PROLOGUE

It's the dates that really clinch their Iraqi origins. A habit that clung to them as thickly as the Arabic language, music, and customs. My parents migrated twice, first to Israel and then to England – but maintained their Iraq-inspired date consumption throughout. They bore children during the Israeli phase but raised us for the greater part in England, their longest home, where my father would occasionally make breakfasts of fried eggs drizzled with date syrup. The jar of brown, thickly sweet syrup was from Basra, southern Iraq, as the black lettering and the palm tree on the label – absurdly exotic in our English kitchen – testified.

Basra: my father's home city and a primary source of pride. The city whose rivers he paddled, on the banks of which he hung out with his first friends – Muslim, Jewish; who cared? – eating flamed, spicy fish together. He lived in Basra for twenty years, spent twenty-three more as a citizen of Israel, and finally ended up – as did my Baghdad-born mother, who'd lived in Kirkuk, in northern Iraq – with just one passport: British. It's a prized nationality for someone who once lived under a British Mandate in Iraq, who attended an English-modelled government school there and listened daily to

BBC World Service broadcasts on Basra shortwave – as my mother recalls doing on the Kirkuk frequency. But ask my father now to which country he most belongs? "Iraq!" he pronounces, in the sort of loaded voice that might more often be heard reading human-rights declarations. "Of course, I am an Iraqi! That's what I am!" My mother is not so categorical: "Israel, probably. I don't know." But they both, happy Londoners, dismiss the subject as irrelevant. "Why split your hairs over it?" they'll say, with a migrant knack for putting a very slight bump in the flow of English expressions. "We are here now, *halas*. It's finished."

Iraqis seem to have a particularly devoted relationship with the palm fruit. In the early half of the twentieth century, Iraq had near-legendary status internationally for its succulent, sweet dates – more so than its oilfields – which it would trade across the Middle East. Those dates were a national treasure. A thriving export industry dispatched this Iraqi bounty in myriad forms: plain; stuffed with walnuts, dried apricots, or pistachio nuts; infused with rosewater. They also had mythical powers. My aunt (two to four dates daily) describes Iraqi labourers at her former home in Basra flying up three flights of stairs with hulking furniture strapped to their backs, turbo-powered, she insists, by the date sandwiches they ate for breakfast. In Iraq, lower-grade dates, known as Zahdi, would be sold to neighbouring Iran. Thereafter, Iranians would be referred to as *Abu al* [father of the] *Zahdi*, a sneery joke at the consumers of inferior dried palm fruit. Very low down, but still a feature of the list of things that grieve my parents about the current misery piled onto decades of suffering in Iraq, is that it has been surpassed by Iran – that nation of former date heathens – in date export and reputation. Also present on the bottom of this list is an infuriation over the current

British media mangling of Iraqi place names: "Four years in Basra and they still can't pronounce it right," they'll lament over radio reports.

In the late 1930s, or so the story goes, Jewish settlers in Palestine smuggled date palms out of Iraq, out of the fertile valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and into the soils of the soon-to-be Israeli state. But, my parents say, the stolen shoots never bore fruit as delicious as the original, magnificent Iraqi dates. How could they, having been transplanted into a foreign land? A short time later, 125,000 Jews, my parents included, pulled up roots and left Iraq, migrated en masse to Israel. Prior to that, Babylonian Jews had been living in Iraq for 2,600 years. They trace a lineage back to the Jewish fighters and nobles who were exiled, following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, to the banks of the river Babylon in 600 B.C.E. In total, around 800,000 Jews migrated to Israel from their native Arab and Muslim countries: Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Turkey. They'd been a part of the Middle East forever. They'd borne all kinds of fruit – cultural, linguistic, artistic, religious, and professional – living alongside Arab and Muslim peoples, for the most part in peace, as good neighbours. Now they, just like the smuggled palms, were sowed into the new soils of Israel. And this land, they say, seemed unaccountably hostile to Middle Eastern and North African Jews – so they didn't grow right, either.

Globally, Jews who come from Arab countries are a minority: 90 per cent of the Jewish population outside Israel is of European descent – German, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, or Eastern European. They're defined as "Ashkenazi", from the old Hebrew word for German. The Western worldwide presence of European

Jewry is why the idea of "Jewish" usually conjures up images of Ashkenazi culture: Yiddish words, klezmer music, gefilte fish, and the shtetl-life-depicting film musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. But in Israel, Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries (also called "Oriental" or "Mizrahi") comprise at least 40 per cent of the Jewish population and at one stage were a clear majority. Jewish culture in their context is Arabic words, Oriental music, Middle Eastern food, and the high melodrama of classic Egyptian cinema. Identities developed to the rhythms and patterns of the Middle East so that, for a large proportion of arrivals to the new Israel, Arab was a way of being Jewish.

Israel was created in 1948, although there had been Jewish migration to it, with state-building motivations, since the late nineteenth century. Most of that was from Europe, because the idea of founding a Jewish state had a European birth. Zionist ideology clashed with the concurrent development of self-determination aspirations in the Middle East. Arab nationalism was rising up against European rule, which not only had colonized countries such as Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt but was evidently about to introduce a new colonial player – Israel – into the heart of the Arab world. These opposite national forces created seismic shifts in the Middle Eastern soils that had nourished and raised Oriental Jews for thousands of years. Multi-weave identities rapidly unravelled as both sides – Arab and Jewish – pulled, hard. Terminology rapidly conflated as "Jewish" became synonymous with "Zionist", which became synonymous with "colonizer" and "enemy". The very idea, much less the actual reality, of a Jewish presence within Arab countries seemed fraught with contradiction. Over a tiny slice of time, Jews left long-term homes in Arab lands – not all of them and not all to Israel; but a robust Judeo-Arabic tradition,

once a valued and integral part of the region, came to a sudden full stop.

There should, after such a long-standing relationship, have been a bounty chest of legacies, keepsakes, and memories for the departing Jews to take with them. It ought to have travelled across seas and deserts to Israel. But the laden chest was quickly discarded. It felt cumbersome and was a source of shame. In the Jewish state, its contents were appraised as backward and belonging to the enemy. Trudging the treasure chest around seemed to foreclose doors leading into society because, in so many ways, that Judeo-Arabic way of life failed to cross cultural checkpoints operating in Israel. The one item that did survive the journey was the experience of animosity under the rule of Islam, magnified, re-examined, and respun into central significance. In place of multiple narratives that describe full lives steeped in the Oriental, stamped with templates of Arab-Jewish coexistence, there is just one story: the Arabs hate the Jews.

For a Western, Jewish nation building itself in an Arab region, surrounded by Arab countries, the "Arab-Jewish" population presented an awkward problem. What should be done with these migrants who, while part of the Jewish family, resembled – and behaved in so many ways just like – the "uncivilized" enemy surrounding the new home state? They had to be absorbed, turned into Israeli citizens like all the other Jewish migrants coming from all corners of the world. One of the central tenets of this state-building enterprise was to create a "new Israeli" who would be an amalgam of all the positive attributes of the multinational migrants, through a process defined as the "melting pot".

That was the theory, but then the attributes of the Middle Eastern Jews weren't exactly viewed as positive – not back then

and, many would say, not now either. Official documents, ministerial pronouncements, and media articles from those initial years show how serious the issue was perceived to be. A real fear was that the high influx of immigrants from the Middle East might actually thwart the project of building a Jewish homeland. Israel perceived the Arab world, now the enemy of the Jews, as an inferior, barbaric world which, if not kept at bay, would drag Israel down to its own low level. Jews from Arab countries were emblematic of many of Israel's fears about the region that it was a part of, but wanted no part of. And so a series of assumptions and appraisals merged into a single path, one fateful conclusion. It was never stated as such, and it went absolutely against the Jewish integration ideals of the new country: but it was as though the new Israelis from the Middle East had somehow to be whitewashed, in order to banish the marks of the Arab within the Jew.