

Jews in Iraq, ancient and more recent

Film tells of Judaism's rich history in that country, and how it ended

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This week's Insight comes from Cambridge University in England, where I have returned for my third extended time at what has become like a second home. We are again staying at Westminster College, and I have the privilege of spending a couple of months as a visiting fellow at St. Edmund's College. While here in 2016, I worked with the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion and with the Woolf Institute, a very active center for interfaith study and programming.

Since my previous stay, the Woolf Institute completed its beautiful \$14 million new building on the grounds of Westminster College. The Faraday Institute has also moved into the new building, so now both institutes are just 100 yards from the front door of the cottage where we stay. After traveling nearly 4,000 miles, I am now just a five-minute walk to my work each day.

Two years ago, we arrived during the celebration of Queen Elizabeth's 90th birthday. This year it is the third child of William and Katherine that dominates the news. Prince Louis, born to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, and latest great-grandson of Queen Elizabeth, is now the fifth in line to the throne.

In the few days we have been here, I've made nearly a dozen renewed connections and attended one lecture on "Jerusalem and its informal holy places," as well as attended the Faraday Institute staff meeting. The Woolf Institute featured a documentary film titled "Remember Baghdad" that recounts some recent history of the Jewish community in that Iraqi city.

The Jewish presence in this area actually goes back 2,600 years, when King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and took the Jews to Babylon, a city about 60 miles southwest of current Baghdad. The Psalms recall this time: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remember Zion." Less than 50 years later, when the Persians captured Babylon, the Jews were allowed to return to Judea, but many chose to stay in this cultural center.

LONG A CENTER OF JEWISH CULTURE

From that time until the 20th century, this area has been a thriving center of Jewish culture. Following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, many refugees came to the area, and it became a center of Jewish scholarship. Christian communities also were established, and the two religions lived together. In the second through fifth centuries, the Babylonian academies were the site of rabbinic scholarship resulting in the production of the Talmud, a collection of legal and theological commentary on the Torah.

Later this area became known as "Iraq-i," meaning "land of the Arabs." In the seventh century, with the arrival of Islam, the Jewish community became a part of the Muslim caliphate. For centuries, Baghdad became the center of the Muslim world during what is known as the Islamic Golden Age. The Jewish community remained successful throughout the Ottoman Empire (1533-1918).

Following the First World War under the rule of the British Mandate, the Jews played important roles but became identified with the European domination of the area.

By the end of the Second World War, Iraq joined the Arab League in war against the creation of Israel, and the situation became extremely difficult for Jews. By 1951, more than 95% of the 120,000 Jews had fled to Israel. In 1967, Iraq joined the Arab forces in fighting Israel in the Six Day War.

Following the Arab defeat and the rise to power of Saddam Hussein, the situation became intolerable for Jews in Iraq, with arrests and public executions. The final exodus of the few thousand remaining Jews began in the 1970s, to the point where today there are only five Jews known to live in Baghdad.

‘FROM UNBOUNDED OPTIMISM TO TERRIFIED ESCAPE’

“Remember Baghdad,” using home movies, photos, news footage and interviews, tells the stories of families who made this transition from the diverse and tolerant Iraq to the final expulsion from the country. It begins with the country’s first beauty contest in 1947 and the crowning of the Jewish Renee Dangood as Miss Baghdad. She and her family were about to join the country’s elite until the creation of Israel in 1948 changed everything.

The film tells of the Jewish families who worked, lived and played with the other Muslim and Christian residents of the city. It seems that this area of Babylon/Baghdad would continue as a center of Jewish life. However, as the film’s promotion describes: “They paid the price of their overconfidence. ... The arc of their lives goes from unbounded optimism to terrified escape. ... The story of Baghdad’s last Jews — from gaiety to revolutions, public hangings and murder — opens out onto the wider story of Iraq.”

Following the showing, Edwin Shuker, the story’s main character, was present to elaborate and tell his story of the final dangerous escape. Traveling to northern Iraq, the Kurds helped them make the middle-of-night escape into Turkey. The Kurds assisted more than 1,000 Jews in this dangerous final flight, acting without payment out of humanitarian concern.

A few thousand miles from home, I am seeing in a new light how a few thousand years of history has culminated in what seems to be a movement away from tolerance to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. The Jews who chose not to return to Zion following the Babylonian conquest finally, after 2,600 years, were forced to leave.

There is much to do in bringing further understanding to our world where political and faith divisions can threaten our presumed comfort and confidence. Wherever we live, it is our task to seek tolerance, understanding and acceptance. It is the only path to peace.

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