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Lament Lebanon's lost tribe

By Roland Tomb

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It's often forgotten that Lebanon's vanishing Jewish community, whose presence in the country dates back to 1000 BC, is officially recognized by the state. It included merchants, physicians, soldiers, civil servants, bankers and craftsmen, and was once fully integrated into Lebanese economic, social, cultural and political life.

This reality casts doubt on the view that Jews in the Middle East were invariably second-class citizens and suffered from restrictions and persecution. It also highlights Lebanon's political and social dynamics, which make it so different from countries in its neighborhood. Unlike Jewish communities in other Middle Eastern countries, the Lebanese community grew after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and it was not until the civil wars of 1958 and 1975 that Jews started emigrating. Throughout the 20th century, Jews unequivocally considered Lebanon their home, defined themselves as Lebanese and, when political stability collapsed, emigrated to places with existing Lebanese expatriate communities such as Paris, New York, Montreal or Sao Paulo.

According to the Bible, Solomon and Hiram, king of Tyre, shared the same language, if not the same beliefs. In 132 AD, following the Bar Kokhba revolt, several Jewish communities moved to geographical Lebanon. The Beirut synagogue was destroyed in 502 AD in the famous earthquake that demolished the town. Caliph Muawiya (642-680) established a Jewish community in Tripoli, and another existed in Sidon in 922. The Jewish Palestinian Academy chose Tyre to establish its seat in 1071. Under the reign of Emir Bashir II, the Jewish community flourished. It had its own synagogue and cemetery at Deir al-Qamar as well as at Mukhtara in the Chouf. However, hostilities between the Druze and the Maronites in the 19th century led to the departure of many Jews from Deir al-Qamar, and by the end of the century most had moved to Hasbaya.

Around 1911, Jews from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Greece and even Persia had settled in Beirut, expanding the community to almost 5,000. The French Mandate marked the beginning of a new era of prosperity for Jews. The Jews of Souq Sursock began moving toward the Wadi Abu Jemil district, which became the cultural, religious, social and economic center of the community. A synagogue was built in Bhamdoun in 1915, and together with the Aley synagogue built in 1890 it catered to the middle classes who took to the mountains in summer.

Jews welcomed the proclamation of Greater Lebanon in 1920, and six years later, when a new Constitution came into force, they were the only Middle Eastern Jewish community to be constitutionally protected. Two Jewish newspapers were created during this period, *Al-Alam al-Isra'ili* (the Israelite World) and *Le Commerce du Levant*, an economic periodical still publishing, though under non-Jewish ownership. Those were also the years when the main Magen Abraham synagogue was built in Wadi Abu Jemil, as were 10 additional synagogues.

In 1937, the Jewish community asked for a seat in Parliament. While President Emile Edde expressed sympathy for the idea, the French high commissioner turned down the request. Maronite Patriarch Antoine Pierre Arida, who had earlier made a triumphal visit to Wadi Abu Jemil, also publicly condemned the treatment inflicted by the Nazis on German Jews.

In light of subsequent history, there was an interesting incident in 1946. The borders were then still open between Lebanon and Palestine, and the British mandatory authorities refused to allow the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion to travel. As a result, a Jewish travel agent in Beirut chartered a Middle East Airlines aircraft to carry Ben-Gurion and his colleagues Moshe Sharett and Golda Meir to a Zionist congress in Switzerland.

In Lebanon, a timid Zionist movement tried to recruit candidates for emigration to Palestine; however, few Jews were interested. Life in a kibbutz wasn't appealing and, to the despair of Zionist officials, Lebanese Jews remained generally opposed to Aliyah. Their sympathy for Israel was never strong enough to counterbalance their attachment to their life in Lebanon. Nor did they ever find themselves threatened, considering themselves full Lebanese citizens.

Despite the 1948 war, the Jewish community grew to almost 9,000 by 1951, thanks to the influx of refugees from Iraq and Syria. Lebanon was the only Arab state that saw its Jewish community

increase after the establishment of Israel. Moreover, there still were substantial numbers of Jews in the Lebanese Army, which took part in the 1948 war.

Nevertheless, change was unavoidable. Jewish students at the American University of Beirut left, fearing anti-Semitic reprisals. However, at Universite St. Joseph, Jews were invited to remain. Al-Alam al-Israili changed its name to Al-Salam (Peace). Jewish celebrations were no longer official holidays and the state no longer supported Jewish charities. A few Jewish army officers chose to resign, but none was forced to do so, nor were Jews pushed out of government positions.

Jewish celebrations still prompted multi-denominational gatherings. In 1952, 3,000 people attended a Passover ceremony. In attendance were officials from all religious groups, including Sami al-Solh, Abdullah al-Yafi, Rashid Beydoun, Joseph Chader, Charles Helou, Pierre Gemayel and the Maronite archbishop of Beirut. The liberal atmosphere in the country allowed the community to grow to 14,000 before the 1958 civil war. However, the ethnic configuration of Wadi Abu Jemil began changing. The Jewish bourgeoisie moved to more residential areas, while Kurds entered the neighborhood.

The 1958 conflict convinced many Jews to leave Lebanon for Europe, the U.S. and South America. Very few went to Israel. Lebanese Jews remained attached to their homeland, but Lebanon's slow disintegration discouraged even the more optimistic. By 1967, following the June Arab-Israeli war, only 3,600 Jews were left in Lebanon, though two Jewish banks remained active: the Safra Bank and the Zilkha Bank, which later became the Societe Bancaire du Liban.

The civil war of 1975 blew away all remaining hopes. Schools and synagogues were closed, Wadi Abu Jemil was deserted, and, for the first time, Jews, like all Lebanese, felt physical danger. About 200 were killed in the hostilities. Located near the old city center, Wadi Abu Jemil was caught between the warring factions. The army rescued members of the community, but even before then Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat sent food and water to Jews trapped inside the Magen Abraham Synagogue. The head of the National Movement, Kamal Jumblatt, evacuated Chief Rabbi Shreim and his family to Bhamdoun.

Paradoxically, the Israeli invasion of 1982 led to the darkest period for Lebanese Jews. They were offered Israeli citizenship but none accepted. This did the community little good, however, since in 1984, at the height of the hostage-taking era, 11 Jewish community leaders were kidnapped by Islamist groups and killed. In 1991, only two Jews remained in Wadi Abu Jemil, and with a population of around 60, the community more or less ceased to exist.

What remains of this 3,000-year presence? A ruined synagogue, a cemetery and fond memories. Lately, it was decided that Magen Abraham would be restored. It will be surrounded by a garden open to downtown strollers.

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