

Source Sheet – The Departure of the Jews of Moslem Countries

Read the texts and then discuss in groups

“The supposedly ideal life of the Jews in Arab lands is nothing but a myth! [...] As far as the memories of my childhood go, in the stories of my father, my grandparents, my aunts and my uncle, living alongside the Arabs was not just uncomfortable, but it was filled with threats, which from time to time changed from the potential for violence to actuality. At the same time, one very significant fact should be remembered: during the colonial period [periods of European control of Moslem countries], the situation of the Jews was more secure, since it had a stronger legal basis. [...] At no time – and I say this expressly: at no time – apart from two or three periods that involved unusual circumstances, and even then barely so – were the Jews who lived in Arab countries seen as anything other than persons of insignificant worth, open to dangers and subject to the occasional bouts of murder and killing, so that they should well remember their status.”

(Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs*,
Sifriyat Poalim, Bnei Brak, 1975, pp. 14-16 [Hebrew])

Albert Memmi is a French-Jewish writer and philosopher. Memmi was born in Tunisia in 1920. In his youth he was sent by his parents to study in France. He saw himself as someone standing at the junction of three cultures: Arab, Jewish and French, and his philosophical endeavors dealt with the difficulty of integrating cultures. In his writings he addresses the difficulty faced by someone who lives between cultures, and who over the course of his life moves between cultures. Some of Memmi's books have been translated into Hebrew.

“The 230 Jews remaining in Syria do not wish to migrate to any other country,” the head of the Jewish community in Syria, Yosef Jataty, said yesterday in Damascus. [...]

“As far as I know, all of the family heads in the small Jewish community have businesses, and they have children who attend school and university. They continue to hold services in the synagogues, even in the absence of a rabbi. I have not heard of a plan for the mass departure of Jews of Damascus, even though, should they wish to do so, they can, since they have all been granted [exit] visas,” he said. Jataty also claimed that he believes that the majority of the Jews who migrated to the United States or to Israel are likely to return to Damascus, after they encounter difficulties. “I am convinced that Syria will welcome them back with open arms.”

Shefi Gabbay, “Head of the Community in Syria: ‘The remaining Jews don’t wish to leave’”, *Maariv*, 19.10.94.

1. What kind of life does Albert Memmi describe in Moslem countries?

2. What kind of life for the Jews of Syria does Yosef Jataty describe?

3. In your view, what might be the reasons for the differences in attitude?

4. What can we learn from the fact that each of them describes matters differently?
