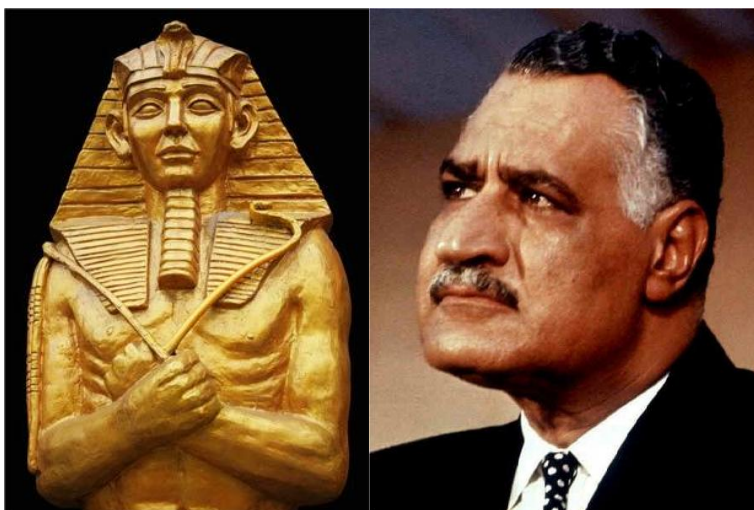


Growing Up Under Pharaoh

The Jews of Egypt from Biblical to Modern Times

Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi



I am a Jew, born and raised in Egypt.
Let me tell you right away: I was born in sin.

Why so? Because three times after the biblical exodus from Egypt God commanded us: Thou shalt never again dwell permanently in the Land of Egypt. [Deut. 17:16; Deut. 28:68; Ex. 14:13] This is the 601st of our 613 commandments, as listed by Maimonides, the great rabbi and philosopher who was probably the most illustrious Jew from Egypt.

So it looks like I blew it from day one. I was born in Cairo, Egypt, in early September 1949, a permanent dweller. A few days later it was Yom Kippur, and already I was learning to beat my breast in repentance: *For the sin that we have committed by dwelling permanently in the Land of Egypt.*

I was forced out after the Six-Day War in November 1967, at age 18, and came to the United States as a refugee. I have lived there ever since.

Jews have a long history in Egypt. Let's start at the very beginning: Biblical times.

The first Jew to live permanently in Egypt was the biblical Joseph, some 3,800 years ago. He didn't have a choice: He was sold into slavery there. He rose to become Pharaoh's right-hand man and saved the country from a devastating famine. He then brought his father, Jacob, and his entire family there -- 70 people, all the Jews of the time!

Egypt later enslaved the Jews, but nevertheless they increased to some three million. Torah tells us there were 603,550 men. [Numbers 1:46] With their families, the Talmud estimates their total was about three million. Then Moses, guided by God, took them out and brought them to the Land of Israel, 3,500 years ago.

Yet many Jews returned to live in Egypt.

We have documents in Aramaic describing the lives of a community of Jewish soldiers stationed in Egypt for the Persian Empire, about 650 BCE.

When the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and conquered the Kingdom of Judah in 597 BCE [2 Kings 25:26, Jeremiah 43:5-7], large numbers of Jews took refuge in Egypt. The Book of Jeremiah tells us they settled in places such as Migdol, Tahpanhes, Noph, and Pathros. [Jeremiah 44:1]

Then the Greeks came. Ptolemy I, a general of Alexander-the-so-called-Great, conquered Judea in 318 BCE. He expelled 120,000 Jews to Egypt, following Alexander's policy of homogenizing the people in his conquered lands to turn them into a single people. The historian Josephus tells us that other Jews went there of their own accord, when they heard how fertile the soil was and how liberal Ptolemy was.

When the city of Alexandria was founded in 332 BCE, Jews received two of the five districts. They were very wealthy. This caused intense judeophobia among their neighbors. Envy and jealousy has always been the primary, if not the only, cause of antisemitism.

Sources tell us of a million Alexandrian Jews some 2,000 years ago, under the Greeks, then the Romans. Times of persecution alternated with times of peace. They served in the Army, and sources speak of 30,000 Jewish soldiers at the time of the Ptolemies.

The Jews of Egypt staged a massive revolt against Rome in the years 114-117, between the two large revolts in Israel in the years 70 and 135.

Emperor Trajan suppressed it and slaughtered 50,000 of them. [Josephus, the Jewish War Book 2.495ff]

The Talmud links these Roman killings to the violation of the commandment not to live in Egypt:

Whoever has not seen the Double Colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has not seen the glory of Israel. It was like a huge basilica that contained twice the number of men who went out from Egypt, and there were 71 golden armchairs for 71 Sages, and each chair was no less than 21 talents of gold. And a wooden pulpit was in the middle of the palace where the attendant of the congregation stood with a scarf in his hand, and when the time came in the prayer to respond "Amen," he raised the flag, [so those who couldn't hear because of the great crowd could know when to respond] and the whole people said "Amen." And they did not sit mixed; rather the goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, coppersmiths and weavers all sat separately. And when a poor man went in, he recognized his fellow-tradesmen and went to them, and received work to support himself and his family. Abaye said: And they were all killed by [Emperor Trajan in 117]. Why were they so punished? Because they transgressed the passage, "You shall not return [to Egypt] any more" [Deut. 17:16] and they did return. (Sukkah 51b)

This, and also assimilation, caused Alexandrian Jewry to disappear.

How could Jews justify living in Egypt in spite of the commandment not to do so? Over time, some commentators softened the commandment. First, the Talmud allowed temporary returns:

You may not return [to Egypt] to dwell there, but for the purpose of business or war you may return. [Sanhedrin Y 10:7]

Some said the commandment only applies to the entire Jewish people, not to a subset. Others said it applies only to Jews leaving *Israel*, not any other country, for Egypt. The Radbaz argued that if you are forced to stay in Egypt by the government you must comply. Rabbenu Bahya said it applied only in biblical times. The Semag and Ritva said the prohibition no longer applies because today's Egyptians are not the descendants of those who lived in Pharaoh's day. Ritva added that the prohibition applies only when Jews rule the Land of Israel. (Note that they didn't then, but do now!)

Let's now move on to the history of the Jews in Egypt since biblical times. Information on the subject comes mostly from the Cairo Genizah, a treasure trove of some 280,000 Jewish manuscripts found in the late 19th century in the genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue and the Bassatine cemetery where my father and ancestors are buried. The oldest document

there is from the year 870. The documents were bought and housed at Cambridge University, and also at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Manchester. The Genizah existed, because according to Jewish tradition, documents with name of God may not be destroyed, but must be stored in a *genizah*.

The Cairo Genizah attests to a long unbroken Jewish presence in Egypt. There were good times and bad times. And then there were none.

When the Roman Empire became Christian, the Jews of Egypt were harassed by the dominant Christians of Egypt. They called themselves Copts, and claimed descent from the ancient Egyptians. They are currently some 10% of the population of Egypt. Because of this bad experience, when Islam was born, the Jews welcomed the Arab invasion, which came in 639 CE. Some Jews from Arabia even emigrated to Egypt with the Islamic conquest. The Genizah has a letter from Muhammad, the Islamic prophet, to the Jewish Banu Janba tribe in 630 CE, saying, "If you will remain loyal, we will be obligated to honor your respectable people and to forgive all your past offenses." The Arab general Amr ibn el 'As (عمر ابن العاص), reported 40,000 Jews in Alexandria in 641 CE when he conquered it.

A new sect of Judaism, called Karaism, founded about 760 CE, flourished in Egypt. Egypt was one of its largest centers. Karaites are Jews who reject the Talmud in favor of a literal interpretation of the Torah. I grew up around them and some were my classmates and friends. They had their own parallel Jewish institutions. Intermarriage with them was forbidden, but isn't anymore today. Maimonides fought their influence on mainline Jews. They made up 40% of the Jews in their heyday, the years 900-1100, [Salo Wittmayer Baron], but today they number less than 50,000 and live mostly in Israel. In 1954, Egypt executed an Egyptian Jew for Zionist activities in the Lavon affair. His name was Moshe Marzouk and he was a Karaite.

Great Jewish Sages lived in Egypt over the centuries. Saadia Gaon (882-942), was born and raised in Egypt. Maimonides (1138-1204) emigrated to Egypt in 1168 and did his most significant work there, such as the Mishneh Torah and the Guide for the Perplexed. His descendants stayed in Egypt. His grandson told a visiting rabbi that his grandfather signed some letters "Moshe ben Maimon, who violates the commandment not to dwell in Egypt

every day”. [Reported by Rabbi Ishtori Haparchi (1280-1366), in *Kaftor v'Ferah*, ch. 5] But no such letters have survived.



There was Rabbi Yaakov Berav (1474-1546), who was born in Spain and became a rabbi in Cairo. The famous Radbaz (רדב"ז) (1479-1573), born in Spain, was Chief Rabbi of Egypt for 40 years (1517-1557). Betzalel Ashkenazi (1520-1592) was born in Israel but spent most of his life in Egypt. The great mystic and kabbalist Isaac Luria, known as the Arizal (1534-1572), was born in Jerusalem but grew up in Egypt. And, in modern times, Ovadiah Yosef, the influential former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, was vice-Chief Rabbi of Egypt and head of the Cairo religious court, its *bet din*, in the late forties (1947-1949).

In the 12th century, Muslims made heavy use of the skills of the Jews. For example, Maimonides was Sultan Saladin's personal physician (~1170). Another Jew, Abu Mansur, was physician to caliph Al-Hafiz (1131-49). A famous Jewish eye doctor named Abu al-Fada'il ibn al-Nakid practiced in Egypt in the 12th century. In 1112, a Jew named Abul Munaga ibn Sha'yah headed the Department of Agriculture. He built a device to control the flow of water in the various canals of the Nile River. It is called "Bahr Abil Munaga" after him. They accused him of spending too much state money for it, jailed him and he had to buy his way out. In 1137, the Vizier, Al-Malik al-Afdal appointed a Jewish master of finances. His enemies brought him down and he lost everything. His successor tried to throw all the Jews out of Egypt.

In the 13th-16th centuries, under the Mamelukes (1250-1517) Jews in Egypt fared less well. Sultan Baibars (1260-77) doubled the *gezya* (جِزْيَة), i.e., the tribute all Jews had to pay as "dhimmis" (ذممي), as "protected people". He

then blamed the Jews for starting a plague and resolved to burn them all. He even dug a ditch to bury them. In the end he relented and instead exacted a heavy tribute, killing many while collecting it. In 1325 large fires erupted in Cairo. The Jews were falsely accused of starting them, and they were extorted 75,000 pieces of gold.

The Ottomans ruled Egypt in the 16th-20th centuries, from 1517 to 1922. Under their rule, we came close to genocide in 1524. Ahmed Pasha, the Viceroy, decided to exterminate all the Jews of Cairo unless an impossible sum of money was paid to him, much more than all their assets combined. But he was also plotting against the Ottoman Emperor, Suleiman II. On the deadline he set for the Jews, the 28th of Adar, he was assassinated by troops loyal to the Emperor, and the Jews were miraculously saved. Since that time, a scroll recounting that story was read in Egyptian synagogues on that day, *Purim Mitzrayim*, the Purim of Egypt, celebrated in addition to the traditional Purim.

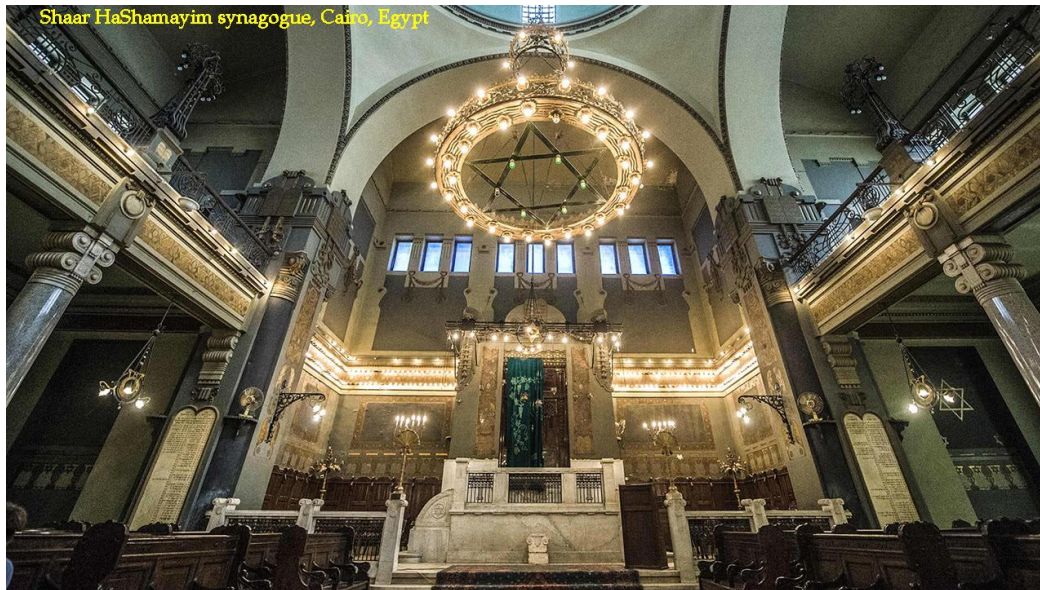


Shabbetai Tzvi, a candidate Messiah, married in Cairo in 1660. The Christians also threw their stones: Between 1840 and 1908, there were at least eight blood libel accusations against the Jews in Egypt, to harass them.

Let us now move on to the history of the Jews of Egypt in modern times. Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, more Jews were invited to Egypt by Viceroy Mohammed Ali and his successors. The Jews came, including all my grandparents, and helped usher in an economic miracle. They produced merchants, bankers, industrialists, builders, physicians, ministers, intellectuals, nationalists, – too many to list. They built modern Egypt. All large department stores in Egypt but one were founded and owned by Jews.

The community was diverse. There were poor Jews, middle-class Jews, rich Jews, almost in equal numbers. We were in the middle. My father had a small clothing store in downtown Cairo, employing two people, not far from our apartment.

My family, like so many Jewish families outside the US, is a linguistic and cultural zoo. My native language is French. I was educated in French, then in Italian, then in both French and Arabic, then in English. These switches were all forced on me by the political winds. My brother was educated in French, then in Arabic. My two sisters were educated in English. My father's native language was Ladino -- Judeo-Spanish -- and he was educated in Italian. My mother's native language was Arabic, and she was educated in French. Her family hailed from Syria and Lebanon. My grandfather was from the island of Rhodes and my grandmother from Salonica, Greece, where Greek was spoken. My great-grandfather, Rabbi Yomtob Mizrahi, was from Smyrna, Turkey, where he built a synagogue and spoke Turkish. And, of course, everybody went to services in the synagogue and prayed in Hebrew! By the age of 10 I knew something of five languages.



With such a diversified background, it's impossible for me to be brief when asked the obligatory "Where are you from?" I have to schedule between 20 and 30 minutes for that process. Here is a typical exchange:

-Mr Mizarhi! That's an interesting accent you have! Where are you from?

-My accent is French.

-French! I took French in high school. What part of France are you from?

-I am not French. I am Italian.

-Italian! Wow. I should have guessed "Mizarhi" is an Italian name. So did you live in France or in Italy?

-Neither. I was born and raised in Egypt.

-Egypt! I've always wanted to go there and see the Pyramids. And frankly, just between the two of us, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Arab side, and not the other side, if you know what I mean.

-I am not an Arab. My name, MIZ-RA-HI, is Hebrew. I am Jewish.

-Jewish! But... How come you...

And so on, and so forth. Sometimes I try to make it short and say:

I was born and raised in Egypt, in a Jewish Italian French-speaking family, and now I am an American.

But it doesn't work. Invariably, the response is: "Whoa! Whoa! Not so fast! You say you are... French?"

I tried other tacks:

-I am an African-American. I was born and raised in Africa.

-I am a Hispanic-American. My ancestors were Spanish.

For some reason, they don't work either.

We were mostly a mix of real Sephardic Jews, or descendants of the Jews of Spain; and Mizrahi Jews, or Eastern Jews, who never left the Middle East. My father was a real Sephardic Jew. His name was Mizrahi, even though he was not Mizrahi. My mother was Mizrahi, even though her name was not Mizrahi. Clear? (Pay attention! There will be a test afterwards!) So, being half Sephardic and half Mizrahi, I had no choice but to marry an Ashkenazic woman. She is known in Gentile circles as "Ms Rahi".

More than 90% of the Jews were denied Egyptian citizenship, even if born in the country. They were "stateless": they had no nationality, and therefore had no protection from any entity. Some were able to claim a European citizenship through their descentance. My family was Italian because my grandfather was born and raised in the island of Rhodes, which was for a time administered by Italy. Both my parents were born in Egypt, but none of my grandparents.

Numerically, the Jews of Egypt were close to 100,000 strong in 1948, when Israel was created and Egypt promptly sent its army to destroy it. Then the noose began to tighten around their collective neck. Only 10,000 remained after the 1956 Suez war. Only 1,000 remained at the time of the Six-Day War in 1967, including myself. I was among the last 1%. I left in early November 1967, one of the last Jews to leave Egypt. Less than 20 remain today, mostly elderly intermarried women.

How did the noose tighten? The larger businesses were seized and controlled by a government agent. The owner became a temporary employee paid a small salary, long enough to teach the job to his successors. Import and export licenses were revoked, including my father's, which crippled his small business. Government employees were fired. Many institutions were closed to Jews. Jews were blacklisted and could not find jobs. Bribes and protection money were demanded. Bank accounts were frozen. Surveillance was tight and none-too-subtle. Fear was pervasive. Our *mezuzot* were on the inside, never on the outside. Foreign travel was banned, unless it was one-way only: Out. Hundreds

were arbitrarily arrested, detained, tortured, humiliated, expropriated, and expelled, forced to sign papers saying they were “voluntarily” relinquishing all their assets and would never come back to Egypt. There were riots, killings, bombings and arson in the Jewish Quarter. There was no accountability: The Jews were mostly stateless, so they had no protection, no one to speak for them.

Some people have pointed out to me that many foreigners and even some Egyptians received similar treatments. That is correct. But, as Elie Wiesel said in a different context, “Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims”.

You can imagine the incongruity of sitting at the *seder* table year after year, in Cairo, Egypt, to celebrate how God took us out of the Land of Egypt, the land of slavery, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with signs and miracles, and wondering: What are we still doing here, when things are getting from bad to worse year after year?

In all, there were 850,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries, from Morocco to Yemen, not counting their descendants. Ancient communities uprooted one after the other. So why doesn't the world know about us?

Because when all these things were happening to us, CNN and *The New York Times* were not there to splash our misery all over the evening news and the front pages. The United Nations was not passing resolutions highlighting our plight. After all, we were just Jews, and that's what Jews do, right? Roam the world as eternal wanderers, starting over from scratch in foreign lands again and again, sometimes two or three times in a lifetime. And I do mean “scratch”, as in “zero”, as in “zip”. Since I left Egypt, I earned every penny I spent.

Also, Israel and the Jewish communities throughout the world did not let us rot in refugee camps, teaching us hatred, keeping us at subsistence levels, denying us citizenship, inciting us to commit terrorist acts, and using us as political pawns, as the Arabs did with their Palestinian brethren. They welcomed us with open arms, gave us rights and citizenship, and allowed us to have a dignified fresh start.

The hardest part of growing up in Egypt was seeing all my friends and entire huge extended family disappear around me one by one, year after

year. I started this quiet continuous mourning process when my first girlfriend had to leave Egypt. We were all of seven years old. In the end, only my parents and I remained. My father was one of those Jews who say, "This is my home, this is where I was born, and this is where I will die. Let's trust that things will improve." Sometimes this is the right attitude to have, and sometimes it is the wrong attitude. It's not always clear ahead of time. My father died in Egypt in 1973, and at that time my mother came to live with us, and had the joy of seeing her grandchildren grow around her for twenty years.

The second-hardest part was the constant barrage of propaganda that insinuated itself into the school curriculum. It masqueraded as "Arabic literature" or "government", or "civic instruction". That's when I was forced to memorize and recite Arabic texts filled with anti-Western and anti-Israel diatribes, sometimes crossing the line into antisemitism. I still have recurrent nightmares about those experiences. For example, one of the many "poems" I was forced to recite talked about how "Beautiful Palestine will soon become a homeland for us and a mass graveyard for the Zionists". I was thirteen in that particular instance. This was my substitute bar mitzvah. As the community disintegrated around me, I had no opportunity for any formal Jewish education. I never heard any talk of peace or accommodation with the Jews. Then as now, the airwaves and the press were filled with venom.

When the Six-Day War came in June 1967, all Jewish males ages 18 to 60 were jailed. They faced sadistic torture and humiliation under appalling conditions, as was later documented by survivors. My family was spared that because I was a few months shy of my 18th birthday, my father was over 60, and the rest of my extended family had already left years before.

I had to endure four months of hostile bureaucracy and uncertainty until I got my exit visa, my permission to leave. If they didn't want us, why didn't they just let us go? It went without saying that they would take everything we owned, so why didn't they hurry up so they could steal it faster? I don't know. Maybe they thought we possessed buried treasures and wanted us to turn them over. From Pharaoh to modern Syria to the defunct Soviet Union, our tormentors said, "Yes, we hate the Jews, but we won't let them go. We prefer to enslave them, exploit them, hold them hostage."

Finally, on October 20th, 1967, I got my exit visa. Pharaoh decided to let *this* Jew go. It gave me two weeks to leave. On both sides of the exit visa stamp, there was a red “Y” in Arabic between quotation marks, added by hand in red ink. It stood for *Yahudi* -- Jew. It was a signal to those who would later check this visa to harass me as much as possible, which they did.

Years later, when I started having children, I stuck this exit visa in our family Passover Haggadah, next to the traditional words:

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם

B'chol dor vador, hayyav adam lir'ot et 'atsmo, k'illuhu yatsa mimmitzrayim.

In every generation, every Jew must consider that *he, himself* was *personally* rescued from Egypt.

That's always been easy for *me* to say!

It's only now that Jews from Arab countries are beginning to speak out about their experiences. Before, the wounds were too fresh, the fear of speaking out was still there, and we were too busy learning to survive and build a future in our new environments. And we couldn't speak our new language well enough! Also, as we age, we feel the need to record our history for posterity. And, as the news media choose to strongly highlight the Palestinian side, we feel the need to present the other side of that same coin.

Many groups have been formed recently in communities with large populations of Jews from Arab countries, many conferences organized. The American Sephardi Federation is urging us to speak out. A “Historical Society of Jews from Egypt” has been formed in Brooklyn, with a web site at hsje.org. It is attempting to retrieve our Judaica artifacts from the Egyptian government, so far with no success.

The Jews of Egypt are now dispersed all over the world. My large family used to live inside one square mile in Cairo. Now they live in Israel, the United States, Australia, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, and I am probably forgetting some. Such is the lot of the Jew.

Israel took in 35,000 Jews from Egypt, Brazil 15,000, France 10,000, the US 9,000, Argentina 9,000, and the rest went to other countries, such as

the UK, Canada, or Australia. Not one -- not one! -- has gone back to live in Egypt. Some have gone back to visit, but most don't even want to do that, including myself.

To this day, Egypt is unrepentant. Egypt stole billions from its Jews, forced them to leave with nothing, and made no restitution. Egypt never acknowledged its evil treatment of Jews, much less apologized for it. Egypt never recognized, in its media or its history books, the great contribution the Jews have made to their country of birth. Egypt even refuses to return simple items that tell our story: Torah scrolls, prayerbooks, libraries, Judaica artifacts, even copies of the plain rabbinical archives that tell us who we are and who our ancestors were!

The Jews are gone from Egypt, but Egypt continues to demonize them, in its press and media, mosques and churches, frequently not even bothering to use the fig leaf of criticizing Israel.

Some Egyptians and others even have the gall to claim the Jews were not really expelled, but left of their own accord. First, that is false: Thousands of Jews were summarily rounded up and expelled. The others were tacitly told:

“You may stay in Egypt. But no one will be allowed to give you a job, so you may starve to death. If you have a private business, we may seize it at any time. If tensions with the Zionist entity rise, we may decide to throw you in jail for years on end with no charges. We may freeze your bank account any time we please, so you will not have access to your money. You may not travel abroad or to many parts of the country. You may not import or export anything. You will not be allowed to join any club, society or association. If you are asked for protection money, you must give it or else. You will face a barrage of anti-Semitism in the media. Your mail will be opened, coming or going, and may be confiscated. You will never be allowed to become Egyptian, but will remain stateless, and as such will not be able to claim protection from any embassy. If all this suits you, *ahlan wesahlan* (welcome), we are a hospitable people and don't discriminate. If you wish to leave, we will let you, provided you abandon all your belongings to us and tell us where you have hidden your treasures.”

That is an *expulsion*. There is no difference between “expelled” and “forced out”. The Holocaust deniers are spawning children.

I bear no animosity towards those who were not personally involved in doing this to us. If we Jews wasted time hating collectively all the groups that have wronged us in the past, we wouldn't be doing anything else. We would never have been able to contribute to human progress as we have. It's well known that hatred destroys the haters first. We Jews roll with the punches and move on.

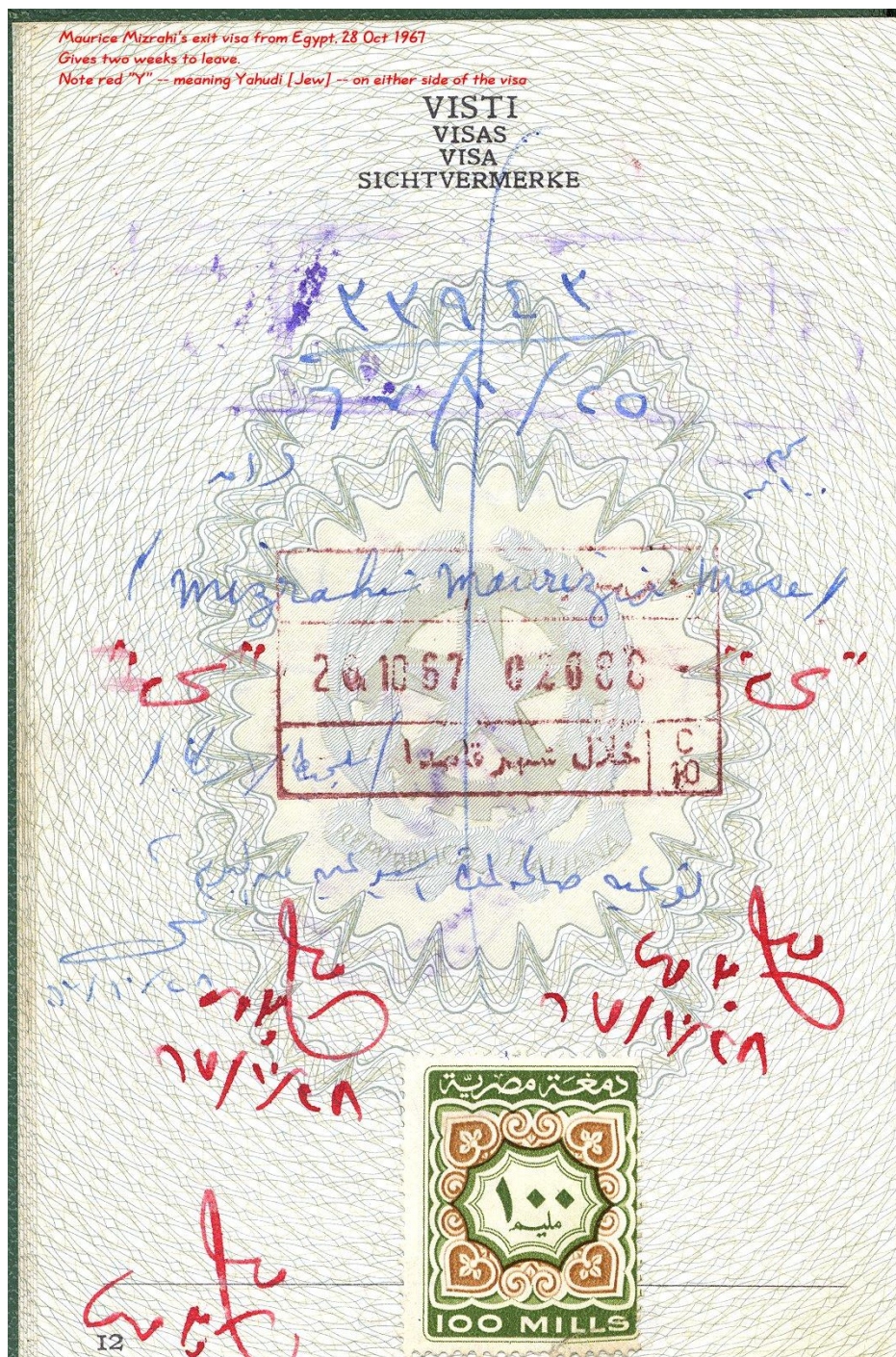
I went to school with Christian and Muslims Arabs. I still talk to them every day and have been for years since the Internet came of age. I also talk to them on the phone -- in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and wherever else they live. They showed a lot of concern for my welfare on 9/11, when Arab terrorists ran those planes into our buildings. As long as we avoid discussing politics or religion, relations are very cordial and we treasure the memories of being schoolboys together in difficult times. *At the personal level, relations are always good.* That's the way it is in the Middle East. People are friendly, hospitable, and in private they'll tell you what you want to hear. In public, however, they will either say nothing or go with the flow, usually out of fear. So you can never be sure what they are *really* thinking.

Let me end on a positive note. The Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. The Jews of Egypt are happier out of Egypt than they could ever have been in Egypt, even under the best of circumstances. Most did well for themselves. Some, who left in middle age, had difficulties adapting, but all agree that leaving gave a better life to their descendants, as events have shown.

In conclusion, Egypt is practically *judenrein* today, free of Jews for the first time since biblical days.

Maybe the commandment not to dwell in Egypt meant exactly what it said.

And God always ultimately gets what He wants.



הנה לא־יגום ולא יישן שומר ישראל

Hinne! Lo yanum v'lo yishan shomer Yisrael.

Behold! The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. [Psalms 121:4]