Israel Recognizes the Travails of Jews from Arab Lands and Iran

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This article appears in the Jerusalem Post online edition, November 30, 2014. It notes the first official commemoration by the State of Israel of the plight of Jews of Arab lands and Iran who fled their hostile home countries after the founding of the State of Israel.

History was made on Sunday, November 30, when for the first time in the annals of the state, official recognition was given to Jewish refugees from Arab lands and Iran.

The event, hosted by President Reuven Rivlin at his official residence, was the continuum of legislation that was passed by the Knesset in June of this year designating November 30 as the national day of commemoration of the plight of Jewish refugees from Arab lands and Iran. The date was significant in that it commemorates the day after the anniversary of the November 29, 1947 United Nations resolution on the partition of Palestine, which led to an immediate flare up of anti-Zionist action and policy among Arab states, resulting in the killing, persecution, humiliation, oppression and expulsion of Jews, the sequestration of Jewish property and a war against the nascent State of Israel.

In 1948 close to a million Jews lived in Arab lands. Some were massacred in pogroms. Most fled or were expelled between 1948 and 1967. In 1948 there were 260,000 Jews in Morocco. Today there are less than 3,000. In the same time frame, the Jewish population of Algeria declined from 135,000 to zero, in Tunisia from 90,000 to a thousand, in Libya from 40,000 to zero, in Egypt from 75,000 to less than one hundred, in Iraq from 125,000 to zero, in Yemen from 45,000 to approximately 200, in Syria from 27,000 to 100, and in Lebanon from 10,000 in the 1950s to less than 100.

Although various attempts were made over the years by leaders of these communities in Israel and academics stemming from these communities to secure the same kind of recognition for the suffering of Jews in Arab lands as is accorded to the Jews of Europe, nothing of major substance was done until the bill proposed by MKs Shimon Ohayon of Yisrael Beiteinu and Nissim Zeev of Shas was placed on the national agenda.

The intention behind the bill said Ohayon on Sunday night, was to ensure that the stories of what happened to Jews in and from Arab lands and Iran should be part of the school curriculum, because most Israeli children are entirely ignorant of these chapters in the diverse aspects of Jewish heritage. Just as they learn about the history and fate of the Jews of Europe, they should also learn the history of the Jews of the region, he said. He placed great significance on national recognition, saying that this would lead to international acknowledgement so that Jews who left everything they owned behind, could be compensated. There were no words to describe his excitement that this day had come said Ohayon, but he was simultaneously pained that the Tel Aviv Cinematheque had chosen at this time to show films of the Arab Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948, while overlooking documentaries and feature films about the suffering of Jews from Arab lands and Iran. He related the story of a woman who had told him that her son, a university student, knows all about Nakba, but not about the travails endured by his grandfather before he came to Israel.

Zeev, the Jerusalem born son of Iraqi parents concurred with Ohayon and emphasized how important it was for the world to know about the tragedy that befell so many hundreds of thousands of people. Of the Jewish refugees from Arab lands and Iran, 650,000 came to Israel, he said, and the rest went mostly to Europe and America.

But before they became refugees, they and their forebears made great contributions to Jewish culture and to the cultures and economies of their host countries, and these must be acknowledged, he said

Meir Kahlon, chairman of the joint Associations of Jews from Arab Lands and Iran, noted that the world has long been talking about Arab refugees, but has ignored Jewish refugees from Arab lands. He also reminded those present that the Holocaust was not solely a European tragedy, but had spread to this part of the world. His mother had been killed in the Holocaust in Libya when he was only five months old.

Rivlin, who is a seventh generation Jerusalemite, does not know what it means to be expelled from one's homeland, said Kahlon. Like Ohayon and Zeev, he questioned the lacuna in the Israeli curricula. As refugees, the Jews from Arab lands and Iran understand the plight of Palestinian refugees and will not allow their problems to be swept under the carpet said Kahlon, adding that the Palestinians must understand that this land also belongs to the Jews who yearned for it during centuries of exile. In this context, he quoted from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion…"

He recommended that the compensation initiative for both sides proposed by former US President Bill Clinton be adopted and that a fund be set up to compensate and rehabilitate all the Palestinians living in refugee camps and all the Jews and their heirs who had been displaced from Arab lands and Iran. "We don't seek war with anyone. We hold out our hand in peace," he said.

Moderator Yossi Alfi, who is known for his marathon story telling festivals in which personalities from every immigrant group in Israel have the opportunity to share their stories with live audiences, radio listeners and television viewers, declared: "We are all excited today. It is indeed a holiday for us and others celebrating elsewhere. This day in Jerusalem is an important date in the story of the exodus of Jews from Arab Lands and Iran."

Alfi, born in Basra Iraq, came to Israel in 1949 as a 3 year old refugee without his parents. Now, at age 69, he said he still feels the weight of what was left behind.

November 30 signifies not only the expulsion he said, but also the right to reparations. "It is also a day of love for Israel and for Zionism."

Despite all that happened to them, these Jews who were expelled did not allow themselves to become dispirited, he said. "They did not forget where they came from, but they knew where they were going. Hardships not withstanding, they were able to maintain the heritage of a glorious past."

Admitting that Jews from Arab lands and Iran had been subjected to a great injustice, and whose story had been pushed to the sidelines of the Zionist narrative, Rivlin commented that the designation of November 30 as a national day came too late and on too small a scale to impact on public consciousness, but declared that it was nevertheless important to correct this injustice "which should not be underestimated."

The healing process, he said, begins with acknowledging the mistakes that were made, and for this reason he was proud as president of the state to host the

inaugural November 30 commemoration. When his own ancestors came to the country from Lithuania in 1809, there were already immigrants from Yemen living here as well as Spanish families with ancient traditions. After the creation of the state when the refugees began arriving, their suffering was not taken into account and they were sent far away from the corridors of power to peripheral communities such as Dimona, Afikim, Beit She'an and Hatzor Haglilit where they developed cities out of nothing to be protective buffer zones for Israel’s borders, said Rivlin. It took a long time before these immigrants could give voice to their frustrations. Rivlin cited a list of writers and entertainment artists who paved the way for others to make their stories and their feelings known.