Baghdad when religion was not an issue

Remembering Baghdad in the *salad days* or during the monarchy era, seems now as if retrieving a reverie from the time of yore or as the Arab narrative goes: *kan ya ma kan*. What happened to Baghdad, Shahrazad’s abode, in the last sixty years or so, invites a flow of memories and emotions.

Being born in a mixed neighborhood of a cosmopolitan city, I still long to a time when religion was not an issue. Tolerance was a value everyone cherish much to maintain and honor. In a short poem written years ago my memory flew me back to childhood when we used to play in the narrow streets of Baghdad and breeze into the nearest home to grab anything to drink without knocking at the door.

عند حديقة غازي
كنا صبيانا نلهو
أو نلعب
فإذا نتعب
نتفيا أي جدار
أو نسلب بعض الأشجار
نقطف ما شاءنا
لا أحد يسأل عنا
كان الجار أخا للجار

*At King Ghazi Grove,*

*We were young kids*

*Amusing ourselves.*

*When tired,*

*We take up shade of any wall,*

*Or mount any tree.*
No one asks

All dwellers were kinsfolk.

It could be a Jewish home, Muslim, or Christian, but it didn’t come to our mind or simply we didn’t care as it was normal, accepted, and welcome.

My father who lived more than one hundred years in the city center and developed intimate friendships and relations with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds told me that Baghdad in the 1920s-1940s was the intellectual capital of Judaism before Jerusalem. The Jews who formed about 20% of the population, used to man the railway stations, police stations, and the banking system. The first Iraqi minister of finance was Hesquel (Ezekiel) Sassoon. The British poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was from the same famous family and from Iraqi origin. One day King Faisal 11 needed a small loan, 150 dinars or about $450 of that time, Mr. Sassoon rejected the king’s request. Later the King who was so popular and the father of modern Iraq asked his cabinet to convene and told them the story saying “we are very happy to have such honest and strong minister”. Knowing Sassoon’s financial prowess and good management, the Iraqis coined a word from his name: hasqala or hasqalha which means well calculated.

The Iraqis never used the word minority and consider it rude but used community instead. History tells us that Harun Al-Rashid the caliph of The Golden Age of Baghdad asked the chief Rabbi who visited him once to come next time riding his horse. I heard this story again from the last Rabbi of Baghdad Mir Basri when I met him in London in 1983. He is the author of Iraqi National Biography and a leading pioneer of Iraqi fiction.

It’s music and singing where the Iraqi Jews excel also. They maintained the Iraqi musical tradition and legacy for centuries. The leading Iraqi maqam singers insist to be accompanied by the Jewish instrumentalists and vocalists known in Baghdadi parlance as chalghi or ensemble. When Radio Baghdad was started in 1936, its administration employed Jewish inspectors to license singers and musicians especially the maqamists. They identify themselves as Iraqis or Iraqi Arabs. Some maqam singers used to recite the Quran or the prayer call. Salman Moshe سلمان موشي was the last Jewish musical inspector until he left Iraq in 1952. He and other Jewish maqam experts like Yusuf Huraish, Saleh Al-Kuwaiti and his brother Dawood Al-Kuwaiti, and Yusuf Bataw established a melodic tradition in conformity with the musical legacy of Baghdad. The Baghdadis still remember Filfel Gurgi فلفل كرجي for his beautiful voice in reciting maqam and Quran. He was hired in weddings, circumcisions, and other social events to recite the Quran. This Iraqi school of maqamists performs the prayer call adhan in strict melodic scale known as hejaz. The Baghdadi Adhan, unlike the Egyptian, can be done in some other scales such as Jehargha, Mahuri, or Qazzazi. It’s not uniform in terms of musical variation though the
text is one. In the *Gilani neighborhood* where my father was born and I spent my best years, everyone in coffee houses knows the basics of Quranic melodic recitation and oftentimes I heard them comment or criticize the *Muazzen* who makes any dissonance. This is the culture of the time. It was the art of recitation not *singing*. In 1932, the First Arab Musical Festival was held in Cairo and Iraq was represented by Muhammad Al-Qubbanchi and his Jewish ensemble and won the FIRST PRIZE and the applaud of King Faruq of Egypt. It was the first international musical conference held in Cairo and attended by international experts and orientalists.

This then thriving traditional city, added the sixth string to *Al-Qithara* (al gitara) when it was only of five strings in the 9th century and took it to Andalusia with its Arabic name. Alas !, it’s no more singing but wailing, its people have no names or memories to borrow Eliot’s words. That culture I am talking about is now *dead culture*. Read what the Iraqi Jewish writers said, Sami Michael, Sameer Naqqash, Shmuel Moreh, and Mir Basri. It’s a gory story; excuse me not to continue this time.

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