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IT ONLY TAKES ONE TO TANGO

In Ishmael's House: A History of Jews in Muslim Lands, by Martin Gilbert. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010. xxiii + 354 pages. Maps to p. 374. Glossary to p. 379. Bibliography to p. 398. Index to p. 424. \$38, hardcover.

Reviewed by Moshe Behar

Think of a prominent Arab-Jewish scholar who had published dozens of books about themes pertaining to the modern history of his native Middle East (for example Murad Farag or Avraham Elmaleh). Imagine further that although he did not have a command of Latin, English, French, or German, our heuristic Arab-Jewish author proceeded to write a book about the history of Western European Jewry during the past fourteen centuries, titling it *In Jesus' House: A History of Jews in Christian Lands*. Would academic presses be likely to entertain publication of such a work? Would scholars of Western

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European Jewry be likely to view such a text favorably or as being authoritative? These were my first thoughts after reading Sir Martin Gilbert's staggeringly ambitious book, aiming to survey the history of Jews from Morocco to Afghanistan, notwithstanding his lack of Arabic, Persian, or Ottoman Turkish.

Predictably starting with Khaibar's horrible Jewish-Muslim battle of 628–629 CE, the book stretches to as recently as “22 February 2010, when the Israeli Knesset approved a law instructing the government to protect the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries in all forthcoming peace negotiations; the first Israeli law to recognize Jews as coming to Israel not only to fulfill Zionist aspirations, but as refugees” (p. 334).

That Gilbert's book is structurally and historically uneven is not surprising: while its first 126 pages cover, however impossibly, the *longue durée* from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, the remaining 228 pages center exclusively on the twentieth century. This imbalance sheds light on why Gilbert's book was written to begin with. Sadly, that reason has little to do with candid interest in the historical experiences of Asian/African Jews or their individual and collective existence; it has more to do with prosaic anti-Palestinian advocacy in the instrumental service of the Israeli right. Although a positivist historian, Gilbert fails to resist the temptation to transhistorically ascribe timeless qualities to Muslims irrespective of locale, context, or individuality. On his book's third page, Gilbert postulates that “modern resonance of Khaibar” is widespread among Israel's Bedouins. That the Bedouins' ancestral land has been systematically appropriated since 1948 by the self-proclaimed Jewish state—or that *unrecognized* Bedouin villages are bulldozed repeatedly (unlike, say, Jewish outposts/settlement in the West Bank)—is an insignificant variable that escapes Gilbert's narration and meticulous attention to all details “Muslim.” Yet Gilbert is candid to acknowledge that the very idea of writing his book came from the Canadian tycoon financier and Zionist advocate Israel Asper (founder of CanWest Global Communications Corporation), whose foundation facilitated the project yet

“without seeking editorial control” (p. xiv).

A juxtaposition of two quotes conveys Gilbert's overriding thesis. First:

While the Israeli leadership strove to support the Jewish refugees from Muslim land and make them an integral and equal part of Israeli life and society, no Arab nation tried to integrate the Palestinian Arab refugees into their new homelands. Instead, the Palestinian Arabs were kept in refugees camps on independent Arab soil, sustained by a UN agency set up solely for them (UNRWA). No such agency was set for the Jewish refugees from Muslim lands. (p. 313)

Second:

The capacity of the Arab world to absorb this [Palestinian] refugee Population has been increased by the [post-1949] immigration to Israel of Jews from Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and other Arab lands, who left behind them their homes, property and labor opportunities and who have been proudly received in Israel, without any plaintive outcry or rush for international help. What could be more natural than that Arab countries . . . should absorb a like number of Arab kinsmen? The national revolutions of the Middle East have produced a two-way movement of population of Jews from Arab lands into Israel and of Arabs from Israel into Arab territories. The crucial difference is that Israel has made the effort and sacrifice to integrate its newcomers, while the Arab governments have deliberately obstructed integration in their territories. (p. 179)

I confess: only *one* of these quotes is Gilbert's; the other one was written in 1955 by another prominent Briton, Abba Eban, twenty years Gilbert's senior (“The Arab Refugees: A Record of Obstruction,” reprinted in Abba Eban, *Voice of Israel*, 1958). Let the reader decide which quote belongs to whom as a means of concluding whether this matters at all, given the substantive content of the arguments advanced.

Gilbert rehashes the old Israeli theses that a “population exchange” took place between the Palestinians and Asian/African Jews, that the latter are equally refugees as the former, and that the responsibility for everything rests squarely with “Muslim politics.” Gilbert also finds it unnecessary to consider variables such as the Zionist assertion of the necessity to “liquidate the (Jewish) exile” as a prerequisite for materializing Zionism; the Zionist calls and actions to “ingather the exiles”; the

Zionist insistence on the institutionalized sociopolitical separation between Jews and Muslims/Christians; or Israel's demographic, agricultural, and industrial need for manpower following the genocidal extermination of Zionism's European-Jewish reservoir.

In other words, if we follow Gilbert, then Zionist variables have zero role in producing the displacement of Jews from "Muslim lands": wherever Muslim/Arab politics are concerned, it apparently takes only one to tango. This thrust is puzzling given that in his 1998 book *Israel: A History*, Gilbert explained, "After secret negotiations in Baghdad with the Iraqi Prime Minister Tawfic al-Suwaidi [Zionist emissaries Shlomo] Hillel and [Mordechai] Ben-Port succeeded, on the basis of a substantial cash payment, in securing a law allowing Iraqi Jews to emigrate to Israel. The Bill to this effect was introduced to the Iraqi parliament on 5 June 1950" (p. 167). Between publishing his 1998 and 2010 books, Gilbert also joined the International Advisory Board of "NGO Monitor," an organization that monitors everyone *except* those who work to undermine the strength of the (post-Holocaust) Geneva Conventions.