Sat 4 June 2011
Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi (mizrahim@cox.net) **B"H**
Congregation Adat Reyim
Lunch and Learn

The Jews of Egypt

In a few hours it will be the 44th anniversary of the Six-Day War

-I was living in fear in downtown Cairo

-Nasser was whipping up war frenzy, threatening annihilation of Israel, engineering mammoth pro-war demonstrations, massing troops in Sinai, closing Straits of Tiran, expelling UN buffer troops; amen from PLO's Shukeiri and Coptic pope.

-I escaped imprisonment because I was (barely) under 18

-I was one of the last Jews to leave Egypt (on 3 Nov 1967)

Jews have a long history in Egypt

-First Jew to live permanently in Egypt was Joseph, some 3800 years ago

-Sold into slavery there, he rose to become Pharaoh's right-hand man

-He brought his family there, some 70 people (all the Jews!).

-Egypt enslaved the Jews, but they increased to some 3 million.

-Num. 1:46 gives 603,550 men; with families commentators estimate ~3 million

-Moses took them out and brought them to the Land of Israel, 3500 years ago.

God commanded: Thou shalt never again dwell permanently in Egypt

[Deut. 17:16; Deut. 28:68; Ex. 14:13; 601st commandment in the Rambam's enumeration]

-Yet some Jews returned and have lived in Egypt since time immemorial.

-The Rambam emigrated to Egypt in 1168 and did his most significant work there

-Other great rabbis lived in Egypt: Saadia Gaon (b. 882 in Egypt), Yaakov Berav (1522, b. Spain), Betzalel Ashkenazi (~1550, b. Israel), Isaac Luria (the Arizal, b. Jerusalem 1534), the Radbaz (1517, b. Spain)

-Some say the Rambam signed some letters "Moshe ben Maimon, who violates the commandment not to dwell in Egypt every day"

-Talmud links Roman killings to violation of commandment:

> Whoever has not seen the Double Colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has not seen the glory of Israel. It was like a huge basilica that contained twice the number of men who went out from Egypt [2x600,000], and there were 71 golden armchairs for 71 Sages, and each chair was no less than 21 talents of gold. And a wooden pulpit was in the middle of the palace where the attendant of the congregation stood with a scarf in his hand, and when the time came in the prayer to respond "Amen," he raised the flag, [so those who couldn't hear because of the great crowd could know when to respond] and the whole people said "Amen." And they did not sit mixed; rather the goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, coppersmiths and weavers all sat separately. And when a poor man went in, he recognized his fellow-tradesmen and went to them, and received work to support himself and his family. Said Abaye: And they were all killed by [Emperor Trajan in 117]. Why were they so punished? Because they transgressed the passage, "You shall not return [to Egypt] any more" [Deut. 17:16] and they did return. (Sukkah 51b)

-Talmud allows temporary returns:

> You may not return [to Egypt] to dwell there, but for the purpose of business or to conquer you may return (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 10:7).

-Radbaz: Rambam was forced to stay in Egypt by the government.
-Perhaps commandment can be interpreted to apply to the entire Jewish people, not a subset?

History of the Jews of Egypt in biblical times after Exodus

-Documents in Aramaic describe the lives of a community of Jewish soldiers stationed in Egypt for the Persian Empire, about 650 BCE.

-Large numbers of Jews took refuge in Egypt after the Babylonians destroyed the Kingdom of Judah in 597 BCE (2 Kings 25:26, Jeremiah 43:5-7). They settled in Migdol, Tahpanhes, Noph, and Pathros. (Jeremiah 44:1)

-When Alexander's general Ptolemy I took Judea in 318 BCE, he expelled 120,000 Jews to Egypt. Other Jews went there of their own accord, when they heard how fertile the soil was and how liberal Ptolemy was. (Josephus)

-When Alexandria was founded (332 BCE) Jews got 2 of the 5 districts. They were very wealthy. This caused intense judeophobia among their neighbors.

-Sources give a million Alexandrian Jews ~2000 years ago, under Greeks then Romans. Times of persecution alternated with times of peace. They served in the Army (sources speak of 30,000 Jewish soldiers at the time of the Ptolemies).

-Massive revolt of the Egyptian Jews under Emperor Trajan (114-117, between the two revolts in Israel in 70 and 135), suppressed with 50,000 Jews slaughtered (Josephus, the Jewish War Book 2.495ff)

-This, and mostly assimilation, caused Alexandrian Jewry to disappear

History of the Jews of Egypt since biblical times

-Information since then comes mostly from Cairo Genizah, a treasure trove of some 280,000 Jewish manuscripts found in late 19th century in the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue and the Bassatine cemetery where my father and ancestors are buried. (Oldest document: 870 CE)

> -Jewish tradition: Documents with name of God must not be burned but must be stored in a "genizah"

The documents were bought and are now mostly at Cambridge University, but also at JTS and the University of Manchester.

-Genizah attests to a long unbroken Jewish presence in Egypt

-The Copts (Christians of Egypt and descendents of the ancient Egyptians) harassed the Jews in collaboration with the now-Christian Roman Empire, so when Islam was born the Jews welcomed the Arab invasion

-Some Jews from Arabia emigrated to Egypt wih the Islamic conquest

-The genizah has a letter from Muhammad to the Jewish Banu Janba tribe in 630 CE, saying, "If you will remain loyal, we will be obligated to honor your respectable people and to forgive all your past offenses."

-The Arab conqueror, Amr ibn el As, reported 40,000 Jews in Alexandria in 641 CE

-Karaism, founded by Anan ben David about 760 CE, flourished in Egypt, one of its largest centers

-Karaites are Jews who reject the Talmud in favor of a literal interpretation of Torah

-I grew up around them. They had their own, parallel institutions.

-Intermarriage with them was forbidden

-The Rambam fought their influence on mainline Jews ("Rabbanites")

-They made up 40% of the Jews in 900-1100, their heyday [Salo Wittmayer Baron]

-But today they number less than 50,000, mostly in Israel

-Moshe Marzouk, an Egyptian Jew executed in Egypt in 1954 for Zionist activities in the Lavon affair, was a Karaite

-Muslims made use of the skills of the Jews. Jews became court physicians and ministers:

-The Rambam was Sultan Saladin's personal physician (~1170)

-In 1112, a Jew, Abul Munajja ibn Sha'yah, headed the Department of Agriculture. He built a Nile sluice (to control the flow of water in the various canals) called after him "Bahr Abil Munajja". But he spent too much state money for it, so they jailed him and he had to buy his way out.

-In 1137, vizier Al-Malik al-Afdal appointed a Jewish master of finances, but his enemies brought him down and he lost everything. His successor tried to throw all the Jews out of Egypt.

-A Jew, Abu Mansur, was the physician of the caliph Al-Hafiz (1131-49)

-A famous Jewish oculist named Abu al-Fada'il ibn al-Nakid died in 1189

-Under the Mamelukes (1250-1517) Jews in Egypt fared less well

-Sultan Baibars (1260-77) doubled the jizya, i.e. the tribute all Jews had to pay as "dhimmis" (protected people). He then blamed the Jews for starting a plague and resolved to burn them all. He had a ditch dug for that purpose. In the end he relented and instead exacted a heavy tribute, killing many during its collection.

-In 1325 large fires erupted in Cairo, the Jews were falsely accused of starting them, and they were extorted 75,000 pieces of gold

-The Turks ruled Egypt from 1517 to 1922

-We came once again close to genocide in 1524. Viceroy Ahmed Pasha decided to exterminate all the Jews of Cairo unless an impossible sum of money were paid to him, much more than all their assets combined. But he was also plotting against the Emperor, Suleiman II. On the deadline he set for the Jews, 28 Adar, he was assassinated by troops loyal to the Emperor, and the Jews were saved.

-Since that time, a scroll recounting that story was read in Egyptian synagogues on that day, Purim Mitzrayim, the Purim of Egypt, celebrated in addition to the traditional Purim

-The viceroy always had a Jew at his side to collect taxes

-Shabbetai Tzvi, would-be Messiah, married in Cairo in 1660

-Blood libel cases to harass Jews in Egypt at least 8 times between 1840 and 1908

History of the Jews of Egypt in modern times

-Beginning in the middle of the 19th century more Jews were invited to Egypt by viceroy Mohammed Ali and his successors.

-The Jews came, including all my grandparents, and helped usher in an economic miracle.
-They produced merchants, bankers, industrialists, builders, physicians, ministers, intellectuals, nationalists, – too many to list. They built modern Egypt.
-All large department stores in Egypt but one were founded and owned by Jews
-The community was diverse. There were poor Jews, middle-class Jews, rich Jews, almost in equal numbers.

-We were in the middle. My father had a small clothing store in downtown Cairo, employing two people, not far from our apartment.

-More than 90% of the Jews were denied Egyptian citizenship, even if born in the country. They were "stateless"(no nationality), and therefore had no protection from any entity. Some were able to claim a European citizenship through their descendance:

-My family was Italian because my grandfather was born and raised in the island of Rhodes, which was for a time administered by Italy. Both my parents were born in Egypt, but none of my grandparents.

-Numerically, the Jews of Egypt were

-Close to 100,000 strong in 1948, when Israel was created and Egypt promptly sent its army to destroy it. Then the noose began to tighten around their collective neck.
-Only 10,000 remained after the 1956 Suez war.
-Only 1,000 remained at the time of the Six-Day War in 1967, including myself.
-Less than 100 remain today (mostly elderly intermarried women).

-How did the noose tighten?

-The larger businesses were seized and controlled by a government agent, with the owner becoming a temporary employee paid a small salary
-Import and export licenses were revoked, including my father's
-Government employees were fired
-Many institutions were closed to Jews
-Jews were blacklisted and could not find jobs
-Bribes and protection money were demanded
-Bank accounts were frozen
-Surveillance was tight and none-too-subtle. Fear was pervasive. Our mezuzot were on the inside, never on the outside.
-Foreign travel was banned, unless it was one-way only: Out
-Hundreds were arbitrarily arrested, detained, tortured, humiliated, expropriated, and expelled, forced to sign papers saying they were "voluntarily" relinquishing all their assets and would never come back to Egypt.
-There were occasional riots, killings, bombings and arson in the Jewish Quarter. There was no accountability: The Jews were mostly stateless, so they had no protection, no one to speak for them.

The Jews of Egypt have dispersed all over the world

-Israel took 35,000, Brazil 15,000, France 10,000, the US 9,000, Argentina 9,000, and other countries the rest (UK, Canada, Australia, etc.)
-Not one -- not one! -- has gone back to live there. Some have gone back to visit, but most don't even want to do that, including myself.

Egypt is unrepentant

-Egypt stole billions from its Jews, forced them to leave with nothing, and made no restitution

-Egypt never acknowledged its evil treatment of Jews, much less apologized for it

-Egypt never recognized, in its press or history books, the great contribution the Jews have made to their country of birth

-Egypt even refuses to return simple items that tell our story: Torah scrolls, prayerbooks, libraries, Judaica artifacts, even copies of the plain rabbinical archives that tell us who we are and who our ancestors were!

The Jews are gone from Egypt, but Egypt continues to demonize them

-In its press and media, mosques and churches

-Frequently not even bothering to use the fig leaf of criticizing Israel.

The Jews of Egypt are happier out of Egypt

-The Lord works in mysterious ways. In the end, most Jews from Egypt did well for themselves and are happier where they are today than they could ever have been in Egypt, even under the best of circumstances.

-Some who left in middle age had difficulties adapting, but all agree that leaving gave a better life to their descendants, as events have shown.

-Egypt is practically *judenrein* today, for the first time since biblical days

-Maybe the commandment not to dwell there meant exactly what it said.