

The Dove Flyer by Eli Amir.
Halban Publishers Ltd., 2010

There has been a slew of books recently, some immensely powerful and moving, about the effects of the establishment of the State of Israel on the native Palestinian population, the expulsions, demolitions and terror that saw many of them leave as refugees, never to return. Far fewer books have been written from the opposite perspective, of the effect on the Jews of Arab lands of the creation of the Jewish State, and the specific and terrible way in which it affected their lives and sent them from countries their ancestors had inhabited for thousands of years to a new land with which many of them had very little in common.

The Dove Flyer tells the story in microcosm of the fate of Iraqi Jewry at this time, and an unforgettable story it is too. The main protagonists all live in the 'new' Jewish quarter of Baghdad to which they have been forced to move for their own protection after the terrible Farhud riots. The narrator is Kabi, whose father is a settled and established Jewish Iraqi, thoroughly acculturated and at home in the Muslim milieu; he will have no truck with the Zionists who are already organising within the Jewish community and drawing the unwelcome attention of the secret police...at least until his brother Hizkel, a Zionist, is arrested and taken off to prison to await trial and a possible death sentence.

As the family, their friends, neighbours and enemies come to terms with what has occurred, the ground gradually shifts beneath them all, causing new friendships to develop and old ones to break.

Eli Amir weaves a rich tapestry of Iraqi Jewish life and the effects of events beyond their control on ordinary and extra-ordinary human beings alike.

This is a magnificent novel, as well as being beautifully written, and it acts as a powerful reminder that when the State of Israel was established, and became an almost God-given haven for the persecuted Jews of Europe, it also had a terrible effect on the Jews of the Middle East for whom a Jewish state was an alien concept and who were – albeit with many compromises – quite comfortable where they were and had been for centuries.

The Dove Flyer is not a book to miss.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh