

BABYLONIA AGAIN

The conflict between Iraq and Iran reminds us of the unique extent to which the Jews have been "on stage" in world history. We go back to the conflict between Babylonia and Persia, formerly Iraq and Iran, over 2000 years ago. We were seriously affected by the conflict then, as we are today.

Persia (Iran) took over Babylonia (Iraq), only about a half century after the Babylonian Exile of the Jews. When Cyrus of Persia marched in, he proclaimed that the exiled Jews could return to Palestine, but most of them stayed. Babylonia was under the control of the Persians for a couple of centuries, then the Greeks, and then the Parthians.

In the long history of Jews in Babylonia, as in Persia, there were periods of relative tolerance and periods of severe persecution. There were strong secular tendencies. During the early Persian period in Babylonia, there was a saying among Jews: "A casketful of dates for a dinar, and yet they do not apply themselves to the study of the law." On the other hand, of course, for centuries after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE, Babylonia became the functional religious center of world Judaism, while Palestine was a place of reverence.

After the fall of the Temple, emigrants poured into Babylonia from Palestine, until the Jewish population there was estimated at about a million. More came after the defeat of Bar Kochba. The second century, under the Parthians, was a "good" period for the Babylonian Jews. They were generally so well treated that one king stopped a war for two days because of Jewish holidays.

The relative freedom came to a sharp end when the Persians took over again in 226 CE for about four centuries. While conditions varied, there were periods of

Zoroastrian zealotry under which the Jews were persecuted. In 456, royal decrees prohibited the observance of Sabbath, synagogues were destroyed, and many Jews fled to Arabia, India and the Caucasus.

The Arabs conquered Babylonia in 640, and stayed in control for over six centuries, permanently Arabizing that nation. Because of the Persian persecution, the Jews welcomed the Arabs. For many years, the Jews in Babylonia, now becoming known as Iraq, participated in a "golden age."

But there were periods of severe persecution as well. In the ninth century, all synagogues were turned into mosques. The famous Jewish Academy in Sura closed in 948. Gradually Babylonia/Iraq became replaced by Spain, France, Egypt, North Africa, as the center of Jewish thought.

After intervals of Turkish and British control, the modern independent country of Iraq was marked by virulent anti-semitism and anti-Zionism. Between 1948 and 1951, the Jews finally returned en masse to Israel, about 2500 years after the Babylonian exile. Over 123 thousand Jews returned to Israel in those years, leaving only a small number behind. In 1969, 9 of those remaining Jews were hanged in a public square, while Iraqians danced with joy.

Babylonia is again trying to establish its sway over the Middle East. If it succeeds, it would again threaten the lives of many Jews -- more efficiently than it did 2500 years ago. But its success would also threaten the security of a newcomer to history, America. By a twist of history, the fate of Middle Eastern Jews and of America have become intertwined.

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Jews in Iraq were once known in that country as "Wolad El Mithe," which means "weaklings" -- because of their non-resistance to oppression. Because of Israel, Jews are not now generally referred to in that manner. The critical question, for Israel and for the United States, is whether the spirit of appeasement will prevail in *this* country, and Americans will become known by Iraqians as Wolad El Mithe.

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