

## **Shabbat Zachor: The Other Refugees**

March 15, 2003

Today is Shabbat Zachor, a day we are commanded to remember and to reflect upon our history and our essence, in anticipation of the upcoming joyous celebration of Purim. In being commanded to remember the efforts of the Amalekites to wipe out our people, we are reminded that there is no celebration in Judaism without its price.

On the holiday of Purim, we rejoice in our triumph over an individual who had accused the Jews of being separate and apart from the rest of the people, and who wanted to annihilate them as a result.

But this stuff about blaming Jews for the ills of society is so distant and remote. No one in any position of prominence today would ever level such a preposterous charge against the Jewish people. That kind of thing only happened in ancient history. Today people are much more sophisticated and educated. No one today would ever accuse Jews of trying, for example to manipulate the foreign policy of a country. And today, Jews need not worry any longer about the scourge of anti-semitism, for it is so clearly a thing of the past.

It seems the advice of our sages – to remember and recall, to teach and never to forget is advice we should heed.

So what should we focus on remembering on this Shabbat zachor?

The local Jewish Community Council has asked rabbis in the community to use the occasion of this Shabbat to bring to the attention of our congregants the plight of the Jews from Arab lands. The story of Purim takes place in Persia, which once was home to a thriving Jewish community. In fact, throughout much of the Moslem and Arab world, Jews lived for centuries, where they created a rich and thriving culture, and where they contributed significantly to the economic well-being and overall prosperity of the countries where they lived.

As someone pointed out, in explaining the ills that are currently plaguing Iraqi society – a devastated economy and very poor health care, they said it shouldn't be so surprising. After all, no wonder they have such a terrible economy and health care, they don't have any Jewish doctors or businessmen there.

But that was not always the case. The roots of the Jewish people in the Arab world go back over 2,600 years. In fact, Jews were in what we call today the Arab world over a thousand years before these territories were by the Arabs. Yet today there is hardly any trace of Jews or Jewish life in the region.

Although there were some periods of relative tolerance, Jews were often discriminated against and persecuted, just as was the case of Ashkenazic Jews. In the ninth century, the Jews of Iraq were forced to wear a distinctive yellow patch on their clothing, and faced other discriminatory taxes.

Jews first came to what is currently Libya in the third century, BCE, and thrived when Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing the Inquisition, and Italian Jews crossing the Mediterranean arrived. There once were vibrant communities in Aden, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other nations, with roots dating back literally 2,000 years and more.

At one time, there were close to a million Jews living in Arab lands. Today there are fewer than 5,000, mostly concentrated in two moderate countries—Morocco and Tunisia.

What happened to these Jews? Did they disappear? Are they living in refugee camps? In each instance, they were rescued and airlifted, usually to Israel. Jews around the world helped them resettle and start new lives. They have never been allowed to return to the countries where they and their families lived for centuries, where they rose to such prominence. Forced to leave so hastily, they left behind considerable assets, homes, furniture, businesses, bank accounts, shops, inventories, communal institutions, none of which can be recovered, and all of which has effectively been stolen.

We Jews make a mistake when we do not tell this story, when we forget our people's past. Why does the world obsessively speak only of the Palestinian refugees—but totally ignore the Jewish refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars?

Why is the world left with the impression that there is only one refugee population from the Arab conflict with Israel, when, in fact, there are two refugee populations? In fact, there were more Jews who left Arab countries, than the other way around, and you can be sure the property assets were a lot more as well.

Jews from Sephardic countries have organized gatherings and petitions, arranged exhibitions, appealed to the United Nations, and met with officials from just about every Western government to raise the issue. But it is as if they are the forgotten Jews, and that is what we must remember on this Shabbat Zachor.

Night Line -- Margalit – My mom's from Iraq. She and her family were kicked out. We want our stuff.

One reason the plight of these Jews is so little known is in part, probably because they picked up the pieces of their shattered lives after their hurried departures, and moved on. Despite discrimination and hardship in Israel, or elsewhere, they quickly succeeded in rebuilding their lives.

One cannot help but contrast what happened to the Jewish refugees with what happened to the Palestinians. They were manipulated and placed in refugee camps, where they have been encouraged to stay for generations. The UN, with funds from Western nations, and not a single penny from any Arab nation, does not try to resettle them. To do so, would not serve the political purposes of the Arab world. Even when, after the Oslo Accords of 1993 brought these camps under full Palestinian Authority control, the refugee camps were not dismantled.

There have been hundreds of millions of refugees throughout history. There have been massive exchanges of populations as a result of war and territorial adjustments. Millions of people were

displaced when Britain partitioned India and Pakistan in 1947, and Greece and Turkey experienced major exchanges earlier in the century. Sooner or later, just about all of them found new homes and launched new lives.

David Harris of the AJC wrote a piece about the plight of the Jew from Arab lands. This is what he said:

I may be a forgotten Jew, but my voice will not remain silent. It cannot, for if it does, it becomes an accomplice to historical denial and revisionism.

I will speak out because my ancestors deserve no less.

I will speak out because my glorious age-old tradition warrants it.

I will speak out because I will not allow the Arab conflict with Israel to be defined unfairly through the prism of one refugee population only, the Palestinian.

I will speak out because the injustice inflicted on me must, once and for all, be acknowledged and addressed, however long that process may take.

I will speak out because what happened to me is now being done, with eerie familiarity, to another minority group in the region, the Christians, and once again I see the world averting its eyes, as if denial ever solved anything.

I will speak out because I refuse to be a forgotten Jew.

And so, on this Shabbat zachor, I urge you, let us remember them, and this part of our history.

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