

Pieces of Our Collective History: The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre



The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre in Or Yehuda, Israel.

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On November 22nd, I sat in the car with my Israeli parents, Michal and Avi, as we made our way to Or Yehuda, a small city close to Tel Aviv. We were headed to a closed tour of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre. Established in 1973, the museum was built next to where the *ma'abarot* (transit camps) once stood, housing thousands of Iraqi Jews who fled to Israel in the years following the *Farhud* ('violent dispossession') and unrest in Iraq. Today, the museum is an impressive building which boasts a large, rich collection of artifacts and library which preserve the history of Iraq's Jews. Unfortunately, the museum does not permit photography of their exhibits; I therefore hope I can sufficiently convey the splendiddness of their collection through a combination of the images available to me and my own notes.

My first introduction to the history of Iraq's Jews was well over ten years ago, thanks to the personal story of Steve Acre, who was an employee of my father's. Born Sabih Ezra

Akerib in Bagdad, Steve lived in a Jewish neighborhood with his widowed mother and eight siblings. On June 1 and 2, 1941, as the Jews of Bagdad were burned and slaughtered by Muslims in the *Farhud*, his family was saved by their Muslim landlord who, using his status as a holy man who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, told the mob that the family was under his protection. After surviving, Steve eventually would join the Jewish underground movement in Iraq, *HaTnuah* ('the movement'), as a teenager until he subsequently succeeded to escape Iraq via Iran and arrive to safety in Israel. He later made his way to Canada and lived in Montreal. In 2011, to mark 70 years since the *Farhud*, Steve shared his testimony in both a personal essay and an interview with the BBC; I have linked both resources here¹. I urge all readers to take the time to read the complete story of his survival. I humbly dedicate this article to him; may his memory be a blessing.

Upon walking inside the museum, we met our guide for the morning, Isaac. We quickly learned that he was not an ordinary tour guide, and that this was not going to be an ordinary tour. Isaac was born in Bagdad and came to Israel at the age of 18 in 1971 – many years after Operation Ezra and Nechemiah (1951 – 1952) which facilitated the arrival of 120,000 – 130,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel. Isaac explained that, unlike many Iraqi Jews in Israel alive today, who arrived in Israel as children, his memories of Iraq remain fully intact and alive. Therefore, our tour was going to feel more like a living testimony. He directed us to begin with a room dedicated to Bagdad's Jewish newspaper, *HaDover*. As we read through the array of highlighted articles, one of the other tour participants made small talk with me and Michal. He had been born in Bagdad and brought to Israel at two years old with his parents. Although he did not have any of his own memories of Iraq, he had the memories of his parents'. I was taken aback when he shared with us that his father had refused to work or unpack the family suitcases for ten years after arriving to Israel out of hope for the family's return to Iraq. Why on earth would he have wanted to return?

The museum is divided into about ten 'stops' which guide visitors chronologically. So, naturally our first stop was an interactive map showcasing the Babylonian exile and the Biblical history of the region. A few participants asked Isaac to elaborate on the *Farhud* and his own personal journey to Israel. Smiling, Isaac reassured us that we would learn about both in due time, and that we needed to be patient. At this moment, I realized that I knew very little about the history and culture of Jews in Iraq – I, like many of the tour participants, was only familiar with the ending of the story, with the violence of the *Farhud* and the subsequent arrival of Iraqi Jews to Israel. Eyes and ears captivated by our guide, we began the tour.

¹ Steve Acre, "On Fire in Bagdad". August 3, 2011. <https://www.mikecohen.ca/files/steve-acre-farhud-article.pdf>

Sarah Ehrlich, "Farhud memories: Baghdad's 1941 slaughter of the Jews". BBC. June 1, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13610702>



Various artifacts on display on the museum (Credit: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre)

Winding through the exhibits, we learned about the music, clothing, language and religious practices of Iraqi Jewry. My favourite exhibition was the clothing and fabrics. Baby bassinets protected by hanging amulets, tiny wedding dresses made to fit 12- and 13-year-old brides (as was the custom at the time), beautifully made jewelry and dowry dresses with face veils to protect the bride-to-be from the evil eye, modern suits and clothing for men complete with an Ottoman *fez* – I was completely enthralled. The clothing captured the simultaneous embrace of both tradition and modernity by Iraq's Jews.



Excerpt from Exhibition: The Voice of a Groom and the Voice of a Bride (Credit: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre)

Another highlight was the recreation of a Jewish alley in Bagdad. An installation which stretches up to the ceiling, visitors walk through a tight alley, every corner carefully recreated. Every peek through a window is rewarded; there is a fabric shop, a jewelry maker, a silver shop and, from above, a group of women watch their husbands drink *chai* at the local café.



A reconstruction of an alley in Bagdad (Credit: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre)

The crown jewel of the museum is the recreation of the Great Synagogue of Bagdad. Once the most ancient synagogue in Iraq, the museum's beautifully detailed recreation features glass exhibits of the Iraqi Jewish holiday traditions running along the walls of the room. As we looked at the Passover display, Isaac said it was time to hear his story of *Aliya* to Israel. He told us that his last two years living in Iraq had been a nightmare, with Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as President and Saddam Hussein as Vice-President. Finally, at the age of 18, his family received a message to make their way to a small village in northern Iraq/Iraqi

Kurdistan; from there the family crossed the border into Iran and was brought to safety in Israel. The only thing he missed about Iraq, he told us, was the summers he spent sleeping on the roof, gazing at thousands of bright stars illuminated above him.



The original Great Synagogue of Bagdad, in an undated image. (Credit: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre)

From the synagogue we walked into a small room filled with seats. This was the room dedicated to the *Farhud*. On either side of us hung memorial installations with names of those killed. Isaac gave a detailed overview of the events leading to that terrible Shavuot – the tension between the newly independent Iraqis and the British, the influence and adoption of Adolph Hitler’s Nazism, and newfound fervor for antisemitism and antizionism. The main lesson to be learned from the brutal events of the *Farhud* is the power of everything to change in an instant. Iraq’s Jews found themselves, after 2,600 years of building themselves up and establishing themselves within Iraq as a highly educated, influential and successful minority, abruptly and violently thrown at the mercy of Iraq’s chaos – with no rescuer in sight.

Symbolically, after the *Farhud*, one of the lowest chapters in the history of Iraq’s Jews, visitors are physically directed to make their way upwards, to *Aliya* (‘ascension’). Crossing a slanted wooden plank walkway, our group entered the scene which greeted Iraqi Jews when they landed in Israel: *ma’abarot* (‘transit camps’). A canvas tent, faithfully recreated with small cots and luggage, showed the harsh conditions that were endured for many months and even years by these new immigrants to Israel. The tour ended here.



An iron suitcase brought by an Iraqi Jew to Israel in the early 1950s (Credit: Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre)

It is impossible to detail every section of the museum within one article, it is bursting with artifacts, recreations, and history. Other attractions briefly worth mentioning include a stunning recreation of a newlywed's bedroom, reproduced wedding invitations written in Arabic using Hebrew letters, an Iraqi Jewish kitchen with *kubbeh*, a pharmacy cabinet filled with amulets prescribed for every ailment, and an ever-changing modern art gallery.

After two hours of being saturated in the world of Iraqi Jewry, I thought back to the story told to us by the man at the start of the tour, of his father who sat with suitcases still packed for ten years after arriving in Israel from Iraq. I reflected on the family's longing to return to Bagdad, and how I had been so surprised. Now, I was not surprised at all. Unquestionably, the Jews of Iraq had built for themselves a very rich and vibrant life over their 2,600 years in exile – and though it ended in tragedy, they, like all other refugees, would certainly have felt a longing for the place they had called home. The museum's choice to limit the *Farhud* to one 'stop' on their historical tour also, I believe, speaks to the importance of studying and appreciating Jewish histories for their entirety – not just in the context of their sufferings. While undoubtedly the trauma of the *Farhud* casts a sorrowful tint over the Iraqi Jewish experience, the richness and beauty of their culture, history and traditions constitute an important and captivating piece of our collective history.

The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre's website can be accessed [here](#).