



Surviving, Building, and Thriving



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Writing language: **Dutch**

My name is Bella and I live in the province of Utrecht, the Netherlands. I am 20 years old and come from a Jewish-Iraqi family. My family fled to the Netherlands because of the persecution of Jews and daily anti-Semitism in Iraq. Before fleeing, they faced daily humiliation and exclusion because of their Jewish identity.



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My grandfather, my mother's father, was hunted in Iraq. He was taken away repeatedly, and my family had to search for him often, until one day they could no longer find him because he had been put in jail because of his religion. That was the last straw that made my family flee to the Netherlands.

My mother arrived here as a refugee, along with her three brothers and a sister. She was then a 10-year-old girl and the oldest of her siblings. As a child, my mother lived temporarily in The Museum Hotel. Later, as a teenager, she briefly attended the Jewish high school Maimonides in Amsterdam, where I also went to school.

As a teenager, she attended a housekeeping school, which she did not like. Soon after, she had to take care of the whole family, along with her parents. At the time, my grandfather had a shwarma shop on Nieuwendijk in Amsterdam, where the whole family worked. My mother did not have an easy childhood; her family worked day and night. She was bullied in the Netherlands because she did not yet speak the language and found it difficult to form a close group of friends.

Despite everything, this was a huge improvement on their life in Iraq. In the Netherlands, they were free from isolation, bullying, and abuse and could finally be who they wanted to be.

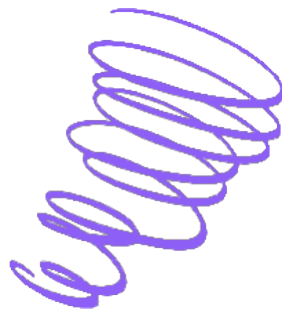


Years later, I can say that things have turned out well for my family, and we are more successful than ever. We can be who we want to be and form a close-knit family that is always there for each other. Despite my family's history, we make sure we are always together during the holidays. We are not very practising Jews, but at those times we are together, and my mother and my aunt cook traditional Iraqi food. After all, love goes through the stomach, as they say. When we go to synagogue, we visit the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam.



As a little girl, I went to Simcha, the Jewish nursery. Then I went to Rosj Pina, the Jewish primary school, and then to Maimonides, the Jewish high school. You could say I played out the 'game'. All my life I grew up within the Jewish-Amsterdam community, and for that I am very grateful. I made friends there for life.

I notice a big difference between my Jewish and non-Jewish friends. After secondary school, I went to further education, where people often gossiped about me and didn't want to associate much with me because I am Jewish. This was a big shock to me. As someone who had never been in such situations before, I really had to learn to deal with this. Fortunately, I have now successfully completed that study and now have a gap year in which I am working. Next year, I plan to continue my studies again.



Let me start by saying that if you have the chance to join Birthright, you should take it immediately. It has given me a love for Israel that I had never felt so strongly. A special moment for me was visiting the soldiers' cemetery in Jerusalem. There I realised that all these people died for the country where I, as a Jew, can feel 100% safe. That feeling was indescribable to me. Masada was also an impressive experience. We stayed overnight with Bedouins in the desert, and early in the morning we woke up to climb Masada at sunrise.

After Birthright, I stayed an extra week in Israel with a friend who was also along. We then had an awful lot of fun, went out with other friends and relaxed on the beach.



Since 7 October, my life has changed completely. I had just returned from Israel, after not being there for a long time, and had had a wonderful trip there. It felt surreal, especially because just two months ago I was standing there with a big smile, surrounded by many friends and family. Now I worry about them a lot.

In the Netherlands, I broke contact with many people. This is mainly because of our different views; I was bothered by their pro-Palestine stance. They often shared posts on social media that hurt me deeply and never asked how I was doing. I find it very difficult to explain over and over again how I feel. With my Jewish and Israeli friends, I don't have to; they understand me without me having to explain anything.

In addition, I have a non-Jewish boyfriend whom I love very much for almost four years, but he thinks very differently from me. This has caused a lot of tension in the relationship between me and my in-laws. I have learned to deal with this, but sometimes it remains difficult and brings uncertainty. But that is all a worry for later.

