some prosperity and a post-feudal attitude to the area. People began to escape the strained medieval limitations on vocational and social movement and throughout the nineteenth century these Jewish communities grew in numbers and in prosperity.

In 1905 when the Young Turk revolution in Ankara overthrew the Ottoman sultan and established a society based on freedom of religion and of association, the Jews of the area entered a short-lived period of realized expectations.

Three Jews of Baghdad were elected to the Ankara parliament and Jews began to

make their way into all areas of government and the economy. This process of economic and political assimilation under the British who gained a mandate over Iraq after the first World War in order to protect and benefit from its oil resources. For the first three decades of this century Baghdad's Jews had reason to hope for better times. Western groups like the Alliance Israelite Universale and some British groups began to establish modern schools for the Jews of Baghdad. Literacy, in terms of ability to speak western languages, increased. A number of the children, particularly boys, were sent to school in Europe. Economically this Jewry was coming alive to modern commerce, but culturally it was still one which assumed traditional ways and where the old folk still held sway.

1932 marked the end of good times. The British gave up their mandate and the Arabs who came to power immediately began to take away the new freedoms which Jews had begun to enjoy. Jews were not the only group to be discriminated against. This period marked increased discrimination against Armenians in Syria and Kurds in Iraq. The decimation of the Jewries of the Middle Eastern center was not due entirely to the rise of Israel. Arab nationalism has been intolerant of all minorities. Look at the Armenian massacre of the early years of this century. Look at the thirty years of fighting against the Kurds. Look at Lebanon.

The west imposed national boundaries on the Middle East. Previously these countries supported a millet system of organization in which the caliph or emperor allowed the minorities to be self-governing and to settle in special areas of the city or special parts of the countryside. Now everything had to be controlled and these centers of residual power came to be seen as a danger to government.

Since the British had been the colonial rulers in Iraq, the new Iraqi Nationalist government turned increasingly to Germany for support and arms.

After 1933 the German ambassador in Baghdad began to disseminate all manner of vicious anti-semitic material; and Iraqi newspapers and literary groups picked up much of this. The universities expelled their Jews, faculty age. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion became required reading in a number of schools. Long before the issue became Zionism, nationalism began to take to its heart German-imported anti-semitism and added it to the passions of their own tradition, the situation progressively worsened for Baghdad's Jews until the second World War.

The leaders of Iraq during the war's early stages were in spirit with the Axis. In May of 1941 there were violent pogroms against the Jews of Baghdad: hundreds were wounded; thirty were killed; over ten million dollars' worth of Jewish institutions and businesses were looted and destroyed. May 1941 marks the beginning of the end of this age-old community. The British reimposed order, but the situation was really out of hand. When United Nations voted to establish a Jewish State in Palestine, Iraq became and has remained an intransigent opponent. Iraq is still at war with Israel. Iraq has not ever admitted the existence of a cease-fire. After 1947 the Iraqi government prohibited the exit of Jews, but such was the difficulty of their lives that some 20,000 fled on foot across the mountains into Iran. Some three years later, in 1951, not knowing what to do with this sizeable Jewish community, 130 or 140 thousand Jews lived in the province of Baghdad alone, the Iraqi government decided to give the Jews a choice: exit and expropriation or a life worse than death. They could take a single suitcase with them. 116,000 Jews left within two months.

After 1953 less than 2,000 Jews remained in a community which just five years before had numbered 80,000. Why the few who stayed remained no one really knows. Some wanted desperately to hold on to their property, but their property was soon expropriated. Some were too old or feeble. Soon there were show trials and arbitrary arrests. By 1985 less than 100 Jews lived in the city of Baghdad.

Iraq has not been an easy country for anyone these last decades. Iraq has been a killing ground, not just for Jews. There has been a nearly 35-year war with the Kurds in the mountains to the east. There's been a nearly 35-year war of attrition against the Armenians in their settlements to the north. There is now the nearly four-year old war with Iran on the east. Each of these killing ground actions was initiated by the government in Baghdad. Iran did not make war against Iraq. Iraq made war against Iran. The Kurds did not fight for independence against Iraq. Iraq set out to destroy the Kurdish and the Armenian communities. Baghdad's Jews did not suffer inordinately. They suffered greatly because of the utter lack of humanity of the local government.

Is there a future for this community? If you believe in Purim perhaps there is. Stranger things than Purim have happened in the Middle east which is a world in which stability and security are rare, in which sudden changes based upon the willfulness of a leader do happen. But given fifty years of propagandizing and anti-semitic stereotyping, given the Muslim habit of considering anyone non-Muslim an infidel, given the fanaticism of resurgent Arab nationalism and its passionate fear of the west and modernity and the importation into Iraq of the worst of the anti-semitic traditions of Europe, you have a witches' brew which suggests that it may be a long time before the days of sadness become days of joy.

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Date March 3, 1985Service no. II

UP

GOP

(SOLO)

Opening
anthemShewitz: Psalm 122

Bar'chu

Trad.

Sh'ma

Trad.

V'ahavta

Braun

Mi chamocha

Ephros

Tzur

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Trad.

Avot

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K'dusha

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SulzerRossi

Anthem/

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(Sermon - School presentation)

Aleinu

Trad.

V'ne-emar

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Amen

#1 - TO CONG.

Hymn

PURIM MEDLEY

Amen

**

REMARKS