

Baghdad: The City in Verse, translated and edited by Reuven Snir.
Harvard University Press 2013.

Baghdad, the fabled city of A Thousand and One Nights, has loomed large in the culture of the Middle East since its construction by Al Mansur in the 8th century of the Current Era. But its antecedence goes back as far as the Sumerians, and includes the Hanging Gardens that were one of the wonders of the ancient world. It is a city of danger, of romance, of triumph and tragedy.

In Baghdad: The City in Verse, Professor Reuven Snir of Haifa University presents a range of poems inspired by the great city, from the eighth century up to the twentieth. Snir, himself of Iraqi origin (his parents were forced to flee to Israel in 1951 to escape the waves of hate that engulfed Iraqi Jews after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1947), has taken more than 170 poems with a range of authors – Jewish, Muslim, Kurdish, Christian – and translated them all. Some of the authors are anonymous, others are known, together with their dates, and there is a period of great poetic richness in Babylon in the 11th and 12th centuries, an efflorescence mirrored by the Jews of Muslim Spain.

Baghdad: The City in Verse is a wonderful portrayal of a legendary city whose influence and relevance spans millennia. It is a potent reminder of the richness and variety of Islamic culture, today so hard to discern, and of the multiplicity of people and cultures who across history have made Baghdad their home and rhapsodized it in verse and song.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh