



# TIES THAT BIND

From Moses to Suez and  
sixty years on

ALEC NACAMULI

BY ALEC NACAMULI

When I tell people that I was born in Egypt, they usually remark, “That’s interesting, but didn’t all the Jews leave with Moses?” I reply that I left in 1956 after the second exodus—the Suez Crisis of 1956. Meanwhile most Egyptians will insist that no Jews ever lived in Egypt. In fact, although largely oblivious to each other, the two peoples have cohabited continuously for thousands of years right up to the present day. This is the land we never left.

The sixtieth anniversary of the Suez Crisis has prompted numerous publications focusing on the events of the 1950s. Too many fail to consider the complete history of the Jews of Egypt. Those who watched Simon Schama’s television series *The Story of the Jews* will remember the remains of the synagogue on the island of Elephantine, off Aswan, dating back to c.500 BCE. Since then, there have been successive cycles of Jewish immigration, repression and emigration.

The Ptolemaic successors to Alexander the Great brought Jewish slaves to Alexandria around 300 BCE. At that time, the Hellenised Jewish community numbered 180,000. They suffered under the subsequent Roman occupation that brutally repressed a Jewish uprising in 115, twenty years before Bar Kochba in Judea. The Arabs from



Mecca invaded Egypt in 642, submitting Jews to alternating cycles of submission and tolerance. During a period of tolerance, Maimonides settled in Egypt, becoming the court physician to Saladin. He wrote the *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide to the Perplexed* in Arabic before dying in Egypt in 1204. The Cairo Genizah, a treasure trove of Jewish manuscripts and scrolls, also dates from this period.

Almost five hundred years ago, the Ottomans conquered Egypt in 1517 and welcomed Jews to develop international trade. The price of cotton quadrupled during the American Civil War, resulting in a boom in Egyptian cotton. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Egypt became a golden medina to which people from all over Europe and the Middle East flocked, including many Jews. More Jewish immigration followed from Palestine, Salonika and Smyrna (today Izmir) during the First World War and following the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire.

From then on, the Egyptian-Jewish community would be largely composed of immigrants. The indigenous Arabic-speaking Egyptian Jews were reduced to a minority whose poorer elements clustered around the Hart el’ Yahood (Jewish Quarter) in Cairo. Numbering around 60,000





*Until 1950, Egypt was a model of tolerance and mutual respect where people of different nationalities and religions mixed socially and worked together.*

in 1917, it was the most prosperous in the Middle East. The majority were Sefaradim and Mizrahim (Oriental), alongside a few Ashkenazim. There was also a large Karaite community that maintained its separate identity and religious practices, adhering solely to the Pentateuch and ignoring the Oral Law, not celebrating, for instance, Hanukah, and rejecting tephillin and mezuzoth as amulets.

Whilst the original Egyptian Jews were mainly artisans, jewellers or moneylenders, the new immigrants leveraged their superior education and international contacts to develop international trade and contribute

disproportionately to Egypt's economic development in banking (Cattaui, Mosseri, Zilkha), textiles, food and urban development. The Suares family built the Cairo tramway network and Joseph Smouha, who was originally from Baghdad but emigrated from Manchester, drained the marshland around Alexandria to develop the idyllic Smouha Garden City. The stock and cotton exchanges closed on Jewish holidays. Even today, the main department stores retain their original Jewish names—Cicurel, Hanaux, Chemla. In 2001, I saw a crowd fighting to get into the Benzion department store in Aswan for the first day of the sales.

Jews were also involved in the drive to wrest independence from Britain. The journalist and satirist, James Zaradel Sanua, better known by his pseudonym Abu Naddara (Father Spectacles), published a pro-independence newspaper and supported the unsuccessful Urabbi uprising in 1882. Félix Benzakein, Victor Sonsino and David Hazan (condemned to death in absentia by the British) were amongst the leaders of the Wafd (Delegation) independence party led by Saad Zaghloul Pasha; Leon de Castro, editor of the *El Horeya* (Freedom) newspaper, was the Wafd's itinerant ambassador. After independence in 1922 under King Fuad, Joseph Cattaui Pasha became the first minister of finance. The chief rabbi Haim Nahum Effendi, was a senator and wrote most of the king's speeches. The king attended Kol Nidrei at the main Cairo synagogue to mark solidarity with his Jewish subjects.

At the other extreme of the political spectrum Jacques Rosenthal, Hillel Schwartz and Henri Curiel were founding members of the Egyptian Communist Party. Originally centred around intellectual groups mainly composed of foreigners, it only reached the wider sections of the Egyptian working class after the Second World War. Ultimately, the active presence of Jewish members projected a negative perception of the party that expelled most Jews after 1948, in spite of their strong Egyptian nationalism and opposition to Zionism as a bourgeois movement.

Jews also contributed to Egyptian culture: the same James Zaradel Sanua was the father of Egyptian popular theatre, nicknamed the "Egyptian Molière" and Togo Mizrahi was one of the Egyptian cinema moghuls, bearing in mind that Egypt was the Arab Hollywood. Some of the most famous actors were Jewish: Shalom, Raqya Ibrahim (real name Rachel Levi), Camelia (Liliane Cohen) and the superstar actor, singer and dancer, Leila Mourad (Mordechai), daughter of a hazan, who was chosen in 1952 to sing the "Song of the Revolution" instead of the adulated Umm Khulsum. There was also a vibrant Jewish press: *Israel*, *L'Aurore*, *Tribune Juive* in French, and *El Chams* (The Sun) in Arabic.

Jewish religious and community life was very active. The Cairo and Alexandria communities operated independently, working in French. Cairo boasted eighteen synagogues and Alexandria twelve, as well as private oratories maintained by some of the richer families. In addition to religious matters, the communities managed







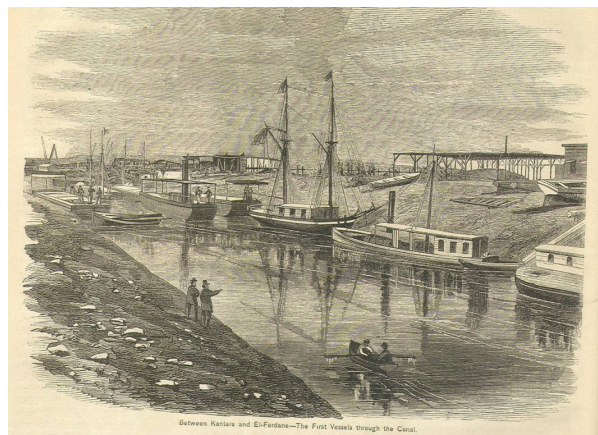
hospitals, orphanages, old peoples' homes and a vast network of charities, including one that provided dowries to brides from poor families. They also maintained the civil registers (births, marriages and deaths) under the Ottoman *millet* system that devolved this task to the religious communities.

Several Jewish schools were established to provide a modern education in French to Arabic-speaking children and the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle were eventually taken over by the communities. The B'nai B'rith founded the *Lycée de l'Union Juive* in Alexandria following an accusation of ritual murder at a Catholic school. The wealthier families would, however, send their children to English or French schools, or even to Jesuit and convent establishments.

Indigenous Egyptian-Jews were more observant than the more recent immigrants who generally did not keep kosher homes. My family ate shellfish but not pork! Shabbat service at the main Eliahou Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria was generally followed by coffee at the nearby Brazilian Coffee Store. The *pidyon ha-ben* (redemption of the first born) was joyously celebrated. When a young boy reached 13, laying tephillin for the first time on Thursday was considered more important than the Aliya on the following Shabbat: we would say "Sam is laying tephillin this year" as opposed to "celebrating his bar-mitzvah". After a family lunch, the young man would entertain a few friends at home with a games party that bears no resemblance to the extravaganzas of today. Young girls would celebrate the coming of age, robed in white, in a communal *Bat Hai* at the synagogue. Weddings were normally consecrated in the house of the *hatan* after the *kala* had visited the mikvah. Festivals were celebrated with the extended family, with rice, *hamino* eggs (hardboiled for hours with onion peel) and lamb served at Seder. At Rosh Hashana we would wish each other "*Kulo sana enta tayeb*" in Arabic (the whole year you should be well) rather than "*Shana tova*".

An embryonic Zionist movement existed in the nineteenth century, reinforced by the arrival of Ashkenazim and Jews from Palestine. Jack Mosseri founded the Egyptian Zionist Federation in 1917, supported by two journals, *Israël* and *La Revue Sioniste*. It might seem a contradiction today that the leaders of Zionist movements were also active in the Egyptian nationalist Wafd, but both pursued the same objective: to kick out the British! Activities were, however, reduced after independence following disapproval by King Fuad. Leadership of the Jewish communities adopted anti-Zionist positions and only around four thousand Jews from Egypt had emigrated to Palestine by 1947. Zionist groups worked clandestinely thereafter, often operating in the shadow of the Jewish scouts and the Macabi.

Until 1950, Egypt was a model of tolerance and mutual respect where people of different nationalities and religions mixed socially and worked together. French was the lingua franca, although people would often mix Arabic, English or Italian words in conversation. It was an



**The first vessels through the Suez Canal, between Kantara and El-Fedane; 19th century image**

© APPLETON'S JOURNAL OF POPULAR LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND ART, 1869



**School of the Jewish Community, 1939**

extremely comfortable life for the middle and upper classes: spacious villas or apartments, domestic servants, parties, summers on the beach in Alexandria, social clubs, delicious patisseries, the latest European and American films, regular visits by European theatre companies, operas and singers.

Antisemitism began to rear its ugly head in the mid-1930s with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. King Farouk held deep Nazi sympathies as evidenced by a telegram to Hitler sent before El Alamein in which he expressed himself "united with his people in the wish to see German troops victorious in Egypt as liberators from unbearable, brutal British yoke". The rise of Arab nationalism after the war inevitably conflicted with an unequal foreign-dominated society and Zionism. The 1947 Company Law decreed that fifty-one per cent of capital and seventy-five per cent of employees had to be Egyptian, forcing some Jews to acquire Egyptian nationality. Riots and attacks on Jews broke out in 1947 during the UN vote on Palestine partition during which the Ashkenazi Synagogue in Cairo was set on fire: the government apologised and paid reparations. The same occurred at the birth of Israel in May 1948 and during the War of Independence, which gave the authorities pretext to throw in prison not only "Zionist" Jews, but also communists and Muslim Brotherhood activists. These attacks prompted the departure of 15-20,000 Jews between 1949 and 1951. Jews and their properties were again attacked during riots against King Farouk in 1952, whose corrupt government and dissolute



A sign outside Cairo's Ben Ezra synagogue which reads, "Property of the Jewish community of Cairo"

© JONO DAVID/HACHAYIM HAYEHODIN JEWISH PHOTO LIBRARY

*At Rosh Hashana we would wish each other "Kulo sana enta tayeab" in Arabic (the whole year you should be well) rather than "Shana tova".*

lifestyle led to his toppling by the Free Officers headed by General Naguib. Naguib made a point of attending Kol Nidrei that year, lulling many Jews into a false sense of security that life could continue as before.

It became rapidly apparent that Naguib was only a figurehead—the leader of the revolution was Colonel Nasser who seized power in 1954. Driven by his vision of pan-Arab socialism, Nasser was a compelling orator who could mesmerise crowds for hours. He gave the vote to women, introduced a minimum wage, and instituted agrarian reform, redistributing land from large owners to the *fellaheen* (peasants). Alongside Tito and Nehru he was a founder of the Non-Aligned Countries, attempting to remain neutral between the Eastern and Western blocks.

After the UK and the USA refused to finance the Aswan Dam he nationalised the Suez Canal to gain revenues, leading to the 1956 Suez Crisis. Curfews and blackouts were imposed, although I do not remember much military activity around Alexandria, as the action and bombing concentrated on the Suez Canal and the "martyr city" of Port Said. The military victory gave way to political defeat following US intervention. French and British citizens were expelled as well as the majority of Jews after their businesses were sequestered and their assets confiscated: after obtaining an "exit visa", they were allowed to leave with only one suitcase and £50, often after humiliating personal searches at final departure. Egyptian citizens were stripped of their nationality and expelled "without return". Fathers were often released

from prison and reunited with their families at boarding. Some 30,000 Jews left in a few months.

I was 13 years old at the time: my tephillin was postponed, my school the Lycée Français closed as all French teachers had left and we were confined to our home. I was distraught at the thought of never seeing my classmates again. Efforts by my parents to conceal that we were leaving were in vain: conversations revolved solely around who was leaving, when, and for where. My family sailed on 15 December 1956. I was an avid reader and the last thing I did before leaving our home was to run my hand over all my books. My mother and our servants cried. A final scare occurred when, after we had boarded the ship, my father was summoned to a lounge occupied by the police, but he returned an agonising hour later. He celebrated that date every year thereafter as *Pessah Sheni* (Pesach 2).

Some 2,000 Jews remained in Egypt at the time of the Six Day War in 1967; several were interned in labour camps, humiliated and brutally treated before expulsion, as during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Of a community that numbered over 80,000 in 1945, there are today less than twelve Jews left, including a few elderly women and one man.

Jews from Egypt are today scattered all over the world, principally in Israel, the UK, France, Italy, Switzerland, USA, Canada, Australia and Brazil. How did they fare in exile? Those who went to Israel shared the perceived humiliation of Sephardi and Mizrahi immigrants by the condescending "Ashkenazi elite". Jewish communities in other countries provided a helping hand. The family hierarchy, based on a paternalistic authoritarian model, changed. Fathers appeared vulnerable for the first time, often having to accept jobs below their capacity and previous status. Mothers, accustomed to giving instructions to servants, assumed cooking and household chores. Children often had to adapt to schools in a different language and were exposed to a much wider social spectrum than they had previously experienced. Parents lost their unchallenged authority: daughters resisted control over outings and boyfriends, while their brothers refused to chaperone them.

That said, with very few exceptions, their business skills and the excellent education received in Egypt, coupled with fluency in many languages and the ability to relate to diverse cultures, enabled them to successfully rebuild their lives, refusing to consider themselves "refugees". The Arabic expression "*ele fat, mat*" (what has passed is dead) became a mantra: parents threw themselves into work and children were left in no doubt that education was top priority. They entered the best universities, and Jews from Egypt have gained leading positions in business, finance, science, medicine and the arts.

How can their history be preserved? Associations of Jews from Egypt are active in several countries. The Nebi Daniel International Association (named after the street where the main Alexandria synagogue stands) has been negotiating, unfortunately without success, with the Egyptian authorities for nearly fifteen years to reach an





agreement on the preservation and future of the remaining synagogues, Judaica (over a hundred Sifrei Torah!) and cemeteries. We have also vainly sought permission to digitise the civil registers held by the communities for genealogical research and for proof of civilian and religious identity. Another endeavour is Sephardi Voices, an oral history and education project recording video testimonies of Jews who were forced to leave the Middle East and North Africa. Recordings in the UK are deposited at the British Library for open consultation.

I first returned to Egypt in 1984. “Welcome home”, said the immigration officer, seeing my place of birth. Was he sensitive to my middle name Isaac? A taxi took me without hesitation from the Alexandria railway station to the Jewish cemetery to visit my grandparents’ tombs; as I had difficulty locating them, the driver offered to take me to the synagogue. I still consider it the most beautiful of the many I have seen. The Ark was opened to show me the Sifrei Torah and I found my birth certificate in the civil registers. No *minian* for a service, only four men on Shabbat. As some street names had changed, we got slightly lost trying to find my home and the taxi driver cried, saying how happy he was to help me find it. The occupants invited me in, offered me coffee, allowed me to walk around and take photos, and I embraced our elderly gardener. I visited the Lycée Français, found my tennis teacher and my father’s caddy at the Sporting Club, walked tirelessly through the streets, went to my favourite cinemas, gorged on Proustian *conafas* and dined at our family’s preferred seaside restaurant. Having left there as a child, everything seemed much smaller 30 years later and I keep in my memory the contrasting images of the city I remember and the city of today, in its dilapidated state. I have returned several times since and I have never encountered any animosity. Despite being aware that resettlement is impossible, I still feel that I somehow belong there. I confess I feel closer to an Egyptian than to a Hassid from Mea Shearim.

How do Jews and Egyptians perceive each other today? Contemporaries of my parents warmly remembered Jewish friends and business relations. My contemporaries remember their parents talking about them. Unfortunately, in spite of the cold peace, a whole generation today has only seen Jews through relentless television images of Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and bleeding babies in Gaza. As in most Arab countries, the Jewish presence in Egypt has been systematically erased from public consciousness, but the atmosphere is beginning to warm. Intelligence and military cooperation between Israel and Egypt is increasing to combat terrorism in the Sinai, and the Egyptian foreign minister recently visited Israel. Nostalgia about Egypt’s *Belle Époque* is creeping in, evidenced by a television series devoted to the monarchy and King Farouk. A film, *The Jews from Egypt*, made by an Egyptian director was screened for five weeks on general release. Last year’s month-long Ramadan television soap was *Hart el Yahood* (The Jewish Quarter), telling the tear-jerking story of



**Naguib made a point of attending Kol Nidrei after the revolution, lulling many Jews into the false security that life could continue as before**

## *Feelings of bitterness and resentment that haunt Jews from eastern Europe are rare*

a romance between an Egyptian Muslim officer and a sweet young Jewish girl in the late 1940s, with the “bad guys” from the Muslim Brotherhood stirring discord. A textbook recently published by the Egyptian Ministry of Education even discusses the benefits of the Egypt-Israel 1979 Peace Treaty alongside a photo of Begin seated with Sadat. Jews, in their majority, have fond memories of their life in Egypt and several have returned to walk down memory lane. One apparently insisted on laying flowers on Nasser’s tomb with a note that read, “Thank you Nasser. Without you I would never have become a millionaire.” Feelings of bitterness and resentment that haunt Jews from eastern Europe are rare and one often hears the saying: “We left Egypt, but Egypt never left us.”

On the eve of submitting this article I heard Daniel Barenboim conducting the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra at the Proms, bringing together Israeli, Palestinian and Arab musicians. They played Wagner, which still raises emotions in Israel and which I doubt is often heard in Ramallah or Damascus. I could not help drawing parallels with the Egypt I knew where people of all cultures and religions lived and worked together. Could these artists point to a return of the cohabitation and mutual tolerance throughout the region at the beginning of the twentieth century? Regrettably, unlike in eastern Europe, I doubt that we will witness a resurgence of Jewish life in the Arab world in the near future. I sincerely hope to be proven wrong. —JQ

DOI: 10.1080/0449010X.2016.1228295 © Alec Nacamuli 2016