“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept as we remembered Zion” (Tehillim 137:1). This verse of longing for Israel has been recited by Jews throughout the millennia, perhaps most poignantly by the Jews of Babylon themselves, in modern day Iraq. But when Iraqi Jews recited this verse on Tisha B’Av in 1947, they could not have imagined that many of them would be in Israel by Rosh Hashanah of that year!

It all began in June 1941, when the Iraqi Arabs attacked the Jewish community of Baghdad in what would later be known as the “Farhud”, the “looting”. Hundreds of Arabs attacked Jewish homes and businesses, murdering 179 Jews and injuring thousands more. Recognizing that Jewish life in Iraq was no longer safe, the local Zionist movement began searching for a plan to bring Iraqi Jews to Eretz Yisrael. At this time, the British ruled over Mandatory Palestine and had enacted a quota system, limiting the number of Jews who could emigrate to Palestine. The Mossad le’Aliya Bet, the agency responsible for the illegal immigration of Jews to Israel during the British Mandate, sent representatives to Iraq to come up with a creative plan.

Shlomo Hillel, a Mossad le’Aliya Bet representative and native-born Baghdadi, joined the effort. Hillel traveled to Baghdad in 1942, hoping to help Iraqi Jews emigrate to Israel, but returned to Israel after a year of fruitless efforts. Five years later, on the 3rd of Ellul, 1947, Hillel was at his Kibbutz, Ma’agan Michael, when the director of Mossad le’Aliya Bet, Moshe Karmil, came looking for him. A rescue plan was coming together and Karmil wanted Hillel to lead the operation. Two American World War II veteran pilots were in Israel with a commando plane which had a capacity of 50 passengers. Though not Jewish nor Zionists, the mercenary pilots were willing to fly to Iraq to bring a plane full of Jews to Israel in return for payment. Hillel immediately accepted the challenge, excited about the opportunity to bring 50 Jews to the Holy Land. Although only 24 years old, Hillel knew Baghdad like the back of his hand and was the perfect fit to lead the mission.

Later that day, pilots Mike and Leo Vessenberg and Shlomo Hillel, dressed as a mechanic, flew to Baghdad in a Curtiss Commando plane, landing in a semi-isolated airport without arousing the suspicion of any Iraqi officials. Hillel immediately went to the Shasha family home in the Al’oliya neighborhood of Baghdad, where Mossad Le’Aliya Bet members were waiting for him. Despite the dangers involved, everyone agreed that the best chance for successful escape would be to leave from the airport. The challenge, of course, was how to smuggle 50 Jews onto the plane without being noticed.

Hillel, disguised as Abu Yusuf, spent the next two days making preparations. The empty plane would taxi along the tarmac, and while at a turning point, it would stop for a few minutes to allow the engines to warm up. While stopped, the passengers would secretly board under the protection of the plane’s blinding lights. With a plan in place, the Mossad Le’Aliya Bet representatives gathered 50 young Jewish men and women from across Iraq. The Shura – the operational arm of the underground – was responsible for organizing the passengers and getting them to the plane safely.

On the 7th of Ellul, the eve of the operation, the pilots approached Hillel demanding their payment. Hillel assured them they would be paid upon...
arrival in Palestine, but the Vessenbergs were not satisfied. Hillel offered them a personal check. The pilots accepted, not knowing that Hillel, a kibbutznik, didn’t have a personal bank account.

Early on Shabbat morning, Parashat Shoftim, the 50 Jews woke up before dawn, and 10 cars quietly traveled to the airport in Baghdad. It was the month of Ellul, and they were accustomed to waking up at that hour during the week to say Selichot at the time known as Et Ratzon. Nine cars arrived as planned, with the tenth being delayed by a herd of camels crossing the road. Fortunately, the delay wasn’t long and all 50 passengers made it to the airport, where they were smuggled through a hole in the airport fence next to the last turn on the tarmac before take-off. It was 3:30 am. The plane’s lights and engines went on, and in the noisy tumult, the young Jews climbed on board. A few minutes later, the plane was in the air, and the new olim cheered their fearless leader, Shlomo Hillel. As they approached Israel, they broke into song. Flying over the Kinneret, they sang songs by Rachel HaMeshoreret1 with tears in their eyes. At 6:30am, they landed in the Yavniel Valley, next to Teveriya, far from the eyes of the British. The Palmach created an artificial runway, lighting bonfires to mark the plane’s landing area. The 50 olim were taken on trucks to nearby kibbutzim.

The aerial operation, the first of its kind during the British Mandate, was named “Operation Michaelberg” after the pilots Mike and Leo Vessenberg. The pilots later flew two more rescue operations, a second rescue flight from Iraq and one from Italy, and the plane was later used in the War of Independence. Shlomo Hillel, the organizer of the mission, would later become Israel’s Chief of Police and ultimately the Speaker of the Knesset. He passed away earlier this year.

In the month of Ellul, in the hours of Selichot, 50 Iraqi Jews were brought from “the rivers of Babylon” to kibbutzim in northern Israel to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, a new year and a new life in Israel.

They fulfilled the words of the piyut “Achot Ketana” (a pizmon sung in Sephardic communities before the commencement of the Rosh Hashanah evening prayer):

חִזְקוּ וְגִילוּ כִּי שֹׁד גָּמַר לְצוּר הוֹחִילוּ בְּרִיתוֹ שָׁמַר

“Be strong and rejoice for the plunder is ended; place hope in the Rock and keep His covenant.”

לָכֶם וְתַעֲלוּ לְצִיּוֹן וְאָמַר סֹלּוּ סֹלּוּ מְסִלּוֹתֶיהָ

“You will ascend to Zion and He will say: Pave! Pave her paths.”

May the new year bring blessings, joy, and many more Jews to Eretz Yisrael!

1 Rachel Bluwstein Sela (1890–1931), a celebrated Hebrew-language poet known as Rachel HaMeshoreret (Rachel the Poetess). Many of her poems were set to music and became classic Israeli songs.

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