

From Persecution To The Pentagon

An Interview With Dr. Moshe Mizrachi

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He is an observant Jew who survived 18 years of persecution in Egypt to become one of the select scientists hired by the Pentagon to work on some of the most secret and advanced technologies for the American military. During his 34-year tenure at the Pentagon, he helped advise 11 US defense secretaries. Meet Dr. Moshe Mizrachi and learn about his incredibly varied and rich life.



Did you ever stop to think about the source of the GPS that directs you to your destination (well, most of the time)? Or the computerized connections you use to deliver files and information across the country or around the world in a matter of seconds? Stealth airplanes that penetrate enemy territory and deliver bombs or launch deadly missiles without being detected? Pilotless drones that terrorize terror organizations in the Middle East? These are just some of the hundreds of inventions with both military and civilian applications that are the products of a special Pentagon agency, the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

DARPA's purpose is to research and develop cutting-edge technology that can be valuable for military purposes. The US government pours billions of dollars into DARPA each year. One of the scientists who had a hand in many of the technological developments at DARPA is Dr. Moshe (Maurice) Mizrachi, an observant Jew who spent 34 years in the Pentagon. Of those, 30 years were spent as a special advisor to the highest official in the Pentagon, the Secretary of Defense. His opinion weighed heavily when deciding which new technologies seemed worth investing in and pursuing.

During his tenure, Dr. Mizrachi served as advisor to 11 defense secretaries. He chaired numerous hearings and issued hundreds of reports that helped decide the future direction of the entire department.



Egypt has a long history of Jewish settlement.



Zman interviews Dr. Moshe Mizrachi in his home.

Nevertheless, what makes his story particularly fascinating are the unlikely origins of this mathematical genius and scientist. He grew up as a persecuted Jew in Egypt. Eventually, he escaped to America, where he spent difficult years scrounging for a job while he studied diligently to obtain an advanced degree.

Zman met with Dr. Mizrachi at his home in Springfield, Virginia, and listened as he told us the fascinating details of his years of terror in Egypt and how he struggled in his new homeland until he rose to prominence. Surprisingly, he mastered English—not to mention speaking fluent Arabic, French and Italian. We asked him how a man who spent his first 18 years in Egypt, where English studies comprised a maximum of one hour per week, had become so fluent in English. He responded, “That’s the secret of a *Yiddische kopf* [Jewish mind].” In fact, after arriving in the United States, Dr. Mizrachi took courses in English. He mastered the language in a short time and was one of only two students in his course who received an “A.”

Here, then, is the riveting account of the man and his life.

Egypt's Jewish Community

Moshe Mizrachi was born in Cairo (*Al Qahira* in Arabic) on September 4, 1949. His family came from Italy and is of Sefardic background.

“Egypt has had a Jewish community for as long as anyone can remember,” he reminds us. “2,500 years ago there was already a huge Jewish community in Alexandria that thrived for hundreds of years. The Rambam lived in Cairo 800 years ago. The Cairo Genizah [an invaluable collection of ancient Jewish books and manuscripts found in storage at a *shul* near Cairo] that was discovered in the 19th century confirms that Jews have lived in Egypt continuously through most of the time that we Jews have been in exile.

“There were good times and bad times for the Jews in Egypt,” Dr. Mizrachi goes on to explain. “We even had our own Purim in addition to the usual one, dating back to the year 1524 when the governor of Cairo, Ahmed Pasha, decided to annihilate all the Jews of Cairo unless they provided him with a huge sum of money that was impossible to produce. Even if they would have sold all their belongings it would not have sufficed to pull together that sum. The Jews fasted and prayed to the One Above and on the designated day, the 28th of Adar, the pasha was murdered by troops loyal to the Turkish sultan, Suleiman. They had discovered that the pasha had plans to carry out a rebellion against the sultan who ruled over Egypt and many other Arab lands. The Jews were saved by a miracle. Since then we celebrated a separate Purim, known as Purim *Mitzrayim*, at the end of the month of Adar.”

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Ottomans appointed a friend of the Jews, Muhammed Ali, as viceroy of Egypt. He welcomed Jews from all over to settle in Egypt. The large influx that resulted triggered an economic renaissance in Egypt. The Jewish community produced ministers, merchants, doctors, financiers, builders and more.

Despite their dazzling success—or because of it—the Jews were always treated as foreigners. They were denied citizenship even though they had been born in Egypt. Still, the Jews lived under conditions that were relatively good for the Arab world. Every once in a while a riot would break

out and the Arabs would attack the Jewish quarter, “but usually the king protected us and there were no particular difficulties for Jews,” Dr. Mizrachi explains.

However, in 1948, after the creation of the State of Israel, the situation for the Jews in Egypt changed for the worse. Suddenly, a series of persecutions began. There were around 100,000 Jews in Egypt at that time. A large percentage of the Jewish population left Egypt and moved to *Eretz Yisrael* and other places. It was in these tumultuous times that Moshe Mizrachi grew up.

When I was three years old, in 1952, a revolution took place in Egypt and Gamal



Left: Muhammed Ali, the viceroy who invited Jews to Egypt. Right: Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian leader who vowed to destroy the Jewish state.



Egypt's Ben Ezra synagogue.