

Purim and Persia, then and now

Thought for the Day

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Iran is in the news because of its involvement in Syria and its war of words with the West, but it might not be the first place you think of in a Jewish context. Yet Iran is the only country in the Middle East where a functioning Jewish community survived Nazi-inspired pogroms in the 1940s, and the expulsion of almost all the survivors in the 1960s.

I've just been reading a book called "Uprooted" that tells this story: In 1945 there were almost 900 000 Jews in Arab countries; today there are around 4000. In Egypt there are now more synagogues than people to attend them; in Syria there were fewer than 100 Jews before the civil war began and probably none now; Iraq had a Jewish community 600 years before Christianity, but in the last century almost 125 000 Jews were expelled, and fewer than 5 remain.

I mention this because yesterday was Purim, a festival that celebrates the story of survival in that part of the world told in the Book of Esther. It's actually a very odd day – or two! Most of us celebrated Purim yesterday – but as the Bible relates, victory took a day longer in the capital. In Israel, you could spend yesterday in Tel Aviv and today in Jerusalem to celebrate Purim twice – or yesterday in Jerusalem and today in Tel Aviv and miss it altogether!

The story began when the Babylonians conquered the ancient kingdom of Israel and expelled its population. Then after Babylon in turn became part of the vast Persian empire, the Jews were threatened with genocide. They were saved through the bravery of the biblical Queen Esther, leading to a period of religious tolerance; that's where the Talmud was composed and some people were even allowed to return to rebuild Jerusalem. Now Persia is called Iran, and its Jews have almost all gone; yet there are still Jewish schools and kosher restaurants, and the community even has a seat in the Iranian parliament – that surely is a sign of hope.