

Don't Let the Opportunity Slip

When Israel faced massive immigration from Iraq, the government had to make a decision — do we bring them in now, or wait until we have enough to provide for them?

A Modern-Day Purim

Yesterday, we read the Megillah and commemorated the miracle of Purim. I would like to share with you a story of the modern-day salvation of the Jews of Iraq, which likewise, took place on the day of Purim.

Jews lived in Babylon-Iraq since the destruction of the first Temple, and even earlier. For the most part, the Jews were on good terms with their non-Jewish neighbors. In 1930, tensions began to rise in the Land of Israel between Arabs and Jews, and the situation had implications for Jews living throughout the Arab world. Over time, the Jews of Iraq began to feel less and less welcome.

During World War II, the Iraqi government supported Nazi Germany, and there was significant anti-Semitic propaganda spread in the local newspapers. In 1941, on the holiday of Shavuot, there was a terrible program in Baghdad where 200 Jews were brutally murdered. Thousands more were injured, and vast amounts of Jewish property was destroyed and looted.

Many Jews wanted to leave the country, but in those days, there

weren't many options. The British had closed the gates to the land of Israel. However, a small group of Jews managed to sneak themselves into the Israel.

One of the individuals who was instrumental in helping Jews escape was named Mr. Shlomo Hillel. He was also an immigrant from Iraq and he devoted his life to assisting other Jews to immigrate to Israel. In 1948, during the War of Independence, he traveled to Iraq via France and reached out to a person named Alexander Glasberg. Alexander was a Roman Catholic priest who saved some two thousand Jews by concealing them in monasteries during the Second World War. He was not just a regular priest - actually, he was born a Jew and had converted.

Now, Glasberg once again agreed to help the Jewish people. The main impediment was the Iraqi government, which forbade immigration to Israel. Glasberg and Hillel arranged for a plan in which Hillel would smuggle Jews into Iran, where they would receive French visas and make their way to Israel.

The plan was successful. Within a few months, 12,000 Jews had been smuggled through Iran. The Iranians were not antagonistic to the new Israeli state, so they didn't mind turning a blind eye and allowing the Jews to cross through their country.

The Jewish community of Tehran mobilized to help their Jewish brethren. They housed the migrants in various secret locations, such as tents in the Jewish cemetery. Ultimately, after long and difficult journeys, the Jews reached the land of Israel.

A new government came to power in Iraq in 1950. Its president was considered more moderate; he was less of an anti-Semite.

At a meeting with the head of the Jewish community, he was convinced to allow Jewish immigration to Israel. He was told that only a few thousand hotheaded young men would go to Israel, and the whole tumult would be able to die down.

That year, he passed a law that any Jew who relinquishes his rights to Iraqi citizenship (and all his possessions) would be permitted to leave the country. This law passed on Purim 1950.

The result surprised everyone, including Shlomo Hillel. Tens of thousands of Jews expressed a desire to immigrate to Israel, and were willing to sacrifice all their material possessions toward that goal. Shlomo Hillel was visiting Israel at the time. He was called for a meeting with Levi Eshkol, who served as the head of the Settlement Department in the Jewish Agency.

“Go back to Iraq,” he was told, “and tell the Jews that they are welcome, but not now. Israel does not have sufficient food or housing for them. We don’t even have enough tents in the absorption camps. Stay in Iraq in the meantime.”

The next day, he was called for a meeting with Ben Gurion.

“Everything Eshkol told you is correct,” Ben Gurion said, “there are no tents and no food, there is no work — there is nothing for them. But go to Iraq and bring as many people as you can. Who knows when the Iraqis will change their minds? We now have a window of opportunity, and we need to utilize it.”

Over a period of twenty months, 120,000 Iraqi Jews flew to Israel on 900 flights. It was the vast majority of the Iraqi Jewish community, which had previously numbered 140,000 souls.

Then, the gates of immigration closed. This week, Shlomo Hillel died at age 97.

Why the Rush?

The holiday of Purim is named for the lots that Haman cast to determine the date he would eradicate the Jews.

He cast lots in the month of Nissan, and the result set the date for twelve months later, the thirteenth of Adar. When Mordechai heard the news, he publicly tore his clothes in mourning. Esther heard that Mordechai had been making this public spectacle, and she sent her servant to find out what was going on. Mordechai informed her of the latest developments and told her to approach the king and beg for her nation.

Esther sent a message back saying that anyone who approached the king without permission was killed, "And I haven't been summoned the king in over thirty days."

Mordechai responded with powerful words: "If you choose to remain silent now, salvation will come to the Jews from elsewhere...who knows if this is why you became queen." He instructed her to risk her life and approach the king despite the danger. (It's important to remember that Achashverosh had already proved his willingness to kill his wife...)

Why was Mordechai so pressured? It was still the month of Nissan, just two days before Passover. There was almost a full year before the decree would be carried out. Wouldn't it be wiser for Esther to wait until she was called by the king on his own volition? Waiting for the king's invitation will give her a

better chance of success. Approaching the king without invitation held the risk of angering him, and then there would be no way to influence him at all.

Additionally, there could have easily been new developments over those twelve months. Perhaps the king would change his mind. And perhaps Mordechai should have used his own connections from the time he saved the king's life! Why was it necessary to endanger Esther's life?

Grab the Opportunity

Commentators explain that Mordechai was actually afraid of further developments. "Who knows if you will remain in the palace," he told Esther. "Right now, you're in the right place at the right time. We need to grab this window of opportunity."

Esther did so, and she brought salvation to the entire Jewish nation.

The lesson is that whenever you are presented with an opportunity to do something good, don't push it off for later. The opportunity may pass, and you will no longer have the ability to make that great accomplishment — to save the Jewish community of Iraq or to save or help even a single Jew.

During the Rebbe's Farbrengen on Purim in 1973, he spoke about the obligation to strengthen Jewish education. "If you don't have money today," he said, "you could borrow and return tomorrow or the next day. But a Jewish child doesn't stop to grow. If we don't bring him into Jewish education today, we might lose the opportunity."

A Jew must always remember that whenever a Mitzvah comes his/her way, it's a window of opportunity. Grab it!