

The Future of the Babylonian Jewish Archives: Interview with Dr. Harold Rhode

by Jerry Gordon (June 2014)



1815 copy of mystical Zohar

Source: Drew Angere for New York Times

When we [interviewed](#) Dr. Harold Rhode, the savior of the Babylonian Jewish archives, he told the story of how he had found them in the water-logged basement of the late Saddam Hussein's [Mukhabarat](#) in Baghdad in 2003 and arranged for recovery and restoration by the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) in Washington, DC. In July 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority reached an agreement under international law with the Iraqi interim government for return of the restored Jewish archives. We noted:

[This] agreement is [controversial](#) as Rhode and others contend that the Hussein's Mukhabarat stole the property from the Jewish community and that it rightfully should be returned to the Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center in Israel. The Iraqi government [contends](#) that the archives may contain important historical information of the origins of the country.

A report by *JNS.org* on May 15, 2014 brought a reprieve by the government of Iraq for exhibit of these Babylonian Jewish archives, ["Iraqi Jewish Archive's U.S. exhibition extended"](#).

The *JNS.org* article cited an exchange of letters by the Iraq Ambassador in Washington saying:

Iraqi Ambassador to the U.S. Lukman Faily said in a statement Wednesday that Iraq "has authorized me to extend the period which the exhibit may remain in the United States." The exhibit "has led to an increase of understanding between Iraq and United States and a greater recognition of the diverse heritage of Iraq," he said.

"We look forward to completing the technical aspects of this extension with the Government of the United States within the coming days. Items which were among the material brought to the United States that are not part of the exhibit will return to Iraq in the very near future, as originally agreed," said Faily.

Following the close of the exhibit of the archives in early January 2014, at the NARA Lawrence F. O'Brien gallery in Washington, DC, it was sent to New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage for an exhibit. You may browse through the Iraqi Jewish Archive exhibit and collection on-line, at the NARA website, [here](#).

The *JNS.org* report noted the comments of representatives of both the Orthodox Union and the American Jewish Committee regarding the ultimate status of the Babylonian Jewish Archives:

The Orthodox Union (OU) welcomed Faily's announcement of the exhibit's extension, but said its work on the issue of the archive's final destination isn't done.

"The historical and religious value of the Iraqi Jewish Archive materials compel us to ensure that the archive should remain in the United States where it will be easily accessible to all, particularly the Iraqi Jewish community now living in diaspora around the world," said Nathan Diament, OU's executive director for public policy. "We will continue to advocate for an appropriate long-term solution for these materials."

Rabbi Andrew Baker, the American Jewish Committee's director of international Jewish affairs, said, "Extending the exhibit's schedule and making it available to other American communities will benefit all who have interest in the history of Iraq's Jews."

Dr. Rhode in our earlier NER interview expressed his views as to the ultimate disposition of these restored archives:

The American government considered the archives as property which belonged to Iraq and therefore by International law it has to be returned. However, this was really property stolen by the previous Iraqi governments from the Jews who fled the country, mostly in 1950-51.


The problem is most of this is private property. These were holy books that belonged to individuals. They never belonged to the Iraqi government. When, for example, Iraqi Jews had a Torah made, if you moved to another synagogue, the Torah moved with you. In 1950/51 when most of the Jews left they were not allowed to take this material with them. They were only allowed to take basically a suitcase of clothes, if that, and so the Jews were forced against their wishes to leave the material behind.

If this is private property it belongs to the Jews. If it can't be identified then it becomes the property of the exiled Iraqi Jewish community. 85% of the exiled Iraqi Jews and their descendents live in Israel. As exiled Jews from the Muslim world they

property was expropriated. They have no access to their material.

We had suggested that the Babylonian Jewish Archives should instead be transferred to the Babylonian Jewish Heritage Museum in Israel to be placed on permanent exhibit there. A significant portion of Iraqi Jews had settled in Israel after their expulsion from Iraq in the early 1950's.

Following the announcement of the May 16, 2014 agreement to extend the Babylonian Jewish Archives exhibit in the US, we reconvened with Dr. Rhode. We returned to discuss the events of April and May 2003, and those in the American government who enabled the transfer and eventual restoration of the Archives. Rhode provided personal testimony of the encounters he had with Diasporan Iraqi Jews who came to view the Washington exhibit and made their own personal discoveries. He also discusses the possible ultimate disposition of these Archives from this ancient Babylonian Jewish community in light of the current agreement reached between the Iraqi and US governments.

Gordon: We are here with distinguished Gatestone Institute fellow and former Pentagon  specialist Dr. Harold Rhode.

Rhode: Thank you, nice to be here.

Gordon: Dr. Rhode, you spent over twenty-eight years in the Pentagon as a civilian specialist in how to understand the Islamic mindset. How did that come about and who was instrumental in soliciting your interest for this advisory post?

Rhode: My Ph.D in Islamic history is from Columbia University but the truth is that it's Professor Bernard Lewis, retired from Princeton, who was my real advisor. He was my real mentor and it was he who was a friend of Scoop Jackson, Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, and Jackson's aide Richard Perle. When Richard Perle became the Assistant Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon for International Security Policy, Professor Lewis called Richard Perle and told him, "You ought to consider Harold for this post." Richard Perle was working among other things on Turkey and he asked me would I be willing to do that. I received my initial security clearance about 3 months later, and shortly thereafter started working for Richard Perle. I very quickly started working as well for his boss, the late [Dr. Fred Ikle](#). I worked on the entire Islamic world and that was my start in 1982. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

Gordon: How did you happen to be in Baghdad in April, 2003 when the Iraqi Jewish Archives were discovered?

Rhode: I went with a group of American civilians that the Pentagon sent for the transition period in Iraq. I was one of the people that was asked to go. I asked my wife who agreed and off I went. I had spent twelve years working with the Iraqi opposition on the Iraqi project. I know almost all of the people involved in the Iraqi opposition fairly well, and was deeply honored and spent three months in Kuwait and in Iraq.

Gordon: What did you find in the water-logged basement of the late Saddam Hussein's Mukhabarat or intelligence service building?

Rhode: Well that's an interesting story. If you don't mind could I give you a little background on this story and how we got there?

Gordon: Absolutely!

Rhode: In totalitarian societies, when the dictator or the brute is overthrown, the people who worked for him try to go to the new people who take and say: "I'll tell you what I did and I'll cooperate with you. In return will you give me a free pass and say that I have cooperated so nothing will happen to me?" There were about six opposition groups. One of the brightest human beings I have ever met in my life was Dr. Ahmed Chalabi, a then Iraqi-opposition leader who headed the Iraqi National Congress (INC).

The man who ran the Iraqi Jewish section – not the Israeli section but the Jewish section of the Iraqi Intelligence – came to Chalabi and said this is what I have been doing. We had under our control an ancient copy of the Talmud from the 7th century, among other things. Nobody knew that there was such a thing a Jewish section. It was obvious that the Saddam's intelligence establishment would have an Israeli section, but why a Jewish section? We were all shocked. Chalabi instantly called me and Judith Miller, then a New York Times journalist who was also in Baghdad at the time and said you've got to come quickly.

We all traipsed over to the Iraqi Intelligence headquarters with this man who was head of the Jewish section. He repeated his story about the ancient copy of the Talmud written, which he said was written on *jild* – the Arabic word for skin or parchment. Oh course Judith and I were enthralled. No copy of the Talmud that old had yet ever been discovered. So we went there, with of Chalabi's people, myself, Judith Miller – she was embedded in the weapons of mass destruction team from the American military. Saddam's Jewish intelligence section head pointed from the outside to two windows in the basement and promptly disappeared.

We tried then to go into the building and the entire basement was flooded up to our waists. Now why was it flooded? We slowly but surely began to piece the entire story together. The

American military had dropped a 2000 pound bomb on the building. It should have destroyed, it as it was a huge building. But the bomb did not explode. It went through the building, destroyed the water system, came out the side and lodged in the ground.

Even though I had by then worked in the Pentagon for twenty-one years I didn't know much about the military hardware, so I didn't know that this thing in the ground was a live bomb. It could have exploded at any time. We were there for about six weeks taking out the material. The bomb never went off. The question was what to do?

Well some of the American military guys waded into the water. This is what they found. The first room they came to the Israeli section – not the Jewish section of the basement – and began to pull out models of the Knesset, a sign that said in Arabic which said, "Who was going to send the fortieth missile off to Israel?" (Thirty-nine were fired at Israel during in the Kuwait war in 1990.) In addition, they brought out a Russian map of Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor which was taken from the sky; other maps, lists of the set-up of the Shin-Bet (Israel's Internal Intelligence Service) and the Mossad. Anyway that was just part one of the thing.

The soldiers then went down the hall; they turned left into the room where Saddam's Jewish specialist showed us from outside. What they found was breath-taking. That room too was flooded; there were books strewn all over the place. There was a Torah scroll, and a box of which the Iraqi Jews would call a *tik*. A *tik* is a wooden box in which Sephardic Jews keep Torah scrolls. The *tik* had floated down into the hallway and that's what we knew on the first day. I think it was in either late April or the first week in May.

The question is what to do? Chalabi asked me what I wanted to do and I said, "Look, there's no question. I am a religious Jew. Saving a Torah for a Jew is like saving a human life."

Chalabi said he can get pumps to suck out the water. He also offered to supply workers to get this out. Chalabi used his own personal money and made every effort to get the project started. He found a truck that could pump out small amounts of water. The pumps on the truck worked and, within two days, the water went down basically to our ankles. We were able to go in and to see what was there.

The material was unbelievable! We couldn't see for sure at first what exactly it was except there were a lot of old books and things like school and community records. It wasn't clear. We began to pull these out. Chalabi had procured for us metal trunks and we began to put the materials that we could in these trunks. Chalabi gave us a courtyard in one of his, headquarters and we would dry out the material there. The problem is that you can't have all

these workers for God knows how long and leave it to Chalabi to pay for everything. It was very nice of Chalabi to do this but I needed to get money from somewhere.

The American government at first was completely unhelpful. There was a wonderful archivist who was part of this civilian team working on things like the Iraqi National Museum and I asked for her help but she was not allowed to help me. It's not that she didn't want to. Most of the American governmental authorities in Baghdad saw me and this project as an albatross. They wanted it to go away.

I managed to get through to a remarkable man in New York who used to be the CEO of Lehman Brothers, Harvey Krueger. He managed to procure funds, a grant, so we could pay the Iraqis who were helping us get the material out.

We slowly but surely put all the material in the central courtyard. It had to dry off a bit; again no one would help me. You know I have a PhD in history but I do not understand restoration and I do not understand how to preserve documents. Through a close friend in Jerusalem, I managed to get through to the Restoration Department of the Hebrew University. That preservation specialist spoke to me on the phone, trying to tell me how to preserve these documents. There was only one problem. She said we needed to put the material in a cool place.

But we had no electricity. There was no cool place. It was about 115 degrees in the shade. What she said wasn't possible. She responded: "look, do the best that you can."

Anyway we took this material, we dried it out a bit and then we had Torahs, we had all sorts of other documents on parchment. If these had been dried out completely, they would have been like a straitjacket. Look what happens to leather when it gets wet and so we would lay it out, dry it out a bit and then put these materials in these trunks on which I put my name in English, and sometimes in Arabic and in Hebrew.

As for the books, each was much waterlogged and therefore very heavy. Now that becomes important when the archivists later got involved.

In the meantime, I spoke with Natan Sharansky who was at the time was an Israeli government minister and a friend. While I was in Baghdad, he would call from time to time to ask how I was doing. He said what I was experiencing in Baghdad was somewhat like what he experienced in the Soviet Union. That was, I think on his part, very polite, very nice, and a bit exaggerated. I did not go through what he did in the Gulag for so long. He asked what he could do to help. I answered: "call your friend Vice President Cheney; see if he can help."

In the meantime Richard Perle who was also a friend of Sharansky's, and a friend of mine, called. I told him that as he was the Chairman of the Defense Policy Board, that he should tell Secretary Rumsfeld about the Jewish material we had found. They both did.

One or two days later, the American government became interested in it. Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld are real heroes in this story, because once they expressed interest in it, the American bureaucracy went into action in Baghdad. I want to tell you when the American government really puts its mind to it, it can do anything!

All of a sudden out of nowhere – this was the second day of Shavuot, the Feast of Tabernacles when the Jewish people received the Torah – the American government got involved. The Americans brought in huge pumps; they blocked off the room containing what remained of the Jewish material. They then sucked out all the remaining water, we saw the water go down very quickly, unlike beforehand, with the small pumps.

So the American government then went into action. It brought over archivists from the National Archives of the United States (NARA) and they took over the project. They – to put it politely – dismissed me from the project and hoped that I would disappear. I came back to the United States and this material is eventually brought out.

The archives officials put the rest of the material into the trunks Dr. Chalabi gave me, and put them into a freezer truck. What a feat it was for the Americans to find such a truck in the midst of the chaos that was Baghdad at that time. But as I say, the American government can do anything, once it decides to do so.

Thereafter, the trunks were put on a small plane with again this remarkable lady, the above-mentioned archivist who had wanted to help me and wasn't allowed to at first. But after the American government got involved, everything was fine and she was able to help.

This whole project is a story of miracles – and the last part of this is also, it's going to end up as another miracle. She was on this plane with the material; she is not a Jew. She had been in the military by then for a long time by then. She was on this small plane with two pilots. The trunks were frozen solid blocks of brown ice. Why? Because freezing stopped the deterioration process. The small plane, it's the middle of the summer – it was extremely hot – landed on the island of Rhodes to refuel at a NATO base. Now the material is in the plane, it lands, in order to refuel. But in order to refuel, you need to turn off the engines. If you turn off the engines you would lose electricity and all of the work that had been done up until then could have been for naught, because turning off the plane's engines meant that the ice preserving the materials in the trunks would melt and the deterioration process would

start again.

The archivist radioed the head of the base who was an American and asked for electricity; he refused. He said it wasn't possible; the conversation got a bit heated. Finally the head of the base who is an American comes out – a Navy guy and my archivist friend is in shock. The Navy officer had a kippa/yarmulke on his head. The archivist was stunned. She said that in all the many years she had have been in military, that she had never seen anybody in the navy with a yarmulke on. She knew there would be no problem getting electricity. Needless to say, when she explained why she needed electricity, she got it.

Anyway, the material was sent to somewhere in Texas where they sucked out all of the ice which had stopped the deterioration process. Now the question was what was going to happen to this material? When it was in Baghdad, when we took over, we had Iraqi sovereignty. If you take over another country you are responsible for its sovereignty, so the American government signed an agreement with the American official who was the acting head of the Iraqi Cultural Ministry at that time. According to that agreement, this material would be sent back to Iraq after it was restored.

Well, that means we signed an agreement with ourselves – not the Iraqis. (When we left, we handed over sovereignty to the Iraqis.) There is an international law which says that if you conquer another country you may not take out its artifacts. There are two or three caveats to that. If the material has been stolen then that law does not apply. In this particular instance, we know that Saddam's people and before that, the Iraqi government expropriated this material when the Jews were forced to flee in 1951.

Slowly but surely the Jewish community that remained behind took the remains of whatever was left its own materials and it put it in the women's section, the upstairs section of the one remaining synagogue -the Meir Tweig Synagogue in what was in the late 1940's the place to live in Baghdad, Bataween. Synagogues in the Middle East often are compounds. Besides the Meir Tweig synagogue itself there are places that people eat and live.

So how was the material stolen/taken out from that synagogue and land up in Iraq's Intelligence Headquarters? Sometime in the early 1980's we found out later, that in the middle of the night, Saddam's henchmen pulled up two trucks with guns and at gun point took all the material. No one knew where. It was stolen. It's important to remember this word – STOLEN.

For ten years – from 2003-2013, following our discovery of this material, nothing happened; it sat in limbo. Eventually – and I really don't know how – the State Department allocated three million dollars for the restoration of this material. Then, the State Department decided to

make an exhibition of this material in both Washington and in New York from October 11, 2013 to May 17, 2014.

In June, 2014, this material was scheduled to return to Baghdad. To return this material which was stolen by the Iraqi government and later by Saddam and to return it now seems to violate the international law. I am not a lawyer but this has been explained to me. The number one issue is that it belongs to the Iraqi Jews – they didn't call themselves Iraqi Jews. They called themselves Babylonian Jews because Iraq is a relatively modern invention after World War I. Babylonia is ancient and the Jewish community of Baghdad had been there for twenty-six hundred years since about 586 BCE when the Babylonian Jewish community began. That is unbelievably ancient. There was a huge fuss over this and maybe we'll leave what's going to happen to it maybe to the end.

Gordon: That is rather fascinating background and previously unrevealed so I am very happy that you were able to fill in the missing blanks on this. But let me ask you a couple of questions about this ancient community. During World War II, the Jewish community in what we call Iraq really had a series of horrible experiences and even post war as you mentioned they had their property nationalized and expropriated and then they were expelled. What was the experience during World War II and who was the person who was involved?

Rhode: The British had ruled Iraq and in the mid 1930's, Iraq was given its independence. It had a king but there was a coup led by a man by the name of Rashid Ali who was working with the Nazis, in cahoots with the Mufti of Jerusalem who was living in Baghdad at the time. The Mufti was also working with Hitler. When Rashid Ali's forces took over in 1941, there was a pogrom (*farhood* in Arabic) against the Jews. The Jews up until then never really worried. Yes they had been second class citizens because in the Muslim world, neither Jews nor Christians nor any non-Muslims were allowed to rule over Muslims.

In reality, however, the Jews actually ran much of the Iraqi economy at that time, and were involved in many other activities which helped Iraq run relatively smoothly. It is not surprising that when I was there after the liberation in 2003, many Iraqis – or rather Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, Arabs – begged me saying: "how do we get the Jews back here because our country only ran well when the Jews were here." After about six days in 1941 when approximately 180 people were killed and a lot of property was destroyed and many Jews were injured – all of a sudden Jews said: "wait a minute, something is wrong here. Maybe we don't have a future here." Iraqi Jews weren't ardent Zionists at the time. But the *farhood* really shook them to their very foundations. The State of Israel was declared in 1948, *i.e.*, it was the rebirth of the Jewish state which had existed 2000 years ago.

After Israel's Declaration of Independence, the Arabs – including Iraq – did their utmost to destroy it. Life became almost unbearable for the Jews of Iraq. Especially in Baghdad but in other places in Iraq as well. Kurdistan, however, was a different story. Life was much better for the Jews in Kurdistan which was Northern Iraq.

Anyway, by 1950-51, an agreement was negotiated between Israel and the Iraqi authorities. It was done indirectly. About 150,000 people were airlifted from Baghdad through Cyprus to Israel. That was so because the Iraqis could claim that they were not having direct flights. They were going to Cyprus. They weren't going to Israel publicly and then after a while the flights went directly from Baghdad to Tel Aviv.

You had rich and poor Jews – all sorts of Jews – on these flights. They had to leave everything behind. They could take a suitcase, nothing more. They were impoverished by the Iraqi government which wouldn't let them take anything but a suitcase of clothes, and about 40 dinars which was a tiny sum of money.

Ninety percent of the Iraqi Jewish community and their descendants today live in Israel. There are Iraqi Jews in New York, London, and Canada but the vast majority live in Israel. Logically the material in this archive is theirs. And there is a museum or a center for the Babylonian Jewish Heritage outside of Tel Aviv in a place called Or Yehuda. That museum should be the final resting place of the materials we found in Iraq.

Unfortunately, given the nature of international politics at the moment that is not going to happen so we have to look for other options. If the stolen material in this archive go back to Baghdad, which the Iraqi government up until May 17th was strongly pushing for, we have an odd situation. This material belonged to the Iraqi Jews. But since Iraq will now not give visas to Israelis, the 90% of Iraqi Jewry and their descendants who live in Israel would be denied their patrimony, because they could not examine their own material. That is not right.

When I rescued this material in the beginning, all of the Iraqi opposition leaders begged me to get the material out of Iraq before it would become public. Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds said: "get it out of here!" But I had no ability to do that and I think it would've been illegal. So why did they say that before it becomes public? Once it becomes public then any Iraqi who would let it go would be shamed, would be humiliated, if they agreed to let the Americans or the Jews have this material. Shame and humiliation are concepts that we do not talk about here in the West. We are a guilt-ridden society meaning we look in the mirror and we say I am proud of myself or not proud of myself for doing X, Y and Z. A "shame society" is one which doesn't care what you think about yourself but cares what other people think about you and your

reputation depends on what other people say about you. No Iraqi politician would be able to say that he let the Americans or the Jews have these materials because he would therefore be humiliated in the eyes of his people.

Gordon: What was the agreement that was reached in 2003 between the Coalition Provisional Authority and the U.S. Government?

Rhode: That agreement was that the NARA – the American National Archival Administration – brought to the United States to restore, and then to return the material to Iraq. The interesting thing now is not that agreement. The Iraqi Jewish Community here in the United States has been told by the State Department, there is another agreement that they have reached on May 16, 2014 and it is very Middle Eastern. It is very hopeful.

The agreement formally says that the material in the exhibition which comprises twenty-seven items can stay and go to other places and the Iraqi government is very happy to do that but the rest of the material will be returned to Iraq. Now that doesn't sit well but I have a thought that maybe something else is going to go on here. As I explained before about honor and shame, it's very possible that the Iraqis could sign an agreement and quietly agree that this material will never be returned to Iraq but it's not written and it's not said which is why I say we must be vigilant now but I am hopeful that the material won't go back to Iraq.

What material will go back to Iraq? There are certain things that are duplicates, for example, there are sixty copies of an Aleph Bet book which is like a basic Hebrew book teaching students how to write the Hebrew alphabet. We don't need all of these. We only need the copies which would have notations in them, because notations give us some insight into the Iraqi Jewish community itself. But there are many other books which are essential because, the Rabbis who used them made notes which give us an insight into their mindset.

That sort of material should be retained for access. In Baghdad no one, even though the Iraqi archivists trained here to take care of this material don't have the conditions they need in Baghdad. Iraq is now a basically lawless society. There are hopeful negotiations with a new group of leaders might take over after the current elections in Iraq. These new leaders might be more receptive to making sure that that everybody has access to this material.

I don't have all the answers but we had some knowledge of Iraqi culture and once the project was taken out of the hands of the Pentagon and put into the hands of the State Department and CIA and others, their knowledge and I would say more importantly their interest in the cultures of the Middle East was much less. I am hopeful that we have another new government in Baghdad which will in the end be much more interested in working with the outside world.

Gordon: You were a docent at the Washington Exhibit which was held at the Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery for the National Archives over the period from October 11, 2013 to January 5, 2014. You had some interesting encounters with folks who came there. Could tell us some of those stories?

Rhode: When you walked into the exhibit you saw some of my trunks, the aluminum trunks and they all said Rhode on them, my family name, in English and Arabic. Some of them said Sefer Torah scrolls in Hebrew. At the exhibition, there was no explanation about why the word "Rhode" is written on the trunks. Moreover, the first picture of the exhibit is a picture me helping the Iraqi workers get some of these books out. My name is not on that picture. The guards at the exhibit kept being asked by people what does "Rhode" mean? Some asked: "Is that some secret code?" As you said I chose to be a docent. I did not do this for the National Archives. I simply came on Sunday mornings and a few other times during the week to give tours. We started out with two or three people, and, each time, up to 100 people joined the tour. I'm the person who was there when we found all of this. I am not the guy who restored it. The Archives did that, and did a beautiful job.

One of the Jews who stayed behind now who lives in London by the name of Edwin Shuker. He went through the exhibit. Edwin is in his 50's. He had to escape Iraq when he was 12 years old. He and his family were not allowed to take anything with them which might show they were trying to escape –meaning no documents which might give them away. So he had to leave school report cards etc. behind. Back to Edwin at the exhibition... As he was passing through the exhibition, he all of a sudden looks up and sees his school report card and a picture of himself as a 12 year old. He shouts: "That's my report card! That's my picture when I'm twelve years old." Edwin broke down and started crying like a baby.

You know, and it was amazing, absolutely amazing. This whole Iraqi Jewish Archive project is filled with stories like this galore. There were other people on my first tour that I took through there, a woman said "Oh my God, there's me and there's my cousin. There's my oldest sister in a picture as well." It was amazing. There was also a copy of the laws from 1948 or '51 in Arabic which are the Iraqi government laws expropriating Jewish material from the people they forced to flee. There it is, the proof that it doesn't belong to the Iraqi government. They expropriated it. They stole it.

In the exhibit, there was one section of the Torah that had not been restored. An American Jew, a woman who is Orthodox who works at the Pentagon as a lawyer, went to see the exhibit. She called me said, "Harold, did you see the section of the Torah that was there?" I said, "no." She said it is from the Book of Beresheit, *i.e.*, Genesis – from the Torah portion Lech

Lecha. My first reaction was “hmmm. That was my own Bar-Mitzvah portion which I first read fifty-one years ago. But what was important here was something much more fascinating – or maybe even hopefully prescient. And that is what is written in that Torah portion on display at the exhibition. It is where God, Ha-Shem, is talking to Abraham and telling him “leave your homeland (*i.e.*, today’s Iraq) and go to the land that I will show you” which of course is what is modern day Israel. It is as if these documents are crying out to the world, saying “get me out of here. I don’t belong in Iraq, I belong home; and home is the ancient Jewish homeland of Israel.”

There are stories galore that I could tell like this. This is the first time that the American Archives has had any non-American government archival material, in all of the years it’s been open which is approximately one hundred and fifty years. I was only there for the first six weeks of this exhibit. Twenty-three thousand people by then had come through to see it. It was unbelievable. Now people certainly came to the Archives but I’m talking about only through this little exhibition room. It’s huge! Jews came and non-Jews came, it was so moving, so fascinating, so amazing.

Gordon: Have you been approached about writing a book on this marvelous story? Has anybody come to you about producing a documentary other than the one that NARA did on the process for restoration and recovery?

Rhode: The answer is a number of my friends said I should write a book, however, nobody has approached me. I would be very interested in doing so because the whole story is just filled with wonderful, amazing people. I would be very happy to do a documentary if anybody would like to do it. Now in all candor, NARA, the National Archives, did a short documentary of how they restored it. But that documentary doesn’t do justice to the whole project from beginning to end.

I’d like to add one more thing about Chalabi. Ahmed Chalabi who was the one who instantly called me and told me to get over there so he could tell us about what he had just learned. I had known him and worked with him on an almost daily basis all the time he was in the United States. I got to know him very well but there are certain things he didn’t tell me. For example, when I went to an opposition meeting in London with the Iraqi Opposition, before we liberated Iraq, I also met some Jews who had been in Baghdad during the Farhud, the pogrom, in 1941. They told me of the greatness of Chalabi’s family. Chalabi himself hadn’t been born yet; he was born in 1944. Chalabi’s family saved Jews and these Jews were telling me their stories when they and their parents ran and the Chalabi family took them in. Now because the Jews kept kosher they couldn’t eat the food in Chalabi’s house. They would only eat hard-boiled eggs. I

went to Chalabi afterwards and asked: "Ahmed. Why didn't you tell me this?" And he looked at me and said, "Why should I tell you this? Why should I have said anything about this? All that would have been self-serving. What good would it have done?" Now my experience with him previously and this episode told me what type of man he was; a very kind and decent man. And a man the Americans never really wanted to understand.

Gordon: How has this episode impacted your life?

Rhode: It's hard to answer that. From the very beginning of this process – when I had to make a split-second decision on what to do? Do I leave this under the water or do we take it out? I couldn't have lived with myself had I left that material to rot under water. It has brought me nothing but enormous joy to know that I'm part of a project which has contributed to Jewish history. Not only for the Jews of Babylonia, of Iraq, but it has helped world culture gain some insight into who we Jews were and how things were done historically. It is part of human history. It's an amazing thing.

I want to tell you that there are many other people, Jewish and non-Jewish, who feel exactly the same way. I find it very difficult to believe that this material would eventually go back to Iraq. But we had the agreement over the weekend on May 16, 2014. Let's hope that the agreement does that, whether it's formal or informal just as long as everybody in the world, who wants to, has access to the material.

NARA has done a marvelous job scanning all of this material for which there is access to anybody in the world on the internet. However, I want to tell you that internet access to the material isn't enough. I want to explain this from my personal experience. I come from a completely assimilated Jewish background here in the United States. My family has been in the US for four generations. My family origins are from what is today's Lithuania, southern Latvia, and western Belarus. When the Soviet Union broke up, I obtained archival documents having to do with my family for the past two hundred years. It gave me information. It was wonderful. However, when I eventually went to Vilna – today known as Vilnius – the capital of modern Lithuania, and when my hands touched the documents where my ancestors two hundred years ago were present at the birth of this, the death of that... Just touching those records was deeply moving. The joy that it filled me with was unbelievable. It is not just seeing the material. It's feeling it. Touching it. It's mine. I say this because I want the Jews of Iraq, the Jews of Babylonia, to have that exact same possibility. If they choose to go, they too can put their hands on their ancestors' material. It will mean the world to them.

Gordon: Harold I want to thank you for this extraordinary story. This interview on the eve

of the famous minor festival in Judaism called Lag B'Omer. When you think about it, what does Lag b'Omer signify in this world? It signifies in many ways the fighting Jewish spirit harkening back to the days of the Second Jewish Republic.

Rhode: You are absolutely right. Jewish history to me seems an aberration. It is outside of normal history. What most of the peoples of our size in this world have gone through, are not here anymore. Either they were eradicated, or absorbed into other peoples. Not so the Jews.

Look at the Bible, there are names galore of all sorts of people and we don't know what happened to them. They don't exist anymore but we Jews are still here and the question is, why? Well, we have a bond with God. God chose us to receive his laws, and carry out his mission on Earth. The covenant that he made with Abraham is very clear. We need God and we must accept whatever is his decision. We can fight him but we must accept it. But guess what? God needs the Jewish people. Why? Because he chose us to bring his Message, his Word, to the world.

There is another phrase in the Talmud. It describes the Jewish people as a particular plant – the name escapes me – a plant which grows in the Negev desert in the southern part of Israel. Whatever you do to eradicate it, down to its roots, next year guess what? There it is again and maybe that's the story of the Jewish people. Maybe that's the story of these Iraqi archives.

Three years after the Holocaust we had the rebirth/re-establishment of the ancient Jewish state after 2000 years when we lost sovereignty. We have had ups and downs. As the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, a remarkable man by the name of Ron Dermer said, the difference now, from the past 2000 years is the Jews now have an army to defend ourselves. The State of Israel has an army and it can take care of whatever it needs to defend Jews all over the world when they are in trouble. What a remarkable story! The story of the history of the Jewish people.

Gordon: On that note Harold, I want to thank you for this engrossing discussion.

Rhode: Thank you very much Jerry. I really appreciate this. This is again as I said, a wonderful project. I am so thankful to God that I had this opportunity to be part of it.

Gordon: Thank you Harold.

Rhode: God be with you.

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,