



## *The Other Refugees*

By David Suissa

(April 25, 2008) Is there a more loaded word in the Arab-Israeli conflict than "refugee"? Is there anything more visceral or emotional than the sight of millions of Palestinians living in miserable refugee camps for three generations?

If any one thing has symbolized the Palestinian cause and put Israel on the defensive, it is this image -- this powerful and constant reminder to the world that Israel's creation 60 years ago came with an "original sin," and that Palestinians deserve the "right of return."

You can debate the fairness of this claim, but in our world of easy sound bites, the image of Palestinian suffering has become an albatross around Israel's neck. The fact that few Jews would ever agree to this right of return -- which would erode Israel's Jewish character -- has made this an enormous obstacle to any reconciliation between the two people.

But here's the question: Will Israel ever be able to claim the high ground when it comes to justice for refugees?

This week in Montreal, where I am spending Passover with my family, I met a man who thinks the answer is yes. He is one of the leaders of the Jewish community here, and he is actively fighting for justice for Middle Eastern refugees.

Jewish refugees, that is.

As Sylvain Abitbol explains it, the expulsion and exodus of more than 850,000 Jews from Arab countries is among the most significant yet little-known injustices against humanity of the past century. For hundreds of years, and in many cases for millennia, Jews lived in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Lybia, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Iran, Iraq and Yemen. In several of these countries, the Jewish population was established more than 1,000 years before the advent of Islam. From the seventh century on, special laws of the Dhimmi ("the protected") subjected the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa to prohibitions, restrictions and discrimination -- not to mention harsh conditions of inferiority. Still, many Jews managed to prosper despite these circumstances.

Things took a turn for the worse after the birth of Israel in 1948. Between the 1940s and 1980s, the Jews of Arab countries endured humiliation, human rights abuses, organized persecution and expulsion by the local governments; Jewish property was seized without compensation; Jewish quarters were sacked and looted and cemeteries desecrated; synagogues, Jewish shops, schools and houses were ransacked, burned and destroyed; and hundreds of Jews were murdered in anti-Semitic riots and pogroms.

To this day, Arab countries and the world community have refused to acknowledge these human rights violations or provide compensation to the hundreds of thousands of Jews forced to abandon their homes, businesses and possessions as they fled those countries.

But activists like Abitbol are fighting back, all the way to the White House and the U.S. Congress. Abitbol, the first Sephardic Jew to lead the local Jewish Federation in Montreal and now co-president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, connected with this movement a year ago when he joined the board of *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries* (JJAC). Together with other organizations like the *American Sephardi Federation* (ASF) and the *World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries* (WOJAC), the movement, which is officially called the *International Rights and Redress Campaign*, toiled for years in obscurity.

A few weeks ago, they hit the jackpot.

That's when the U.S. Congress overwhelmingly passed the first-ever resolution to grant recognition as refugees to Jews from Arab and Muslim countries. House Resolution 185 affirms that all victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict must be treated equally, which means it will now be official U.S. policy to mention "Jewish refugees" whenever there is mention of Palestinian refugees in any official document.

It's a huge victory, but only a beginning. The United Nations and the world media are the next fronts in this battle for Jewish justice. Abitbol, a sophisticated man in his mid-50s who's fluent in French, English, Arabic, Hebrew and Spanish, has no illusions about Israel's precarious image in the world. But he's far from being a cynic. He's passionate about fighting for the rights of Jewish victims, and he is also a Jewish refugee (from Morocco). Yet he hardly acts like either a refugee or a victim.

Over tea at my mother's house, he reflected on the major influences of his life. One of the things that stuck with me was something Abitbol said he learned early in his career, when he was in sales. Abitbol, who has two engineering degrees and is chairman of an innovative software company called uMind, calls the technique "listen and adapt:" You adapt your strategy and your communication to the values of your audience.

He gave me a fascinating example. While in Dubai recently on business, an Arab businessman confronted him on the situation in Israel. Abitbol, seeing that the man was a devout Muslim who believed that everything comes from God, gently explained -- in Arabic -- that if Israel has survived so many wars over 60 years, maybe it's because it is "Inshallah" (God's will). Abitbol got the other man's attention.

Same thing when he spoke recently at a United Nations conference in Geneva on the subject of Jewish refugees. Directly facing representatives of Arab countries, he used the language of indignation and human rights that Arabs have used so successfully against Israel for so many decades, only this time it was on behalf of Jews.

Of course, he added that there is one major difference: Jews didn't put their 850,000 refugees in squalid camps so they could have a powerful image on the evening news. They helped them resettle, so that one day, one of them would learn five languages and fly to Geneva to speak up on their behalf.

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