

Letter from a Forgotten Jew



AJC Global Jewish
Advocacy

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LETTER FROM A FORGOTTEN JEW

I am a forgotten Jew.

My roots are nearly 2,600 years old, my ancestors made landmark contributions to world civilization, and my presence was felt from North Africa to the Fertile Crescent — but I barely exist today. You see, I am a Jew from the Arab world. No, that's not entirely accurate. I've fallen into a semantic trap. I predated the Arab conquest in just about every country in which I lived. When Arab invaders conquered North Africa, for example, I had already been present there for more than six centuries.

Today, you cannot find a trace of me in most of this vast region.

Try seeking me out in Iraq.

Remember the Babylonian exile from ancient Judea, following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE? Remember the vibrant Jewish community that emerged there and produced the Babylonian Talmud?

Do you know that in the ninth century, under Muslim rule,

we Jews in Iraq were forced to wear a distinctive yellow patch on our clothing — a precursor of the infamous Nazi yellow badge — and faced other discriminatory measures? Or that in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, we faced onerous taxes, the destruction of several synagogues, and severe repression?

And I wonder if you have ever heard of the *Farhud*, the breakdown of law and order, in Baghdad in June 1941. As an AJC specialist, George Gruen, reported:

In a spasm of uncontrolled violence, between 170 and 180 Jews were killed, more than 900 were wounded, and 14,500 Jews sustained material losses through the looting or destruction of their stores and homes. Although the government eventually restored order...Jews were squeezed out of government employment, limited in schools, and subjected to imprisonment, heavy fines, or sequestration of their property on the flimsiest of charges of being connected to either or both of the two banned movements. Indeed, Communism and Zionism were frequently equated in the statutes. In Iraq the mere receipt of a letter from a Jew in Palestine [pre-1948] was sufficient to bring about arrest and loss of property.

At our peak, we were 135,000 Jews in 1948, and we were a vitally important factor in virtually every aspect of Iraqi society. To illustrate our role, here is what the *Encyclopedia Judaica* wrote about Iraqi Jewry: “During the 20th century, Jewish intellectuals, authors, and poets made an important contribution to the Arabic language and literature by writing books and numerous essays.”

By 1950, other Iraqi Jews and I were faced with the revocation of citizenship, seizure of assets, and, most ominously, public hangings. A year earlier, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Sa’id had told the British ambassador in Amman of a plan to expel the entire Jewish

community and place us at Jordan's doorstep. The ambassador later recounted the episode in a memoir entitled *From the Wings: Amman Memoirs, 1947-1951*.

Miraculously, in 1951, about 100,000 of us got out, thanks to the extraordinary help of Israel, but with little more than the clothes on our backs. The Israelis dubbed the rescue Operation Ezra and Nehemiah.

Those of us who stayed lived in perpetual fear — fear of violence and more public hangings, as occurred on January 27, 1969, when nine Jews were hanged in the center of Baghdad on trumped-up charges, while hundreds of thousands of Iraqis wildly cheered the executions. The rest of us got out one way or another, including friends of mine who found safety in Iran when it was ruled by the Shah.

Now there are no Jews left to speak of, nor are there monuments, museums, or other reminders of our presence on Iraqi soil for twenty-six centuries.

Do the textbooks used in Iraqi schools today refer to our one-time presence, to our positive contribution to the evolution of Iraqi society and culture? Not a chance. 2,600 years are largely erased, wiped out, as if they never happened. Can you put yourself in my shoes and feel the excruciating pain of loss and invisibility?

I am a forgotten Jew.

I was first settled in what is present-day Libya by the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy Lagos (323-282 BCE), according to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. My forefathers and foremothers lived continuously on this soil for more than two millennia, our numbers bolstered by Berbers who converted to Judaism, Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing the Inquisition, and Italian Jews crossing the Mediterranean.

I was confronted with the anti-Jewish legislation of the occupying Italian Fascists. I endured the incarceration of 2,600 fellow Jews in an Axis-run camp in 1942. I survived the deportation of 200 fellow Jews to Italy the same year. I coped with forced labor in Libya during the war. I witnessed Muslim rioting in 1945 and 1948 that left nearly 150 Libyan Jews dead, hundreds injured, and thousands homeless.

I watched with uncertainty as Libya became an independent country in 1951. I wondered what would happen to those 6,000 of us still there, the remnant of the 39,000 Jews who had formed this once-proud community — that is, until the rioting sent people packing, many headed for the newly established State of Israel.

The good news was that there were constitutional protections for minority groups in the newly established Libyan nation. The bad news was that they were completely ignored.

Within ten years of my native country's independence, I could not vote, hold public office, serve in the army, obtain a passport, purchase new property, acquire majority ownership in any new business, or participate in the supervision of our community's affairs.

By June 1967, the die was cast. Those of us who had remained, hoping against hope that things would improve in a land to which we were deeply attached and which, at times, had been good to us, had no choice but to flee. The Six-Day War created an explosive atmosphere in the streets. Eighteen Jews were killed, and Jewish-owned homes and shops were burned to the ground.

I and 4,000 other Jews left however we could, most of us with no more than a suitcase and the equivalent of a few dollars.

I was never allowed to return. I never recovered the assets I had left behind in Libya, despite promises by the government. In effect, it was all stolen — the homes, furniture, shops, communal institutions, you name it. Still worse, I was never able to visit the grave sites of my relatives. That hurt especially deeply. In fact, I was told that, under Colonel Qaddafi, who seized power in 1969, the Jewish cemeteries were bulldozed and the headstones used for road building.

I am a forgotten Jew.

My experience — the good and the bad — lives on in my memory, and I'll do my best to transmit it to my children and grandchildren, but how much can they absorb? How much can they identify with a culture that seems like a relic of a distant past that appears increasingly remote and intangible? True, a few books and articles on my history have been written, but— and here I'm being generous — they are far from best-sellers.

In any case, can these books compete with the systematic attempt by Libyan leaders to expunge any trace of my presence over two millennia? Can these books compete with a world that paid virtually no attention to the end of my existence?

Take a look at *The New York Times* index for 1967, and you'll see for yourself how the newspaper of record covered the tragic demise of an ancient community. I can save you the trouble of looking — just a few paltry lines were all the story got.

I am a forgotten Jew.

I am one of hundreds of thousands of Jews who once lived in countries like Iraq and Libya. All told, we numbered close

to 900,000 in 1948. Today we are fewer than 5,000, mostly concentrated in two moderate countries—Morocco and Tunisia.

We were once vibrant communities in Aden, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other nations, with roots dating back literally 2,000 years and more. Now we are next to none.

Why does no one speak of us and our story? Why does the world relentlessly, obsessively speak of the Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars in the Middle East — who, not unimportantly, were displaced by wars launched by their own Arab brethren — but totally ignore the Jewish refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars?

Why is the world left with the impression that there's only one refugee population from the Arab-Israeli conflict, or, more precisely, the Arab conflict with Israel, when, in fact, there are two refugee populations, and our numbers were somewhat larger than the Palestinians?

I've spent many sleepless nights trying to understand this injustice.

Should I blame myself?

Perhaps we Jews from Arab countries accepted our fate too passively. Perhaps we failed to seize the opportunity to tell our story. Look at the Jews of Europe. They turned to articles, books, poems, plays, paintings, and film to recount their story. They depicted the periods of joy and the periods of tragedy, and they did it in a way that captured the imagination of many non-Jews. Perhaps I was too fatalistic, too shell-shocked, too uncertain of my artistic or literary talents.

But that can't be the only reason for my unsought status as a forgotten Jew. It's not that I haven't tried to make at least some

noise; I have. I've organized gatherings and petitions, arranged exhibitions, appealed to the United Nations, and met with officials from just about every Western government. But somehow it all seems to add up to less than the sum of its parts. No, that's still being too kind. The truth is, it has pretty much fallen on deaf ears.

You know that acronym — MEGO? It means “My eyes glazed over.” That's the impression I often have when I've tried raising the subject of the Jews from Arab lands with diplomats, elected officials, and journalists — their eyes glaze over (TEGO).

No, I shouldn't be blaming myself, though I could always be doing more for the sake of history and justice.

There's actually a far more important explanatory factor.



We Jews from the Arab world picked up the pieces of our shattered lives after our hurried departures — in the wake of intimidation, violence, and discrimination — and moved on.

Most of us went to Israel, where we were welcomed. The years following our arrival weren't always easy — we started at the bottom and had to work our way up. We came with varying levels of education and little in the way of tangible assets. But we had something more to sustain us through the difficult process of adjustment and acculturation: our immeasurable pride as Jews, our deeply rooted faith, our cherished rabbis and customs, and our commitment to Israel's survival and well-being.

Some of us — somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of the total — chose to go elsewhere.

Jews from the French-speaking Arab countries gravitated toward France and Quebec. Jews from Libya created communities in Rome and Milan. Egyptian and Lebanese Jews were sprinkled throughout Europe and North America, and a few resettled in Brazil. Syrian Jews immigrated to the United States, especially New York, as well as to Mexico City and Panama City. And on it went.

Wherever we settled, we put our shoulder to the wheel and created new lives. We learned the local language if we didn't already know it, found jobs, sent our children to school, and, as soon as we could, built our own congregations to preserve the rites and rituals that were distinctive to our tradition.

It's unbecoming to boast, but I think we've done remarkably well wherever we've gone. I would never underestimate the difficulties or overlook those who, for reasons of age or ill health or poverty, couldn't make it, but, by and large, in a short time we have taken giant steps, whether in Israel or elsewhere.

But what has befallen the Palestinians, the other refugees of the Arab conflict with Israel? Sadly, an entirely different destiny, and therein, I suspect, lies the principal explanatory factor for the widely varying treatments of the two refugee sagas.

While we essentially disappeared from the world's radar screen overnight—if ever we were on it—as we embarked on our new lives, the Palestinians did not. To the contrary, for a whole host of reasons—partly of their own making, partly of the making of cynical Arab leaders, and partly of the making of generally well-

intentioned but shortsighted third parties—the Palestinians weren't afforded the same chance to start new lives. Instead, they were manipulated and instrumentalized.

The Palestinians were placed in refugee camps and encouraged to stay there, generation after generation. They benefited from the support of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN body founded over half a century ago, not to resettle them, but rather to maintain them in those camps by providing a range of educational and social services.

Incidentally, the majority of UNRWA funds have not come from the Arab countries—many of which do not contribute a single penny—but from Western nations. In fact, the Arab nations combined donate a relatively small percent of the total UNRWA budget. So much for the crocodile tears of compassion and empathy that we periodically hear from the Arab world.

The UN also runs the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which is responsible for the millions of refugees in the world today who are outside the borders of their native lands unable to return. UNHCR seeks to resettle those refugees in immigrant-receiving countries or otherwise help them adjust to new lives. Uniquely, the Palestinian refugee population is outside of the orbit of UNHCR. Why?

It's obvious. Whatever the official explanation, maintaining the refugee camps provides the incubators for the ongoing war against Israel. After all, if the refugees were actually given the chance to start productive new lives, as we were, then their animus toward Israel might, heaven forbid, start to dissipate and their propensity to produce “martyrs” in terrorist operations against Israel would diminish.

I've searched high and low for another explanation that makes good sense, but I can't for the life of me find it. The sad truth is that the leaders of the Arab world never wanted to solve the Palestinian refugee problem; they preferred to nurture it, maintain it front and center, and thus keep alive their grievances against Israel for the entire world to see.

And, lo and behold, many in the world took the bait, became almost hypnotically preoccupied with the plight of Palestinian refugees, without ever asking the hard questions, and never once thought of us — Jews from Arab lands. Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose.

Had these diplomats, politicians, journalists, and human rights activists asked the tough questions, it might have dawned on them that the Palestinian refugee problem came about because the Arab world rejected the 1947 UN Partition Plan and declared war on the fledgling State of Israel in 1948; that only Jordan, among all the Arab countries professing concern for Palestinians, offered them citizenship and a real new start; and that the Arab countries energetically used the Palestinians when it served their purposes, but otherwise left them to fend for themselves (or worse).

Moreover, had they not abandoned critical judgment long ago, these international actors might wonder why there are still refugee camps in cities like Jenin.

The 1993 Oslo Accords provided for Israeli withdrawal from all the major cities on the West Bank and direct Palestinian rule. Astonishing, isn't it, that even under full Palestinian Authority control the refugee camps were not dismantled? Has anyone ever bothered to ask aloud why? And what about Gaza, from which Israel fully withdrew in 2005 and which still houses refugee camps?

Another thing upsets me as well.

Sometimes I feel as if the world thinks of the Palestinian refugee problem as the only one of its kind.

Tragically, there've been hundreds of millions of refugees in history, probably more. Sooner or later, just about all of them found new homes and launched new lives. And there have been massive exchanges of populations as a result of war and territorial adjustments. Millions of people were on the move in both directions when Britain partitioned India and Pakistan in 1947, and Greece and Turkey experienced major exchanges earlier in the century.

None of this is meant to minimize the tragedy of dispossession or dislocation. I know. I've been there. Instinctively, my heart goes out to any refugee. But why are Palestinians treated as if they were the only refugee problem worthy of boundless sympathy, and why do so many otherwise well-intentioned institutions and individuals go along with this?

And while I'm letting off steam, let me mention one other thing that troubles me.

It's when Arab spokesmen stand up and manage a straight face as they assert that there is no anti-Semitism in the Arab world. After all, they contend, Arabs are Semites, so, by definition, they cannot be anti-Semites. Give me a break. This gives new meaning to the notion of sophistry.

It's well known that the term "anti-Semitism" was coined in 1879 by a German, Wilhelm Marr, no friend of the Jews, to describe a sense of hatred and hostility toward Jews and Judaism alone.

The Arab spokesmen don't stop there.

They claim that Jews were always well treated in Arab societies, pointing out that the Holocaust occurred in Christian Europe. True enough, the Holocaust did take place in Christian Europe and, equally true, there were periods of relative quiet and harmony in the Arab world, but the discussion can't end there. The absence of a Holocaust—putting aside, for a moment, the unrestrained enthusiasm with which some Arab political and religious leaders embraced Hitler and the Nazi Final Solution—does not in itself mean that Jews were always treated fairly and equally, only that the levels of discrimination and persecution never reached the same heights as in wartime Europe.

And, yes, citing the experience of Jews in Andalusia under Muslim rule from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, or noting that the twelfth-century sage Maimonides settled in Egypt, is a reminder of a different—and far more promising—era. But Arab spokesmen underscore the weakness of their case by the need to go back hundreds of years to find such laudable examples of relative harmony, since they don't seem able to come up with anything remotely similar in more recent times.

Finally, they assert that if Israel didn't exist, there would have been no problem with Jews in Arab lands. That's another bizarre argument. By that logic, there shouldn't be well over one million Arab citizens of Israel, but, of course, there are. Those Arabs who remained in Israel after 1948 were given citizenship, voting rights, religious freedom, and the opportunity to send their children to Arabic-language schools. That's pluralism and democracy at work, even if there are flaws in the system. While Israel has faced

war and terrorism initiated by Arab neighbors, it never asked its own Arab populace to pay the price. By contrast, the Arab nations forced their Jewish communities to pay a very high price. I'm living proof.



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 other minority groups in the region, notably the Christians, the Yazidis, and the Bahá'í, 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.



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