

'You may be the special ones but remember that you met someone from this grey unit who knew how to treat those Palestinians.'

I became what I became. It was not what I wanted. I was inside the garbage can of the world during those very crucial years of 18 and 19. I don't know if you can understand what that does to you.

My decision to go to jail rather than to the territories at the beginning of the Second Intifada was a moral position. I didn't want to take a part in this crime.

One major reason for going to jail was the feeling that in jail, I would cover my sins. This will be the price.

When I see news on TV about Gaza today, I feel sad. Sometimes it makes me crazy inside. I feel bad that I'm not doing something to help and sometimes I feel very desperate or helpless.

If there was a reunion for people who served in my unit, I wouldn't go to it. This was the most terrible period of my life.

I didn't humiliate Palestinians most of the time, but I stood by and did nothing while it happened. A very few soldiers in my unit were critical but I wasn't one of them. I was just a good soldier in the most banal sense of the phrase.

I didn't think I was someone evil. I had become the essence of the evil without even thinking about it.

YEHUDA TAJAR

From the depths I call out to you

Perhaps no Israeli military mission has been more darkly viewed than the one that began in Baghdad in the 1940s. In 1951, several Mossad agents in Baghdad were arrested and convicted of bombing Jewish targets – and killing Jewish civilians – in a bid to spark a mass flight of Iraqi Jews to Israel. Some of the Israelis were executed. However, their alleged goal succeeded. All but a handful of Iraq's estimated 130,000 Jews fled the country. Three years later, the 'Lavon affair'¹⁶ in Egypt proved to many that Israeli agents and local Jews they had hired were indeed capable of such subterfuge. But doubts about what really happened in Iraq remained. Prior to this interview, Yehuda Tajar, one of the arrested Iraqi Mossad agents, whose court testimony was often cited as 'proof' of his guilt, had never before spoken to a non-Israeli journalist about the events of 1951. He is an urbane, slightly mischievous man,

16. Morris, *Righteous Victims*, pp. 281–2. When Britain and Egypt signed an agreement for the removal of British troops from their bases in the Suez military canal in 1954, Israeli strategists began a black operation in Egypt. 'At the beginning of July



Yehuda Tajar. Photo by Arthur Neslen

now living an anonymous existence in the suburbs of Tel Aviv. He is still associated with the Mossad, whose motto is: 'By way of deception thou shalt do war.'

My first memory of life is of being evacuated from the Jewish quarter of Kiryat Moshe in 1929, when I was six. Kiryat Moshe was the village adjacent to Deir Yassin.¹⁷ My grandfather was the quarter's rabbi.

It was a Saturday morning and they attacked us with gunfire. We had almost no defences. Just a few people from the Hagana tried to do something. I remember my grandfather taking the Sefer Torah¹⁸ in his hand as we travelled to a hospital in Jerusalem. This is my first memory of life. *Ladino Jew*

My family had lived in Israel for more than 25 generations, since they were expelled from Spain in 1492. My mother comes from the Meyuhas family, who led the Jewish community in Spain and established a synagogue in Jerusalem in 1510. My father's side were comparative newcomers. They arrived in 1712.

I was born in 1923 or '24 – we don't know the exact date – in Mishkenot Sha'ananim which faces the Old City in Jerusalem. Mishkenot's residents were known as 'the old people', because Jews used only to come to Jerusalem to pray and die. My family had lived for such a long time under Muslim domination that they accepted it as natural. The mayor of Jerusalem was always an Arab, the responsibility for your life lay with the government, and the way to deal with any injustice was to petition the authorities, as all Jews did in the exile. My family were not Zionists.

1954, Unit 131, a psychological warfare department of IDF intelligence, launched a long-dormant Egyptian-Jewish network on a bombing campaign in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, targeting American and British cultural centres and other sensitive Western sites.' The agents involved, mostly young Egyptian Jews who had been recruited by Israeli intelligence, were arrested, tortured, and in two instances, executed. Israel initially denied any involvement in the operation but the incident eventually led to the ousting of the defence minister, Pinhas Lavon and the director of military intelligence, Col. Binyamin Givli. It came to be known as the Lavon affair.

17. Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (rev. edn, New York: Nash, 1977), p. 164. On 9 April 1948, Jewish fighters of the Irgun and Stern Gang massacred more than 250 Palestinian civilians in the village of Deir Yassin. Palestinians charge that the killings were an act of ethnic cleansing, intended to provoke a flight of surrounding villagers. Begin, the IZL's leader, and future Israeli PM, wrote of the effect of Deir Yassin: 'Arabs throughout the country, induced to believe wild tales of "Irgun butchery", were seized with limitless panic and started to flee for their lives. This mass flight soon developed into a maddened uncontrollable stampede. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be overestimated.'

18. The Sefer Torah is a scroll containing the Five Books of Moses. It is kept in a synagogue and read publicly on holidays and the Sabbath.

But Jewish immigration was beginning – and so was a revolution for the old people. Jews were starting to move outside the Old City and work in agriculture. My family were one of the first to go. What became known as the 'Medina Bederech' – the state *in situ* – was beginning.

When the disturbances started again, there were no evacuations because we had the Hagana and Etzel¹⁹ to defend us. In 1937, I joined the Hagana, while I was still in school. In 1941, I joined the Palmach in Jerusalem and in 1943 I worked for Aliyah Bet, helping illegal immigrants come to Israel.

At times I admired Jabotinsky²⁰ and the Etzel people who were ready to sacrifice their lives for their ideas. But, unlike, the Hagana, they were outside the national consciousness. Yitzhak Shamir²¹ had even taken the underground name of 'Michael' after the Irish leader Michael Collins who argued against any compromise with the British.

The Holocaust changed everyone's attitudes. After the war, a UN resolution called for the establishment of two states because the world felt that nothing had been done to help the Jews. We accepted the resolution, the Arabs rejected it, and Arab armies attacked us from every border. It was very hard. We at the time were hardly 600,000 people and more than 6,000 of us were killed.

The Arabs were very cruel. When Gush Etzion was cut off from Jerusalem, a platoon was sent to reinforce it. They were ordered to kill an Arab shepherd they found on the way but the commander was a humane man and he refused. The shepherd let out a 'tsfaza' [warning cry] and thousands of villagers descended on the platoon and massacred all 35 of them. Their bodies were slashed open and their testicles were cut off and stuffed in their mouths.

19. Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 21. The April 1936 Palestinian uprising was sparked by a series of tit-for-tat sectarian killings but directed against the Jewish settlers who were agitating for statehood. It lasted three years and, though unsuccessful, provoked the Peel Commission in London to conclude that Jewish and Arab nationalisms were equally intransigent and Palestine should thus be partitioned into two separate states.

20. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*. Lenny Brenner, *51 Documents* (Barricade Books, 2002), pp. 10–14. Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940) was the founding father of revisionist Zionism and former leader of the Irgun. He saw Jewish culture as being an offshoot of western civilisation that would have to be implanted into a primitive and backward Middle East. Jabotinsky was not uninfluenced by the rise of Mussolini, and in his 1904 'Letter on autonomy', justified his credo thus: 'It is impossible for a man to become assimilated with people whose blood is different from his own... A preservation of national integrity is impossible except by a preservation of racial purity.'

21. Yitzhak Shamir became the Lehi director of operations after splitting from the marginally less extreme Irgun in 1940 and was involved in the planning and execution of numerous terrorist attacks. He went on to work for the Israeli security services after the founding of the state and succeeded Menachem Begin to become Likud prime minister from 1983 to 1992.

How did you feel about Jews who stayed in the Diaspora during such carnage?

I was a company commander in the sixth brigade at the time and I was so busy fighting that I didn't even pay attention to the declaration of independence. I admired Churchill's speech, 'You give us the tools and we'll do the job'. At the time, we didn't want fighting people. We wanted assistance in other respects.

Yet you risked your life going to Iraq to help Jews there...

In August 1950, I was sent on a mission by the state of Israel, by the Mossad. I am very proud of the Mossad – I am still connected with it – but back then we were taking our first baby steps and mistakes were made. We had three objectives. First, to bring the Jews of Iraq to Israel because we were only 600,000 people and we had to increase our numbers as fast as possible. There were 130,000 Jews in Baghdad. Second, their situation was very bad. There had been a pogrom in 1941 and the Hagana had set up a self-defence branch there after that, trained by Israeli instructors. Thirdly, we wanted intelligence because during the war the Iraqi army fought in Israel. But my preparation was very bad and I was recognised twice.

To improve my Arabic, my last posting had been as area commander of Acre. But an Arab who worked with us there became one of the refugees. In Iraq he got a job with the Tacticat (CID) and we came face to face one day. He recognised me.

The second time was after I had been in Iraq for eight months. I had to go back to Tel Aviv for the Passover and I went via Paris. My girlfriend of the time was working as an air hostess. All she knew was that I'd disappeared from her life. Well, it just so happened that as the Iraqi group I was with marched through the terminal, an Israeli group with her in it walked straight past. She saw me, ran over and tried to kiss me. I kind of threw her back but the whole Iraqi group saw it.

What happened to you?

I was arrested, I think on 25 May 1951. There had been three big explosions, concentrated in a short period – I think Masauda Shemtov was the last and biggest.²² I was in Baghdad then but it was the Muslim Brotherhood who did it, not us Israelis. The reason given – that it was done to frighten Jews into making

22. Naeim Giladi, 'The Jews of Iraq', *The Link*, vol. 31, issue 2, April–May 1998. 'On January 14, 1951, at 7pm, a grenade was thrown at a group of Jews outside the Masouda Shem-Tov Synagogue. The explosive struck a high-voltage cable, electrocuting three Jews, one a young boy, Itzhak Elmacher, and wounding over 30 others. Following the attack, the exodus of Jews jumped to between 600–700 per day.' Before this attack, Jews had been wounded in bombings at the US Information Office and the Dar-el-Baida coffee shop, among others.

aliyah – doesn't hold because more than 120,000 of the country's 130,000 Jews had already registered for exit visas. There was no need to encourage anyone.²³ Still, myself, Mordechai Ben Parat and others in our group were sent to prison for the bombings.

Now, I cannot prove it but it was confirmed indirectly to me that one Israeli was responsible for later bombs. In my cell in Baghdad Prison, it became a tradition that when prisoners were to be hanged, they'd call me in to be with them on their last night. I asked one man, Yosef Basri, whether he threw the bombs. He said, 'I didn't'. I asked, 'Maybe other friends?' He kept quiet. So after I was released ten years later, I spoke with the wife of a man who had died. She said she'd asked him [if he had thrown the bombs] and he'd replied that if a bomb were thrown while we were in prison, it would have proved that it was not us who bombed the Masauda Shemtov. She implied that he on his own initiative, without orders from Israel, did it in order to save us.

What was the man's name?

Yosef Bet Halachmi. His name there was Josef Habaza.²⁴

And which was the incident where he threw the bomb?

(prays) I know of what I know.

And he didn't throw the bomb at Masauda Shemtov?

No! Not Masauda Shemtov. Yosef threw one or two small explosions. I don't know where or when. I'm afraid if you ask others they will say we Jews did not throw anything. I cannot confirm my story. I think it is the way I presented because I knew this young man, Josef Habaza's way of thought. He was an activist. He always wanted to do things. Thinking that it would help us, I believe that he did it.

23. David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch* (Futura Publications, 1977), ch. 5. Hirst posits that the rush for exit visas was a direct result of the panic that swept the Iraqi Jewish community in the aftermath of the bombings. He says that 'about 10,000' Jews signed up for visas after the Dar-el-Beida bombing and cites an Iraqi government newspaper quoted in 'the Black Panther' (a Hebrew journal) of 9 November 1972, to show that travel restrictions on Jews was not a key issue. 'The encounters between the police and the emigrant groups showed that some Iraqi Jews do not want to live in this country. Through their fleeing they give a bad name to Iraq. Those who do not wish to live among us have no place here. Let them go.'

24. Giladi, 'Jews of Iraq'. 'Yosef Basri, a lawyer, together with Shalom Salih, a shoemaker, would be put on trial for the attacks in December 1951 and executed the following month. Both men were members of Hashura, the military arm of the Zionist underground. Salih ultimately confessed that he, Basri and a third man, Yosef Habaza, carried out the attack.'

You're saying that he was responsible for throwing minor bombs which were never publicised and had no practical effect?

The first three explosions were also small. The media only made a big noise out of it because the government wanted them to. I don't recollect that there was any public notice or reaction to the other two.

Some people think that all the bombings were carried out by Mossad...

I'll tell you what. Recognising how things work in Iraq and knowing what followed in the time of Abdul Salaam Arif,²⁵ when Jews were sentenced to death for no reason at all, I wouldn't have minded at all – I mean, knowing that I, personally, in order to save Jewish lives, or at least to decrease their numbers [in Iraq] – I wouldn't have hesitated to put a bomb in order not to kill, but so that people would [leave]. Not that I did it. But years after, I do say that openly.

*A columnist once wrote something similar. 'If I had the power as I have the will, I would select a score of efficient young men, intelligent, decent, devoted to our ideal and burning with the desire to help redeem Jews... and I would send them to countries where Jews are absorbed in sinful self-satisfaction. The task of these young men would be to disguise themselves as non-Jews and plague Jews with anti-Semitic slogans and similar intimacies... I can vouch that the results in terms of considerable immigration to Israel from these countries would be 10,000 times larger than the results brought by thousands of emissaries who have been preaching for decades to deaf ears.'*²⁶

He puts it very nicely. But anti-Semitism in the world is so strong that Jews will come [to Israel] wherever they have the chance. Things would have happened the same. All the Jewish community would have come.

Did you have a fair trial?

On the surface it was a regular ordinary trial, but everybody knew what the outcome would be. Believe it or not, I should only have been sentenced to five years according to Iraqi law. The confessions were obtained by torture. For the first ten days, I said nothing. I was hung from the roof by a chain and beaten by two gorillas with *sjambols* and clubs covered in blankets. The blows would make you fly but then the chain would suddenly stop so you were torn to the other side. And they put your fingers in a machine which took your nails out. They also shoved a club up the backsides of prisoners in front of me and said, 'This may happen to you'.

25. Abdul Salaam Arif came to power in a military coup that ousted Abdul Karim Qassem in 1963. While he was president, Iraq was swept by a bloody wave of revenge attacks. In 1966, Arif died in a mysterious helicopter crash. His prime minister, Dr Abdul Rahman al-Bazzaz, was nominated as his replacement but prevented from taking office by sections of the military.

26. Abraham Spadron, *Davar*. 11 July 1952.

Little by little, I stopped denying. 'You are Israeli.' 'No, I'm not Israeli.' Little by little, I kind of kept quiet. You may say in a negative way I confessed that I'm Israeli by not denying it any more. I decided to hold to red lines that I would not cross. We were in contact with Israel at an active station in a respectable Jewish suburb and until the last moment, I would not endanger any other Jew there.

But I had to give them something. I told myself: 'Never get to the stage where you're broken because once you confess, you'll become so angry with yourself that you'll lose control. You won't know what is important or not and you'll tell them everything. When the time comes, retreat under control.' In other words, try to win time.

One of us, Rodney, was a British citizen, and I thought he'd left because only the British could leave the airport without a permit. So I spoke about Rodney in order not to speak about Mordechai Ben Porat who, as a local Jew, would have been hanged. Rodney as a British subject would get a short jail sentence and his conditions would have been much better.

You say what you have to, in order to protect those who you need to.

(coughs and nods)

Did you find any solace in prison from religion?

I was from a religious family. As a youth, my father wanted me to become a rabbi and I studied in a yeshiva. The Communists dominated life in jail but they fought with me and even staged a mock execution for me. They had a big library but I was boycotted so I could only get a Bible. I read it from the artistic and ethical perspectives. I knew the psalms of David by heart, but the story of the prophet Jeremiah in prison had particular resonance for me. Then there is the psalm, 'from the depths I call out to you'.²⁷ I repeated it to myself. I'm not a religious man but these things comfort.

I was thinking of Jonah and the whale...

Strangely enough, now that you say it, I wonder why I didn't. It is also set in Babylon.

In any case, I was sentenced to life imprisonment – 25 years – with hard labour. The first seven years, I got no reduction at all. After the revolution, the

27. Psalm 130: 1–8, King James Bible. 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.'

government pardoned all nationalist and Communist prisoners. Gradually, they reduced our sentences too. I was released after ten years. Iraq under Abdul Karim Qasim was by then fighting for its independence against Nasser's Egypt. Syria and Egypt were old allies and they were facing Iraqi units on the border. Israel was then on friendly terms with Iran and through its contacts, it informed Iraq of many things. As an act of grace, we were released.

In prison, I met a famous Iraqi nationalist, Abdul Rahman Al-Bazaz. He was a former Dean of Law at Baghdad University and he'd always preach. I'd stand outside his salon listening because I'm a permanent student. When he saw me one day, he said I was his most faithful listener. Others came and went but I stayed there. He told me, 'Outside I will kill you but here you are under my protection.'

Later he was sent to England as the Iraqi ambassador, while I was at the Israeli embassy in London doing my PhD at the LSE. One day, at an embassy reception for the Queen, he passed by in the other direction with a group of Arab ambassadors. I didn't want to embarrass him but he saw me and I smiled. He gave such a big smile back that all the Arab ambassadors looked. After he left London, he was appointed as Iraq's prime minister.

But during a coup, he was tortured to death in the basement of a palace. One of his eyes was gouged out with a finger. That's how things work in Iraq. There is nothing democratic in the Arab world.

3

Strangers in the Land of their Fathers

The Hebrew word 'Mizrahi' ('Eastern' or 'Oriental') is a strange term for Jews to use negatively. Ashkenazi Jews in Europe were historically viewed as Orientals or, as the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder put it, 'the Asiatics of Europe'.¹ From the late eighteenth century, some in the Ashkenazi Diaspora idealised the 'Oriental' label. Reacting to popular imagery of the 'noble Orient', for instance, Benjamin Disraeli, the British Tory prime minister of Jewish descent, once described Jews as an 'Arabian tribe' and Arabs as 'Jews on horseback'.² In the post-Enlightenment period, the Orient was reconstructed as an inferior value system in such a way as to justify European imperial ambitions. Anti-Semites, such as Adolf Wahrmund, morphed the noble Orient into a 'nomadic culture of the desert [that can] only interact with settled peoples such as the Europeans by robbing and enslaving them'.³ Zionism developed as an 'authentic' late-European nationalism in this period.

By the time of the first mass Mizrahi migrations to Israel in 1949, a popular image of the Orient as illiterate, wild, despotic and pre-modern was prevalent in Ashkenazi society. Arye Gelblum wrote in the liberal Ha'aretz newspaper:

racist quote
This is immigration of a race we have not yet known in this country... we are dealing with people whose primitivism is at a peak, whose level of knowledge is one of virtually absolute ignorance, and worse, who have little talent for understanding anything intellectual. Generally, they are only slightly better than the general level of the Arabs, Negroes and Berbers in the same regions ... These Jews also lack roots in Judaism, as they are totally subordinated to the play of savage and primitive instincts... As with the Africans you will find card games for money, drunkenness and prostitution. Most of them have serious eye, skin and sexual diseases, without mentioning robberies and thefts. Chronic laziness and hatred for work, there is nothing safe about this asocial element.⁴

1. Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham: Brandeis University 2004), Introduction.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Arye Gelblum, *Ha'aretz*, 22 April 1949.