Vanishing Civilisation

Thought for the Day
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Before the appalling news from New Zealand broke, I was travelling round Scotland with author Lyn Julius. Lyn's book, *Uprooted*, chronicles how 3000 years of Jewish civilisation vanished from the Arab world almost overnight, and that coincidence led me to reflect on how little human cruelty to 'the other' has changed.

There have been Jewish Communities in Iran and Iraq since Biblical times, and that's where the Talmud was written. In fact the festival of Purim, which we celebrate tomorrow, marks the events recorded in the Book of Esther that took place there five centuries before Christianity and a millennium before Islam.

In the early twentieth century, these communities mostly flourished, and before the Holocaust nearly a million Jews lived in North Africa and the Middle East. But in the next 30 years, almost all were persecuted and forced to flee, and these refugees now make up half the population of Israel. Many Arab countries now have no Jewish people at all, and there are known to be fewer than 15 Jews in Egypt and 5 in Iraq.

For me, the echoes of the biblical narrative and of European history were chilling. During the War, Arab leaders allied themselves with the Nazis, and promised to eliminate their Jewish populations; there was even a Nazi government in Iran, and a pogrom in Iraq. In the Book of Esther, the villain Haman plots to wipe out the Jews of Persia; in 1969, nine Jews were publicly hanged in Baghdad by Saddam Hussein – on the date now marked internationally as Holocaust Memorial Day, another eerie parallel!

Sadly, there are too many reminders that such hatred still persists. From Charleston to Pittsburgh to Christchurch and Utrecht, extremists are emboldened by each other's actions. That's why an attack on one is an attack on all, and a challenge not just for any one community, but for all of society.