

## **The *Farhud* as History and Memory in the Writings of Iraqi-Jewish Intellectuals**

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One of the main challenges of the State of Israel was the creating of a cohesive society out of many Jewish groups, gathered from different countries, each of them with different histories, different collective memories and different cultures. For many years during the Yishuv period and undoubtedly after the founding of the state, the image of the 'New Jew' has been the model for amalgamation, and a main component in the Israeli identity. In spite of the problems emanated from this model, it presented characters and values that, at least formally, were opened to everyone, and it stressed the idea of ingathering and unity. Since the second decade of Israel, the Holocaust has become more and more prominent in shaping the Israeli identity, and the passing of time does not blur or reduce its weight. On the contrary, time intensifies it.

In this situation we can't avoid questioning: what does it mean to the place of the Mizrahim (Jews from Islamic countries) in the new Israeli identity, considering their coming from states which most of them were not conquered by the Axis armies, did not have annihilation camps, and did not experienced mass massacres where many thousands of Jews lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis or their assistants. It is especially true in the Middle East. In the 1940s, unlike with European Jews, the Holocaust was not a shaping event of their memory and consciousness. I claim that the centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli identity forced the Mizrahim to cope with two options:

1. To express solidarity and to identify with European Jews for the disaster that happened to them and to the Jewish people, a disaster that in different circumstances could have happened to them too.
2. To interpret their own experiences as an un-separate part of the Holocaust.

These two options are common in memoirs and literature written by Mizrahim

In this paper I will examine this subject by focusing on one case-study: the Farhud, the pogrom of Baghdad's Jews in June 1941. I will focus on reconstruction: on the changes that this occasion has undergone passing in Iraqi-Jews' consciousness from 1941 until now. I will also describe and

analyze the different contexts that the Farhud became connected to and the interpretations that were given to it by the Zionist establishment and Iraqi Jews in Iraq and in Israel.

### The Farhud

In the first and the second of June 1941, the Muslim residents of Baghdad attacked the Jewish population of the city. In this period about 90,000 Jews, who were two thirds of 130,000 Iraqi Jews, lived in Baghdad. More than 150 Jews were murdered and more than 600 wounded. Some 1,500 stores and homes were looted. (About 2,500 families – 15% of the Jews of Baghdad, were harmed, either physically or materially.)

The pogrom occurred in the end of an anti-British and pro-Nazi coup and continued for two months, April and May 1941. During these months, the pro-Nazi regime protected the Jews so the pogrom began as soon as the regime collapsed and its leaders fled from Baghdad. The British army was on the outskirts of town, waiting for Iraqi forces to enter the town, and in this absence of rule the pogrom began. In the following day the Iraqi army entered Baghdad, shot into the plundering and looting mob, killed some hundreds of them, and very soon the silence was back again. The rioters were led by defeated Iraqi soldiers, right-wing youths and policemen. Many Baghdad residents and Bedouins from the vicinity thronged to the city to share in the booty, and they too, took part in the violence.

This pogrom, which was exceptional in the history of Iraqi Jews, undermined the Jewish-Muslim relations in a period when Jews had been integrating into Muslim society and an intellectual elite evolved, who identified Iraq as their homeland. This event was considered a turning point in Iraq and was engraved in the consciousness of all Iraqi Jews, Zionists, Communists and others, in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Three reasons for the outburst of the pogrom are accepted among all researchers:

1. The anti-colonial struggle led by the national Iraqi movement against the British. Because Jews collaborated with the pro-British regime and opposed the pro-Nazi coup, they were looked upon as traitors and the enemy of the Iraqi people.
2. The Arab-Jewish dispute in Palestine. In October 1939, Haj Amin al Husseini, the Mufti who was expelled from Jerusalem, arrived in Baghdad and since then had a decisive role in

organizing the coup and connecting with Nazi Germany for political and military support. It's important to point out that there had been no Zionist movement in Iraq since 1935.

3. The Nazi influence in Iraq. It included the publishing of *Mein Kampf* in a local newspaper, disseminating anti-Semitic ideas in propaganda film and in radio broadcasting. The youth movement 'el fittuwa', similar to the Hitler Jugend in Germany was influenced by Nazi ideology and Fascist values. These groups took an active role in the pogrom.

How was the Farhud explained in Iraq?

### 1. The British and Iraqi regime:

The British blamed Zionism for the event. The ambassador Kinehan Kornwalis claimed: 'Unavoidably , and even if it's not true, they [Iraqi Jews] were considered Zionists and paid the price, not only in money donations... but also with their blood'. (25.9.1941) Nuri as-Said, the Iraqi politician, told Moshe Shertok in their meeting in Cairo in July 1941: 'For many generations the Jews of Baghdad lived safe and secured, and if something like that happened, it happened only because of Palestine. It is true that Nazi-Arabs aroused and organized the pogrom, but they could do it only by using the subject of Palestine'. (from Shertok report in Merkas Mapai, 27.7.1941)

### 2. The Jewish religious leadership

According to the traditional Jewish commentary, the Iraqi Jewish rabbis cast the blame on the wide secularization process in the community, claiming it was a punishment for the weakening of the traditional religious practices and customs and as a lesson they demanded penitence *חזרה (בתשובה)*. The sins noted by the rabbis were denial of the belief in payment and punishment and in afterlife, shaving the beard, and also young women's not going to the Mikve. (Mukamal)

### 3. The leaders of the community

It seems that the religious interpretation was not accepted by the secular leadership of the community. They (Abraham El Kabir, Yusuf El Kabir, the president rabbi Sasson Khaduri and others) connected the Farhud to the colonialist system, to the cooperation between the Jews and the British, and to the hostility of the Iraqi national movement. Thereupon, they blamed the British who had abandoned them as a part of their 'divide and rule' policy. One of the Yishuv's

soldier who served in Iraq in the British army, wrote: 'The Jews believe that instead of the Assyrian play ball, this year the English chose the Jews'.

Practically, the leaders preferred lobbying among political figures, hoping to maintain their good connections and their ability to influence. This behavior tells us that the leadership did not interpret it as a catastrophe and did not foresee a massacre or a general destruction. This conception is described by the community secretary, Shalom Darwish, some year later: 'We have been in Iraq for two thousand years and will continue to be for more two thousand years, may be until the messiah days, so we must live in peace with the Iraqi people'.

4. Prof. Elie Kedourie researched the British documents in the 1970s. In a profound and well documented research he concluded that the colonial situation and the cooperation of the Jewish minority with the British were the main reason for the Farhud. 'Baghdadi Jews', he summarized, 'were killed and robbed as British supporters'. (p. 91)

5. A short time after the Farhud, Zionism became active in Iraq and had its own interpretation. When the first news arrived in Israel, the Zionist leadership connected the event with the anti-Semitism of Iraq's Muslims, the Mufti and the Nazis, and rejected any accusation that blamed Zionism for the destruction of in Arab-Jewish relations in the Arab countries. In a meeting of Merkaz Mapai in July 9<sup>th</sup> 1941, the participants compared the Farhud with the pogrom that took place in Yassi in Rumania at the same time. They were very concerned about the new situation of the Jews in the Middle East, but only later the difference between the 2 events became clear: about 10,000 people were murdered in Yassi. This difference in the dimension of the killings would be characteristic of the difference between Europe and the East.

How was the Farhud perceived by the Zionist-Israeli emissaries in Iraq?

During World War II it was perceived mainly as a part of the exile's distresses, in the context of anti-Semitism and the pogroms in Europe. The Farhud memory was aimed to convince Iraqi Jews with the justification and validity of Zionism.

I would like to demonstrate it through the 'Yizkor' that was written by Israeli emissaries around 1944 for the anniversary of the Farhud:

'Remember, the people of Israel in the exile, those bitter days, days of robbery and murder, rapes and disgrace. We shall remember the bloodlust of the rioters, the screams of the

wounded and battered, the children's cries, the pain and shame and the helplessness... we will remember and know: our exile is as Yemen, and Yemen is as Germany, our fate in the world is one. And we will have a lesson: only a Hebrew homeland is our coast of redemption.'

This text was based on the form of the Israeli Yizkor, written by Berl Katzenelson after the Tel Hai incident, but its content reflected the difference between the exile's victims and the Zionist project's victims. It doesn't deal with an event of heroism and sacrifices but with that of exile, and the murdered people are not victims of assignment but helpless victims of fate. The existential response of the community leaders was defined as self-humiliation and national denial. The lesson and the solution were Zionist: the unity of the Jewish fate and Zionism was the only solution. In its contents, this Yizkor reminds Bialik's 'On the Slaughter', not Katzenelson's Yizkor.

But we can also trace a new element: Yemen and Germany were combined, so the murder of Jews not only in Iraq but in the Middle East was connected to their fate in Europe.

Very soon more Zionist attitudes about the Holocaust were brought to Iraq. One of them was the distinction between the "Iraqi common Jew" and the European Ghetto warriors. We learn about it from articles in Zionist leaflets written by local youngsters about the Farhud:

'On what and why were the old and young people, the women and the babies were killed?

Because they chose to live in slavery, in a rotten exile life. They feared death but death overtook them, despised and humiliated'. And he compared: 'Poland, the Warsaw ghetto – the symbol of Jewish heroism nowadays. They didn't save their lives but saved their dignity, Israel dignity.

Upstanding they marched to their death, holding a torch of Jewish redemption and heroism...'

(1945)

The contents of these pieces show the internalization of the 'negation of the exile' and blaming the Jews for their own situation in the world and the calamities falling upon them. The history of Iraqi Jews is perceived as a part of a general Jewish history, or more accurate, European history, extracted in humiliation, pogroms and suffering. The Holocaust, in the very time of its occurrence, was 'recruited' by the Israeli emissaries, in their struggle for Zionist achievements in Iraqi Jewish society.

In these and many other texts, we see some elements connecting Iraqi Jews to the Holocaust:

- a) Solidarity with the victims
- b) A feeling of sharing the same fate, the fate that was expected to happen.
- c) The conclusion that it might happen, unless they immigrate to Israel.

The first two elements don't deviate from old Jewish perceptions of solidarity. The third is the Zionist solution.

What happened to the Farhud memory after the Iraqi Jews' arrival in Israel?

Iraqi Jews arrived during 1950-1951, and the first decade was a very difficult period, even a traumatic one. In this period, the Farhud remained personal and communal memory among them, and was not a part of Israeli public discourse. In this period, the Holocaust memory was also in the private sphere.

The Eichmann trial began a process of situating the Holocaust and the victims themselves in the center of the Israeli identity. This concept neglected the Zionist definitions about heroism in the Holocaust, redefining a new model focused on the individual and his daily ability to cope with life under annihilation. This concept reduced Zionist weight as an amalgamating basis of the gathered exiles. It raised a feeling that solidarity alone is no longer enough for defining the Israeli identity.

Very soon after arriving in Israel, the Iraqi began to integrate into the middle class. Unlike North Africans, they acquired more and more economic, social and political positions. They didn't consider themselves outsiders and they objected to participating in violent protest movements. More than anything else they wanted to belong. In the sixties they faced a new dilemma: How to be identified with the Holocaust component in the Israeli identity. The only event that could be related to it, was the Farhud. And so, from the sixties on, we witness an increasing engagement in the Farhud as a part of the Holocaust. It was done in a parallel initiative by both the Israeli establishment and Iraqi immigrants.

Henceforward I will mention some steps:

1. In 1961 the president Yitzhak Ben Zvi asked Yad Vashem to include the Farhud in the commemoration of the Holocaust.

2. In the same year the Histadrut (General Federation of Laborers) published a booklet titled: '20 years after the pogrom in Baghdad's Jews'.
3. In the middle of the sixties Yad Vashem began to collect testimonies about the Farhud.
4. In 1966 the first academic research about the Farhud was published. It was written by Dr. Hayyim Cohen, researcher of the Middle East history, of Iraqi origin. Cohen claimed that because anti-Semitism is in contrary to Islam, the Farhud could not evolve in a Muslim society, and it happened only because it was brought to Iraq by Nazi propaganda. It is interesting to note that several years later, Eli Kedouri concluded that it was the colonial situation that caused the massacre.
5. The Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center, which was founded in the seventies, dedicated itself to writing the history of Iraqi Jews. Here the connection between the Farhud and the Holocaust is made self evident, both in its publications and in its museum.

The book *Hatred of Jews and the pogrom in Iraq* came out in 1992 by Prof. Shmuel Moreh and Dr. Zvi Yehuda. In the introduction, Moreh argues that the link between the Farhud, the Nazis and the Holocaust is the main pivot that explains not only the Farhud but also the whole history of Iraqi Jews in modern period. Anti-Semitism was a shared factor by Muslims and Nazis, and it led them to cooperate. He explains the Farhud as the result of religious and social hatred 'by rulers and mob who were instigated by Nazi, Arab-national and anti-British propaganda. (p.9) Then he concludes that 'The Farhud was the main cause of the Jewish national revival in Iraq, as the Holocaust was the cause of the state of Israel establishment'. (p. 9, 210)

Some of the practices of Yad Vashem Museum are used in the exhibition in the Babylonian Museum. Near the pictures of the rioters, there is a board with the victims' names and acknowledgements of the righteous who saved many Jews.

This conception does not end with these institutional attitudes. It appears more and more in literature (as Dudu Bussi in his book ...*אמא מתגעגעת למילים*...) and in memoirs, but the most conspicuous writers are the brothers Balfur and Herzl Hakak, two of their uncles were murdered in the pogrom. As early as 1981, Balfur Hakak published an instruction-booklet to teachers titled 'Holocaust in the East', most of it dedicated to the Farhud: 'The Holocaust experience is common to all of us and it has one meaning: we are the sons of a persecuted people, under the danger of extermination, during our whole existence'. (p.9)

Since then, the brothers have been activists in spreading this idea, in newspapers and on the internet. They claim that instead of being called 'the Holocaust of European Jews' it should be

called 'the Jewish people's Holocaust', because the Nazis didn't distinguish between Jews. They wrote:

"Each cutting of a continuity injures the historical truth, the cultural wholeness, and in any case, the people's unity.'

In her book about the Mizrahim and the Holocaust, Hana Yablonka writes:

'Since the eighties on, accompanied by establishment's legitimization, Iraqi Jews have made all they could to include the Farhud in Holocaust events, and by that to belong to the Israeli civil religion, with the main role it kept for the Holocaust. This was, probably, the missing cultural layer to complete their full integration in Israeli society.'

I have some notes about this 'process of completing the integration:

1. The Israeli collective memory, knowingly, contradicts and distorts the history of the Iraqi Jews and ignores the uniqueness and the complexity of a long Jewish-Muslim coexistence.
2. Instead of dealing with this special history, Iraqi Jewish history is subordinated to European Jewish history, or more accurately, to the way that it is perceived by Zionism. But the Farhud should be seen in the context of the colonial situation and Arab reaction to the Zionist project in Palestine. These factors have no role in the history of European Jews.
3. The Farhud was done by Muslim residents of Baghdad, similarly to East-European pogroms and to other pogroms in Islamic countries in the forties (in Tripoli, Cairo, Eden, Ujda and so on) that were not connected to Nazi actions. As well, the Farhud was not a part of a systematic annihilation plan.

We know that the impact of the Holocaust is huge and it colors Jewish history in Europe as well as in other places. I can also understand the willingness to belong. Yet I think that the price required to complete Iraqi, and may be all Mizrahi integration in Israel, is too high and not very respecting. Iraqi Jews have a specific history, and it should be researched and taught in connection to its context, even if it does not serve societal and national goals.