

BAT YE'OR

ORIENTAL JEWRY

and

THE DHIMMI IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB NATIONALISM



This lecture was given at Jews College, London, on 5 September 1978 at a seminar organised by *The Jews in Arab Lands Committee* (Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland).

Chairman : The Rt. Hon. Sir Harold Wilson, KG, OBE, MP
The Panel : Dr. Solomon Gaon, Chief Rabbi
Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Great Britain
Mr. Eric Moonman, MP, Chairman
Zionist Federation of Great Britain & Ireland
Mr. Percy Gourgey, MBE, Chairman
Jews in Arab Lands Committee
Main speaker : Bat Ye'or, Representative in Switzerland of WOJAC
(World Organisation of Jews from Arab Countries)

The text has been revised for publication, but no changes of substance have been made. Notes have been added.

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WOJAC (WORLD ORGANISATION OF JEWS FROM ARAB COUNTRIES)

Front cover photograph

A Yemenite Jew from Jerusalem

Back cover photograph (Yossef Yinnon 1972)

Ancient *Sifrei Torah* (Scrolls of the law), confiscated by the authorities from the Jewish communities of Irak, are here stacked one against the other in a locked room at the *Medresa Al Moustansariyya*, near the *souk al haraj*, Baghdad.

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ARAB NATIONALISM

by

BAT YE'OR

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is not without emotion that I, a Jewess from an Arab land, address you this evening in the country of Palmerston, Finn, Oliphant, Balfour, Churchill and Wingate, to name but six¹ of the numerous British Zionists of the Christian faith (not forgetting Sir Harold Wilson, tonight's chairman) who have, each in his own way from the early 19th century onwards, demanded the recognition of the human and historic rights of an oppressed, dispossessed and exiled people to its ancient homeland. Neither do I forget the struggle maintained by representatives of British Jewry, beginning with Sir Moses Montefiore, to restore human dignity to their persecuted brethren in the Orient and North Africa.

Twenty-one years ago, when my parents and I found refuge in Britain, I was unaware of these historic antecedents and knew little about the history of Oriental Jewry. Due to religious discrimination, I was deprived of my Egyptian citizenship and driven from my country of birth by the fanaticism of a totalitarian regime. I arrived in London a refugee, stateless and penniless. It was in England that I discovered the meaning of freedom in contrast to the constant fear for one's life experienced in Egypt. It was in London that the Jewish Refugee Committee provided me with a grant, which enabled me to study at the Institute of Archaeology. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the British authorities and all those who received us with hospitality on these shores in 1957. I extend my special thanks to the *Jews in Arab Lands Committee* which has invited me to address you this evening on the subject of Oriental Jewry.

In the thirty minutes at my disposal, I will speak of the *dhimmi* condition and the use of the *dhimmi* stereotype in modern Arab nationalism. I will not advance opinions on current political events, but will suggest in my analysis how Arab leaders may be encouraged to acknowledge Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

1) Lord Palmerston, Foreign Secretary (1830-34, 1846-51), Prime Minister (1855-58, 1859-65) ; James Finn, Consul, Jerusalem (1845-62) ; Laurence Oliphant (1829-1888) ; Arthur James Balfour, Prime Minister (1902-05), Foreign Secretary (1916-1919); Winston Churchill (1874-1964); Orde Wingate (1903-1944).

In the middle of the 19th century, Oriental Jewry² was in a critical situation. When it came into contact with European Jewry, it was as if the gates of hope had opened. The Jews of Arab lands still lived in inhuman conditions, having miraculously survived centuries of oppression. They were dhimmis. The term dhimmi was applied by the Arab-Muslim invaders to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians after the Arabisation and Islamisation of their lands from the seventh century onwards. Besides its religious connotations, this Arabic word has also a political meaning. It refers to those nations which were dispossessed of all their rights by conquest... including, theoretically, the right to life itself. However, a concession was granted by the victors: dhimmi peoples could buy back their rights to life and property – except land – on condition that each male adult paid a special poll-tax (the *jizya*) and that the collectivity agreed to submit to humiliating regulations. Any breach of these rules, as did happen under benevolent rulers, automatically restored to the Muslim community (*umma*) its initial rights over the lives and property of the dhimmis, guilty of desiring equality with true believers.

In the case of the Jews, once their ancestral homeland had come under Islamic jurisdiction, a political dimension was added to their previous religious-dhimmi status in Arabia. This political aspect of the dhimmi condition was at the root of the numerous bloody conflicts since the early 19th century, whenever a dhimmi people fought to regain control of its national territory from Islamic domination, whether Ottoman or Arab, i.e. the Greeks, the Serbs, the Rumanians, the Bulgarians, the Maronites, the Armenians, and more recently the Jews.

I would define a “dhimmi civilisation” as being characterised by a language, a history and a culture, as well as specific political and juridical institutions developed in the national homeland before its annexation by the Arab-Muslim conquerors. The expression “dhimmi civilisation” or “dhimmi people” refers to a nation, the ethnic origin of which is associated with a particular country Islamised by *Jihad* (holy war), regardless of that nation’s present dispersion. People who belong to a dhimmi civilisation are individuals who have continued to transmit a specific heritage to their progeny, in spite of wanderings resulting from conquest and oppression. Thus, from an Islamic view-point, whether he is a *Westerner* or an *Oriental*, a Jew is a part of a dhimmi civilisation if he willingly perpetuates and accepts the national and cultural values of *Israel*. This principle applies also to the Armenian and the Maronite Christians, as well as to other peoples who, after the Arab-Muslim conquest of their homelands, were subjected to a legislation which either decimated them or forced them to live in exile.

Islamic tradition maintained that from the time of 'Umar the second caliph (634-644) dhimmi peoples could reside in Islamised lands only if their work was beneficial to the maintenance and expansion of Arab-Islamic rule. Later, this theory was developed into a system of legalised economic exploitation

2) For simplification, all the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa are included in the expression : “Oriental Jewry”.

and oppression based allegedly on divine will. This is not the place for me to describe fully the dhimmi condition. It is enough to say that the indigenous peoples of the Middle East and North Africa were gradually reduced — through pillage, ransom, exploitation, oppression, dispossession, forced conversion, famine and physical elimination — from majorities to helpless minorities. Their everyday life was governed by countless oppressive rules and it became a religious obligation to humiliate and to revile them. In an age of violence, the law forbade them to carry arms. Lifting a hand against a Muslim, even in a case of legitimate defence, was a capital offence. In an age of injustice, their sworn testimony was refused by Muslim courts. Thus, if the aggressor was a Muslim, the judge would not accept the plea of a dhimmi. They were more defenceless than the humblest animal protected by nature with a self-defence mechanism. Deprived even of this natural right under a system which promulgated inequality in human society and in human relations, many became servile and corrupt, the better to preserve their existence. They endeavoured wherever possible to amass money secretly, because in times of great oppression they might thereby purchase their survival. Their blood was considered of an inferior quality to that of Muslims and could be shed lightly. Dhimmis rarely appealed for justice prior to the 19th century. To complain of pillage, murder or massacre frequently provoked collective reprisals, thereby reminding the dhimmis of their proper place.

Dhimmis were often considered impure and had to be segregated from the Muslim community. Entry into holy Muslim towns, mosques, public baths, as well as certain streets was forbidden them. Their turbans — when they were permitted to wear them — their costumes, belts, shoes, the appearance of their wives and their servants had to be different from those of Muslims in order to distinguish and humiliate them; for the dhimmis should never be allowed to forget that they were inferior beings. The humble donkey was generally the sole beast of burden permitted them and then only outside the town and on condition that they would, as a sign of respect, dismount on sight of any Muslim and mount again only after their superior was out of sight. Even their saddles had to be ugly and uncomfortable and often they were forced to mount side-saddle. In the street, dhimmis were obliged to walk on the left, or impure, side of a Muslim. Their gait had to be rapid and their eyes lowered. Their graves had to be level with the ground so that anyone could walk on them and in desert lands it was assumed that the elements would quickly obliterate their remains. These were the more common rules which in some regions prevailed into the 20th century; but there were other no less vexing obligations applicable to the dhimmis and to them alone.

Our ancestors plodded on for twelve centuries in this vale of sorrow. Their world was one of distress and despair, in which they were allowed no dignity and were crushed by humiliation and misery, by oppression and a perpetual fear of death. Not all were able to resist such pressures, and many were converted. Those whose souls were not destroyed through such abasement remained faithful to an ideal of spiritual freedom. They refused to join the ranks of the

oppressors although by a simple declaration they could have ended their sufferings. They knew that they were the heirs of a great spiritual heritage, and in order to preserve it for their posterity they preferred to remain in servitude. They believed that the oppressed would be redeemed, that the slave and the captive would be freed from tyranny, that the Jews would one day return to Zion and liberate the Land of Israel. They consoled themselves in their deep distress by escaping to a world of study and mysticism. They believed that their sufferings were of a providential nature meant to strengthen their faith and their hope in a future society based on justice for all.

A letter written from Egypt by the philosopher (and physician to Saladin's vizier) Moses Maimonides to the Jews in Yemen, faced with imminent forced conversion in the late 12th century, is worth recalling. Here is an extract.

"Remember, my co-religionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins, God has hurled us in the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us [...] Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase and hate us as much as they [...] Although we were dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and had to put [up] with their fabrications, yet we behave like him who is depicted by the inspired writer, "But I am as a deaf man, I hear not, and I am as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth." (Psalm 38:14). Similarly our sages instructed us to bear the prevarications and preposterousness of Ishmael in silence [...] We have acquiesced, both old and young, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair." (50:6). All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment which well nigh crushes us. No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David predicted, "I am all peace, but when I speak, they are for war." (Psalms 120:7) [...]

*"May God, Who created the world with the attributes of mercy, grant us the privilege to behold the return of the exiles, to the portion of His inheritance, to contemplate the graciousness of the Lord and to visit early in His Temple. May He take us out from the Valley of the Shadow of Death wherein He put us. May He remove darkness from our eyes, and gloom from our hearts. May He fulfill in our days as well as yours the prophecy contained in the verse, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." (Isaiah 9:1) [...] Peace, peace, as the light that shines and much peace until the moon be no more. Amen."*³

Those who welcomed Sir Moses Montefiore in the middle of the 19th century, in Cairo, in Damascus, in Jerusalem, in Marrakesh, were the descendants of the "deaf and the dumb"... the meek in spirit. But thereafter things changed.

I will not here go into historical details but only stress that thanks to the efforts of Jews and Christians in Western Europe the condition of the Jewish

3) Moses Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen* (Halkin Edition), New York 1952, p. XVIII/XX.

and Christian dhimmis greatly improved. However, the more the dhimmi peoples were emancipated from discriminatory legislation – thanks to European influence and later as a result of colonial rule – the more they were hated and threatened in their Muslim environment, permeated as it was by pan-Islamic ideology and traditions. It is simple to understand why: the emancipation of the dhimmis was imposed by European powers in the name of the equality of each individual before the law. This concept was in total contrast to the values of traditional Muslim societies. Muslim religious leaders saw the social promotion of the dhimmis as a sacrilege, as an intolerable intrusion of the West, aimed at weakening Islam and humiliating it.

But there is also another more complex and human reason: twelve centuries of oppression and humiliation have created a dhimmi stereotype... the stereotype of the Jew and the Christian in Arab-Muslim lands, or to be more precise in Arabised “dhimmi lands”. This stereotype permeated history, laws, traditions, behaviour, literature and modern political ideologies. The diabolic attributes of the dhimmi stereotype were carried along in the current of Arab-Muslim historiography and are still considered valid. And if I have spoken of the past, it is because the present is conditioned by the past. To a person familiar with dhimmi history, there can be no doubt that the dhimmi stereotype is at the very root of Arab and Muslim anti-Zionism and the present Middle East conflicts.

Modern Arab nationalism is the spiritual heir of the early caliphal Arab empire: an empire which expanded through the Arabisation of dhimmi land and by the progressive development of an anti-dhimmi jurisdiction. Today, the goal of Arab nationalism is total Arabisation, an endless struggle against all non-Arab national – even cultural – revivals of those nations which have survived from one of the longest and most oppressive imperialisms of history. And *Arabisation* means a return to the dhimmi condition, a condition of alienation, of subjugation or of exile... not for Israel alone, but also for the Maronite Christians and for any other movement of national independence within *dar al-Islam*.⁴

Today, Arabism and Islam are virtually synonymous for Arab nationalists. According to a Muslim religious tradition, all infidels had to be expelled from Arabia, so that Arabs could only be Muslims. Arab domination is in fact Muslim domination, and this is why the traditional dhimmi stereotype – absorbed into the legal and religious structures of Arabised societies – has been reformulated by contemporary Arab nationalists.

The core of the Arab refusal and of the Charter of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) is based on the very principle of the dhimmi condition: the refusal of Jewish sovereignty on its once-Arabised land. One cannot emphasise enough that in calling itself the vanguard of Arab nationalism the PLO has become an instrument to fight and suppress every non-Arab nationalism.

4) *Dar-al-Islam*, House of Islam, in contrast to the rest of the world : *dar al-Harb*, the House of War. Muslim jurisprudence posits a perpetual state of war between the two until Islamic rule prevails throughout the world.

One has seen it already in Lebanon. It is the PLO even more than Syria, which, in the name of Arab nationalism, destroyed Lebanon, the only "Arab" country where indigenous Christian remnants still enjoyed political expression. One has merely to recall the declaration of Yassir Arafat on 30 November 1975 :

*"The civil war in Lebanon is not over and bloodshed will continue. The battle we are fighting in Lebanon is for the preservation of the country's Arab character. I declare in the name of the Palestinian revolution and the Lebanese nationalist and progressive movement that every inch of Arab land will remain Arab and Lebanon will remain Arab."*⁵

It is in the name of Muslim solidarity that the PLO has raised the banner of *jihad* against Israel, the purpose of which has always been to reduce independent non-Muslim peoples to that of dependent dhimmis.⁶

I do not doubt the sincere desire for peace of the Egyptian people and of President Sadat, nor the liberal views of some of Egypt's intellectuals, but one should not forget Egypt's dependence on the Arab world, particularly on the theocratic, feudal regime of Saudi Arabia. The influence of the theologians of Cairo's renowned Al-Azhar University and the Muslim Brotherhood are also not negligible factors.⁷

Before concluding, a few words on the psychological aspect of the Arab-Israel conflict are appropriate. The changeover from dhimmi to Israeli (the Jew liberating his land from Arab domination) has traumatised the Arab political consciousness. Why? Because Arab-Muslim domination and the resultant feelings of superiority were confirmed by the abasement of the dhimmi. If, however, the dhimmi can obtain equal rights, the superior feels himself doubly inferior and is thereby *humiliated*... The psychological trauma was particularly vivid for the Arabs in Palestine, where the treatment of the Jewish remnant was often more severe than anywhere else, as the conqueror's aim was to impose *his* sovereignty. The less the Israeli image of the Jew fits into the dhimmi stereotype — a servile, cowardly, debased being — the more violent and bloodthirsty will become the efforts of the ancient oppressor to force the victim to fit into a preconceived discriminatory mould.

Since Israel's independence, the dhimmi stereotype has been transferred to Israel and Zionism, thereby justifying that country's constant vilification in international forums. Israel is the scapegoat, responsible for every evil which afflicts the Arab world... as well as other regions. Israel is mocked and defamed, just as the dhimmi was forced to wear despicable clothes. In fact, Israel symbolises today the isolation, the hatred, the contempt which formerly crushed the dhimmi communities. And just as death punished the rebellious dhimmi

5) *Voice of Falastin* (Lebanon), 1 December 1975. Broadcast of Yassir Arafat's speech of 30 November 1975 in Damascus to the administrative council of the Palestine Student Association. See also *Jerusalem Post*, 3 December 1975.

6) For a recent example, see Yassir Arafat's message of 11 February 1979 to the Ayatollah Khomeini : "... I pray Allah to guide your steps on the road of faith and *Jihad* in Iran, which will continue the struggle until we reach the walls of Jerusalem where we will raise the flags of our two revolutions." (Beirut) *Le Figaro*, 13 February 1979.

7) See D.F. Green (ed), *Arab Theologians on Jews and Israel*, Editions Avenir, Geneva 1976.

in the past when he rejected the rules which degraded him, so the DHIMMI STATE, in rebellion against Arab domination, is today condemned to be destroyed by pan-Arab nationalism. Its existence must be illegal, for only Arab domination in such a context is considered legal. And, therefore, killing Israelis is a just cause – in the same manner as the dhimmis and their wives and children were killed in the past... not so long ago either, as the Jewish survivors of the many massacres in Arab countries during the last generation can testify. Racialism, imperialism, colonialism are the hateful cloth of contempt and derision thrown on the State of Israel in order to disarm and ostracise a country, half of whose population is composed of descendants of dhimmis.

In our time, the weaknesses of Oriental Jewry are simply the prolongation of the helplessness engendered by the dhimmi condition. If the majority of Oriental Jewry is politically-speaking inarticulate today, it is because its communities were reduced to a state of *inexistence* during the past millenium.

They were destroyed to the very core by segregation and a public stigma of inferiority. They were destroyed again by their emancipation at the hands of the colonial powers, which by granting them human dignity and equal rights with Muslims broke the chains of their moral and physical prison, yet alienated them culturally.

If Oriental Jewry is emerging from subjugation in our generation, it is because it has been rescued from Arab servitude and can measure itself alongside free peoples. But with this awareness goes a sense of responsibility. Perhaps we Jews of Arab lands can still change the course of history by building – with all the peoples of the Orient – a future of peace and brotherhood, rather than a future of hatred and war. With such a past, hatred is futile, debasing – and fatal to humanity.

The struggle for peace will unite us with a past, the greatness of which we have forgotten: a past characterised by the heroism of spiritual courage and non-violence in face of violence. It is this past – not the ephemeral period of the emancipation of the dhimmis imposed upon the Arabs by Europe – which justifies the peace vocation of Oriental Jews and Christians, a duty which no one can assume in their place.

This duty consists in provoking a fundamental renovation of Arab political thought: by liberating it of its traditions of racial and imperialist intolerance; by encouraging acceptance – in terms of equality – of the *other*, the different, the non-Arab, the non-Muslim, through a re-evaluation of Arab-Muslim imperial glories as seen and felt by its victims.

It is the role of Oriental Jewry to unmask in Arab anti-Zionism that “infectious current”, that “plague” – surviving from the depths of the dark ages – which condemned the Synagogue and the Church in the Orient to debasement and to segregation – for the East also has its own “*enseignement du mépris*” (teaching of contempt), to use the words of the historian Jules Isaac. This action should be used not to accuse, but to liberate; not to hate, but to seek agreement. It is a difficult path, sown with mines, but the only possible path for laying the foundations of peace between free peoples.

Courageous men and women have over the years led the struggle against every form of racism. Equality, liberty, the respect for the rights of men and women of all creeds and colours have been the rewards for their efforts. For one cannot eradicate the concentration camps, the gulags or, for that matter, apartheid, by pretending to ignore them. Similarly, one cannot eliminate Arab anti-Zionism, the modern expression of age-old anti-dhimmi prejudices... by denying these prejudices. Soothing words, the temporary display of fine feelings, are incapable of modifying attitudes which have been conditioned by unchallenged stereotypes.

My conclusion is optimistic. At such a crucial epoch for the Jewish people, for Israel and for the peace of the world, the voice which yet might restrain the Arab peoples, that voice from the past which can speak to their collective conscience by portraying the tragic history of the dhimmis – that voice of justice – has begun to speak out and to be heard.

In 1975, WOJAC (the World Organisation of Jews from Arab Countries) was founded. Speaking for nearly two million Jews from Arab lands who live in Israel and in the Diaspora, WOJAC aims at contributing to the building of a bridge of friendship between Israel and the Arab countries and all the peoples of the Middle East. It also aims at achieving the realisation of the rights of displaced Jews from Arab countries and a just settlement of their individual and collective claims, which, based on Security Council Resolution 242, is a major and essential condition for peace in the Middle East.

For centuries, we kept silent when our human dignity and rights were flouted. During the long night of exile, we held our peace rather than respond to our oppressors. During those dark centuries, we lived as if we were blind so as not to see our disgrace, as if we were deaf so as not to hear endless insults – so that we no longer knew how to see, how to hear, how to speak. We kept silent even when twenty Arab countries covering 10% of the world's surface – countries which have stamped into their past and present history the degradation of the dhimmi – condemned Zionism as racism, condemned Israel of racism, that small homeland of hope and redemption to which two-thirds of the descendants of the Jewish dhimmis have returned.

We remained silent, for we reacted like a captive people, and captive peoples tend to lose their identity, their history and the control of their destiny, remaining unaware of their rights. The recovery of our historical identity and our moral dignity will enable us to start a dialogue with the Arab peoples – as free men and not as servile dhimmis – a dialogue which may transform them and renew them spiritually. This dialogue, although inspired by the lesson of the past, nonetheless points to the future: a future of friendship and not of contempt, a future of peace and not of war, a future of mutual esteem and recognition, of understanding and of reconciliation.⁸

8) In concluding a peace treaty with Israel on 26 March 1979, Egypt has courageously chosen a revolutionary path, in contrast to the reactionary PLO-led Arab Rejection Front.

Other publications on this subject

- Jews under Muslim Rule in the late 19th Century (David Littman in *Wiener Library Bulletin* 1975, Nos. 35/36)
 - Jews under Muslim Rule II : Morocco 1903-1912 (David Littman in *WLB* 1976, nos. 37/38)
 - Zionism in 'Islamic Lands : The Case of Egypt (Bat Ye'or in *WLB* 1977, nos. 43/44)
 - Protected Peoples under Islam (David Littman & Bat Ye'or, *Editions de l'Avenir*, Geneva 1976)
 - Dhimmi Peoples : Oppressed Nations (Bat Ye'or, *Editions de l'Avenir*, Geneva 1978)
 - Arab Theologians on Jews and Israel (D.F. Green (ed.), *Editions de l'Avenir*, Geneva 1976)
 - The Jews of Arab Lands : Their History in Maps (Martin Gilbert, Oxford 1976)
 - The Jews of Persia before 1914 (David Littman, to appear shortly, *WLB*)
- French editions available**

See also

- Les Juifs en Egypte (Bat Ye'or)
French : *Editions de l'Avenir*, Geneva 1971
Hebrew : (preface Prof. H.Z. Hirschberg) : *Ma'ariv*, Tel Aviv 1974
- Islam and the Minorities : Background to the Arab-Israel Conflict (Ronald L. Nettler, *Israel Academic Committee on the Middle East*, Jerusalem 1979)
and
- Who is a Refugee in the Middle East ? (32nd session of the UN General Assembly on 13 December 1977) WOJAC publication
- WOJAC's VOICE (Vol. 1 & 2), 3 Bograshov Street, Tel Aviv

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