

Operation Ali Baba Tells Tale of Iraqi Jews

There is a small corner of the *shuk* (market) in Jerusalem where everyday hundreds of Iraqi Israelis come to play backgammon and drink Turkish coffee and black tea. Iraqi Jews came to Israel shortly after she became a nation in Operation Ali Baba (also known as Operation Ezra and Nehemiah).

The tiny Jewish nation, through the new El Al Airlines, airlifted 130,000 Iraqis. The Iraqi Jewish community was one of the oldest in the world, dating all the way back to the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE.

Once Israel became a nation, the Iraqi government made it illegal to immigrate to Israel under the threat of death.

"We stayed in Baghdad until 1951, when we moved to Israel," Israeli-Iraqi Vardika Shabo says. "They hated the Jews in Iraq. They killed many of us in 1948. They took our belongings and burned our houses. We left with nothing except our suitcases. No money. We left the house, my parents' shops. Everything that we had, we left."

With the help of Israeli lawmakers, a deal was reached with the Iraqi government.

"... a special bill permitting Jewish emigration—according to Iraqi law, though, Jews had to sell their property and liquidate their businesses before they could leave. Additionally, each person was allowed to take no more than \$140 out of the country and could only carry 66 pounds of luggage; jewelry was also forbidden from being taken out of Iraq."

Despite the severe restraints, over 95 percent of Iraqi Jews choose to make *aliyah* (move to Israel) shocking Iraqi

officials who had believed that less than 10,000 Jews would emigrate. In the end, 130,000 choose to leave behind some \$30 billion in assets and start a new life in Israel.

Of course, this mass exodus was prophesied long ago in the Hebrew Scriptures:

"Up, Zion! Escape, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon." (Zech. 2:7)

"For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land." (Ezek. 36:24)

"As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country." (Ezek. 34:12-13)

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