



The Arabian Massacre

Jews' first contact with Islam led to
destruction that set the stage for the future

By Professor Lawrence H. Schiffman



When we sit down for *kinos* on Tishah B'Av, we will be recalling not only the destruction of the two *Batei Mikdash* but also a series of other calamities that have befallen our people. Some of these are already specified in the Mishnah (*Taanis* 4:6), but some happened much later. For example, we will recall the death of many Jews at the hands of anti-Semitic mobs during the First Crusade (1096). Virtually everybody will recite a *kinah* in memory of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. But there is one massacre, the effects of which are still with us today, that remains virtually unknown and uncommemorated. It is the massacre of between 600 and 900 Arabian Jews that resulted from Muhammad's withdrawal from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, known in Arabic as the *hijra* or *hegira* ("departure, migration").

Muhammad initially began his teaching in Mecca, where he seems to have been roundly rejected. He reached a decision in 622 to move his activities to Yathrib, also known as Medina, about 250 miles to the north. Medina apparently derived its nickname, "the city" (Aramaic *Medinta*), from members of its substantial Jewish population. This was Muhammad's first regular contact with a full-scale, living Jewish community. Jews had a long history in the Arabian Peninsula, probably going back as far as *Churban Bayis Sheini* (in 70 CE). There is considerable archaeological evidence for Jewish communities in southern Arabia, much of it in the form of cemetery inscriptions, going back as far as

the fourth century CE. By the seventh century, some Jewish tribes had migrated north and had established themselves in agriculture—especially the cultivation of date palms—at Medina. In fact, Jews were the majority of the population of this town.

Three Jewish tribes made up the bulk of the Jewish population, the Banu Nadir, the Banu Qurayza and the Banu Qaynuka. The first two of these tribes were made up of large numbers of *kohanim*, and some think that "the city, the population of which is all *kohanim*" discussed by Chazal may refer to Jews in the Arabian Peninsula. Groups of *kohanim* are thought to have fled there together after the *Churban*.

expertise from
nd:white;height:400px;...
0 transparent;transition:all .3
t;margin-bottom:30px;...
:10px;}.case h2,.case h1{color:#000
zing;border-box;-moz-box-sizing:border
fter{content:'!';display:block;...
x;width:31.66667%;margin:0 33.33333%;
20px;media screen and (max-width:
call,contact{width:90.33333%;margin:0
and (max-width:700px){font-size:1
...}

START YOUR CAREER IN

Computer Programming & Web Development

Plus! Earn 24 college credits toward a Bachelor's degree

Join TTI's Career School for a certificate in computer programming and development

In just 10 months, you can become a developer qualified to work in a wide range of IT professions.

REGISTRATION DEADLINE:
SEPTEMBER 12



LIVE ONLINE COURSE
FOR MEN & WOMEN
FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE
LOW COST



877.RING.TTI

www.TestingAndTraining.com
info@consulttti.com

Local Arab tribes had long been locked in a struggle for domination of the town, and they hoped that Muhammad would bring peace. While these tribes swore allegiance to Muhammad and accepted the new religion of Islam, they imposed a simple condition: that their Jewish neighbors who clung strongly to their faith would be protected. Little did the Arabs of Medina know that Muhammad would soon drive out two of the Jewish tribes and slaughter the men of the third, selling the women and children into slavery.

The clouds started to darken in 624, after Muhammad's first victory in a battle with Meccans who had earlier driven him out of Mecca, rejecting his religious teachings. Feeling greater political power, he turned against the first of the Jewish tribes, the Banu Qaynuka. He immediately besieged them, but had to acquiesce to a demand for clemency by an Arab chieftain with whom the Jews were allied. As a result, the Banu Qaynuka were allowed to leave Medina with some of their possessions, and they relocated to Syria. After suffering a defeat in 625, Muhammad decided to turn against the Banu Nadir tribe. Since the battle that he lost was on Shabbos, neither they nor the Banu Qurayza had come to Muhammad's aid. So he turned against the Nadir, besieged them, and ordered them to leave Medina. They surrendered on the condition that they be allowed to leave with all their movable property, except for their arms. They departed to the northeast, to the nearby Jewish oasis of Khaybar, proudly marching through the streets of Medina in a caravan reported to have consisted of 600 camels, with music and fancy clothing. Two years later, the men of this Jewish tribe would be killed when Muhammad attacked Khaybar. Their wives and children would be sold into slavery.

Now Muhammad was ready to turn on the last Jewish tribe of Medina, the Qurayza. In 627 the Meccans and their Bedouin allies moved towards Medina to attack Muham-

mad's forces. The Jews of the Qurayza tribe attempted to maintain neutrality; some later Muslim traditions—attempting to excuse Muhammad's horrendous cruelty—claimed that the Qurayza had made a pact to defend Muhammad's forces. The Jews did, however, receive an emissary from the attackers, although they never took any action on behalf of either side. As soon as the attackers left, apparently after failing to defeat Muhammad, he turned on the Jews. The Jewish tribe held out for some 25 days. Finally, the Qurayza attempted to surrender on terms similar to those achieved by the earlier tribes. But this time, Muhammad was loath to spare them. Again, Arab allies pleaded to save the Jewish lives. Instead, Muhammad chose a Muslim to pass judgment upon them. According to the Muslim historians, the Jews thought that he would act on their behalf and so agreed to have him pass judgment. He, dying of wounds that he had suffered during the siege against the Jews, condemned all of the males to death by decapitation, and the women and children to slavery.

According to one account, Muhammad himself beheaded all the Jewish men. Another version claimed that he simply stood there and watched with glee as all of the men were slaughtered in this horrendous manner. Somewhere between 600 and 900 men were slain, according to the various accounts. We should stress that this massacre is fully recorded in Muslim sources, almost all of which viewed it in positive terms and as a

BECAUSE THE BATTLE WAS ON SHABBOS, NEITHER THEY NOR THE BANU QURAYZA HAD COME TO MUHAMMAD'S AID. SO HE TURNED AGAINST THE NADIR, BESIEGED THEM, AND ORDERED THEM TO LEAVE MEDINA.

precedent for later Muslim law. The denials that one finds from some modern scholars of Islam, whether Muslim or not, are in reality reflections of the horror that these scholars feel at what was actually done. But these denials do not detract from the historical evidence that this massacre took place.

It was not long until Muhammad pursued the Jews of the Nadir tribe to Khaybar, where they were slaughtered along with many of their fellow Jews who had long made their home at that oasis. Muhammad had started his career by trying to rid the Arabian Peninsula of the Jews who had lived there for centuries. While saner voices and later Muslim communities allowed Jews to remain if they accepted a second-class legal status as *dhimmi*s—members of a protected minority—modern times would again see the rise of the call for Muslim political states that would be fully free of Jews—*judenrein*, to borrow the German term.

As we mourn the destruction of Jewish communities in our *kinos* on Tishah B'Av, we should be mindful of those Jews slaughtered either directly by or at the order of Muhammad in the early days of Islam. Sadly, even after some better days in the medieval period, the continued slaughter of Jews by Muslims has yet to come to an end. ●

Lawrence H. Schiffman is Judge Abraham Lieberman Prof. of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.