



MAX RAFII

Max, would you tell me about your family background?

I was born in Shushan Habira, that is Hamadan, Iran. Shushan Habira, as you know, is the place where Esther and Mordecai are buried. The history goes back thousands of years ago, where the Jewish community in Persia settled in Hamadan, or Ecbatana. This is where the great kings used to live, including King Ahasuerus, who married Esther.

So I was born in that city, and when I was very young, maybe four or five years old, I did in fact visit the tomb of Esther and Mordecai, with my father and maybe with my mother. Esther and Mordecai are buried side by side. Despite the fact that the country is an Islamic country, they have always cherished and respected the place, even during the recent revolution of Iran. The site still is there, and I believe that there is a very small Jewish community in that city which has access to the site.

I finished one year in the Alliance de Israélite, which is an Alliance school, created by French government and at that time considered to be a very elegant and very prestigious school. They had elementary as well as high school. When I was eight years old, we came to the city of Tehran, which was the capital city at the time, and in that city I grew up.

This was during the Shah of Iran, so there was a tremendous amount of freedom for the Jews and tremendous amount of ability for them to grow and to go to schools and to cherish each other and the Jewish religion. They had many synagogues, as did other

cities like Isfahan, like Shiraz, like Hamadan, like Yazd, or Kashan.

Would you say that your Jewish background was Orthodox?

Well, that's a very good question. We are Mizrahi Jews. Mizrahi Jews are not Sephardi; we are Babylonian Jews, which we were after the destruction of the Temple. It was King Cyrus the Great, who we call "Kurosh," who rescued the Jewish community in Babylon, which is the present location of Iraq.

So we are Mizrahi Jews, Babylonian Jews. I could say the definition of Orthodoxy and Reform here in this country is different. There was no Reform classification over there. There was no extreme like Chabad there. My father observed most Jewish customs as best we could under the circumstances of the Islamic country.

If you look at our prayers and the way we pray and some of the customs, you see the influence of the Islamic world into these habits and customs. After the 7th century, as a matter of fact, in 621, when Islam came to Iran and got rid of the Zarastorous people,

they were very harsh on Jews, and for a time, we had our own Holocaust in a sense.

There were times that Jews were prosperous from 7th century, 8th century on, and there were other times when there were tremendous pressures on them.

So we observed the best we could under the circumstances. My father put Tefilin on, and he prayed. We had Hebrew School, but it was very difficult for everybody to get there, because the schools were isolated. So I went to Muslim public schools. We had to observe the general population's way of life, though they never really pressured us to study Koran or Arabic; they respected our religion.

Amazingly, I cannot even recall an incident where I was told to stop practicing my religion. My generation of '60s and on were different from my father's generation of 1905, 1910. There were tremendous changes between these times.

My father had a much harder time. In my time there, Jews were going to medical school, going to pharmacy school, they were going to dental school. They were prosperous in business. They made millions

of dollars. Nobody took this away from them, right up to the edge of Revolution.

I went to high school in Tehran, and then after completing my high school, due to the desire of coming to this country, I worked about 18 months with a construction company and then I saved enough money to come to this country.

Where did you first settle?

I first moved near Nashville, Tennessee. I went to school there, and I found a Jewish community over there. For High Holidays, we went to Nashville. The Christian communities were very helpful, very friendly, and as matter of fact, at times I could say they were more friendly than the Jewish community. They invited us into their homes and took us out of town.

I went to college and finished college for four years, studying Chemical Engineering. Later on in life, I did some postgraduate studies in California and also in Washington, D.C. and I became specialized in environmental management. That's what I'm doing now.

Before we came to California, we went to

Richmond, Virginia. My children were born there. From Richmond, Virginia, I was sent by a company to work near the Soviet border, the Caspian Sea.

After that we came to California, in 1980, to Costa Mesa.

There was a rabbi named Rabbi Bergman, a very good man. He had Beth Sholom here in Santa Ana.

I was looking for a shul. We were just too far from everything, so we went to a Reform one for a few years.

Then I was working at Hughes Aircraft right here in Fullerton, from 1985-1989. Hughes Aircraft had 12,000 employees, so they had all kinds of activities. Two women, Joyce Stein and Sima Staav, organized the Jewish community there at Hughes Aircraft. They had Hebrew classes and Torah reading. So I said, "Well, this is good for me."

Rabbi Eliezrie with another rabbi came over there, and they brought sandwiches and cold cuts during the lunch hour, and we started talking Torah and discussing issues, and that was beautiful.

This continued for a while, and then I left Hughes Aircraft for another job.

Then I started to come to Rabbi Eliezie's shul. It was a small shul, a rundown little yellow house with lots of problems there with the toilet and water and plumbing, but he kept on going. He kept on going. At one point, we met for a year at his house while they built this building.

What has being a part of this shul meant for you?

Oh, a lot. This has rejuvenated me. My wife and my son, who was younger at the time, came here. He attended for years with me on Shabbat, and he loved it. There was a man named Harold Friedman, who was our cantor, and somehow he became very fond of my son, and he always gave him a blessing.

We found a home here. We became sort of attached to this place, from the yellow house to the Rabbi's house to this place. We have gone no other place for High Holidays except here. We pray here. We have seen members of the congregation going through difficult times. We have seen a few tragedies that I

hope I don't have to see for anybody again. We have seen the Rabbi's oldest son become sick with cancer, and we have seen the second son become sick. We say a special prayer for the sick here. We have seen his children getting married, and we participated in the marriages. I watched their children grow, I saw Stella's eagerness to find a husband for the girls, their joy of seeing them marrying. I watched them get married, and I saw their children, and his grandchildren grow.

So, in a nutshell, we became a part of a larger picture. We became a part of the shul and the family of the Rabbi. I feel very comfortable here.

Something that is amazing and the most beautiful, central core of all of this for me, is that he always gives me the mitzvah of opening the Ark. So I feel very guilty if one Shabbat I can not come here, because not only will there possibly not be a minyan, but also I may not get the pleasure of opening the Ark and carrying the Torah for the congregation. This has come to be the nexus. The joy that I get from carrying out this act is a nexus, a bridge, a connection that I value a lot.

Rabbi Eliezrie is an excellent man, and I love him very much.

The most beautiful thing here is Sukkot. It's wonderful. Even when we didn't have a synagogue, he set it up in his house. When we had the yellow house, he set it up back of the yellow house. The luncheon that we had under the Sukkah with what little means that he had was wonderful. He improvised, but he did not compromise.

Would you like to say something about the Rebbetzin?

She's a wonderful lady, and she's also the same as the Rabbi, very helpful, very compassionate, and she thinks about community all the time, and cares about the community. When she gets a chance, and when we see her, she discusses Jewish faith, about how we can be helpful to one another.

Is there anything else you want to say about the shul and your hopes for the future?

Oh, my biggest hope is for more people to participate for such an elegant, such a beautiful shul with the new construction. I

think it is going to be the best in California for this category of classification of shul.

So why, sometimes, don't we have enough people? I think people should really take a look into this. That since we came out of Egypt, we Jews have kept our Torah and we have followed it. I don't question those people who play golf on Shabbat—it's not my business, but I think if they have time to play golf four or five hours, I believe they could dedicate even one hour here, at the time that they open the Torah. They need to have people for minyan.

So that's my biggest hope, that more people participate, more enroll their kids in the school here, and benefit from this tremendous effort by our two rabbis here—Rabbi Eliezrie and Rabbi Levi, his son-in-law. I really enjoy them. That's my biggest hope.

Have there been particular experiences or times for you when the Rabbi has really helped?

Yes. There have been times that he has been emotionally helpful. He's very easy to talk to, and he always gives me blessings. His house door is always open. I could go there anytime that I want.

One of the things that he encouraged in me was Tzedakah. One of the greatest joys that I have is a day or two before Rosh Hashanah, around 9:30 at night, I drive to his house, and the door is open, and I take him the Tzedakah box for the charity work he does. And that's a very beautiful feeling. Of course, there are other Tzedakahs that everybody participates in, but this particular one is very unique. I've had the same box for 15 years, and this same process with him. I don't know how to explain the tremendous amount of joy in doing that. The whole thing may not be lots of money, but during the year, every day in my home, for every good wish that we have, for every devotion, we put something in this box. We believe that charity and Tzedakah and Teshuva are really the central core of the religion. I mean if you have these three, I think that you will get whatever you need.



Looking north, along the grassy field, to the back of the property, behind the Sanctuary.



September 25, 2005. Groundbreaking Ceremony and beginning of Cornerstone Ceremony for our Synagogue expansion project.



September 25, 2005. Our children, the future of our Congregation, are placing the Jerusalem Cornerstone for the Education Building.



September 25, 2005. At the Cornerstone Ceremony, Rabbi David Eliezrie inspired our Congregation with his vision for our future.



Sanctuary: Bimah and Aron HaKodesh