he first time my great-grandmother, Tavoos Merage Neek-Fahm, attended her own funeral, she was eighty-some years old and nowhere near ready to be dead.

She had received notice of her demise through the obituary announcements on Tehran’s state-controlled radio. *With great sadness we announce the passing of our dear mother, Mrs. Tavoos Neek-Fahm, who bid farewell to the terrestrial sphere and set sail for the celestial kingdom on...*

Tehran in 1964 was a city with nascent infrastructure. The telephone was a luxury saved for the wealthy and well-connected, radio was the primary means of mass communication, and “news,” once divulged, generated its own credibility and momentum. This particular report, of course, was a mistake. Tavoos (“peacock”) was a common first name, and Neek was a prefix to an assortment of surnames: Neek-Khoo, Neek-Nejad, Neek-Been, and many, many more. You couldn’t blame the poor radio announcer for a small slip of the tongue. In this case, reports of Tavoos Merage Neek-Fahm’s death traveled faster and more widely than usual because she was a celebrity of sorts and therefore known mostly by her first name. There may be many Tavooses out there, but to the vast majority of Tehrani’s of the time, there was only *one* Tavoos khanoom. By the time someone from dead Tavoos’s family got wind of the error and raced to the station to correct it, word of my great-grandmother’s extinction had spread around town and mobilized a good number of her acquaintances into making plans to attend the burial.

*Tavoos khanoom*—Lady Tavoos—was an Esfahani Jew from the *Juyy Bar* ghetto who had achieved, single-handedly and against formidable odds, the nearly impossible task of what today’s Americans call, casually and without a

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* Becoming American

*by Gina Nahai*
second thought, “making it on her own.” Married at age nine to a much older, better-looking, and more charming man, she had borne four children, raised them in relative financial comfort till the youngest was a toddler, then upped and left her husband because of his many infidelities. This was in the late 1800s in one of the poorest ghettos in Iran. For a woman, divorce was a stigma more devastating than death. Add to that the fact that this particular woman was dark-skinned and therefore not especially desirable, had no useful skills and five mouths to feed but no money of her own, and you’ll begin to understand just how monumental a challenge Tavoos khanoom had taken on.

Sixty years later, she was a successful businesswoman with considerable capital and a steady income stream. You wouldn’t know it by looking at her, but Tavoos khanoom was a purveyor of precious stones to a host of wealthy but “selective” (a euphemism for “tight-fisted”) clients in the capital as well as other major cities. Her most important customer was none other than the dowager queen, wife of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the first monarch of a dynasty that would end with the fall from power of his son, Muhammad Reza, in 1979. Like all royals, the dowager and her entourage wanted only the best of everything. Like most royals, they were loathe to spend money on anything, given that they felt they owned the country and everything in it.

Unlike other successful jewelers, Tavoos khanoom never owned a store. She worked out of her clothes—literally carried her entire inventory at any given time on herself—and got around mostly on foot and sometimes on the bus. She went around in multiple layers of candy-colored clothes—orange and green and red silk or taffeta skirts with large pockets, embroidered cardigans that had seen much better days, and a white headscarf that she fastened with a safety pin under her chin and that set off her dark skin and protruding lower jaw in not the most flattering of ways. She stuffed the pockets of the outer layers of skirts with tissue paper and dime-store jewelry and other “foils,” tucked tens of thousands of tomans’ worth of real gems into the inner layers, and made house calls morning to night.

The only exception to this manner of conducting business was on the days when the royal court sent for her. On those occasions, a man in a dark suit and Steve McQueen sunglasses pulled up at dawn in a shiny black car, parked at the top of Khaakh Avenue with the windows up and the doors locked, and waited. Tavoos khanoom’s house was several blocks away, but she got word of the “summons” almost immediately because all her neighbors knew the car and whom it had come to fetch. She took her time getting ready, making a point of presenting her most elegant, palace-worthy self, but in the end the woman
who emerged from her doorway and marched up the street into the parked car looked or acted no differently from the Tavoos of every day. If you didn’t know her, you’d be out of your mind to think she carried anything worth robbing. But of course people did know her and how much she was—literally—worth on any given day on any given sidewalk. Why she was never robbed, at home or outside, had to do more with the caliber of customers she catered to—and the dread of retribution they inspired—than the smokescreen and disguise she employed.

But you don’t become a neighborhood icon and jeweler to the queen mother without having the ability to recognize an opportunity when one presents itself, and you don’t live to the ripe old age of eighty-plus without realizing that what people say about a person while she’s alive sometimes differs greatly from the narrative that follows her death. Given all this, and because she was a scorekeeper by nature, Tavoos khanoom decided to let the misunderstanding linger for a while longer. Instead of taking the initiative to make it known that she was, indeed, quite alive, she decided to drop in on her own funeral.

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A Jewish funeral in 1960s Iran was a community event. Like so much else in the existence of Mizrahi Jews, our rituals of mourning bore great resemblance to those of the Muslim majority among whom we lived. The communal aspect of funerals, their theatricality, the significance of public expressions of despair, so prevalent among Mizrahi populations of Sunni-majority nations, was even more accentuated in Shia-dominated Iran.

Perhaps the greatest metaphor for the importance of mourning for the Shia is the manner in which they commemorate the death of Imam Hussein on the tenth day of the holy month of Muharram. Ashura, as the day is called, is an occasion for self-flagellation and the shedding of tears. Blood must be drawn, worldly activity must cease, and pain must be inflicted, suffered, and—crucially—publicly exhibited. Believing that a single tear shed for Imam Hussein will expunge a hundred sins, they organize large processions of men dressed in black who wave black banners with expressions of grief written in Arabic, and sob like children as they march through streets and city squares, pounding their naked flesh with special chains with blades and striking their skulls with swords.

For the Jews, the size of the funeral party and the extent of misery they displayed was the final verdict not just on the value and significance of the newly departed’s life, but also on the level of esteem in which his or her family was held. Everyone who knew the deceased or had a (however tenuous)
relationship with the *saheb azza*—those who own the grief—would be in attendance and required to display acute misery. Women were expected to shed copious amounts of tears, wail loudly, swoon, and faint. A poorly attended funeral could be construed as a greater calamity than the death itself. To avoid such an occurrence, families hired professional mourners who specialized in beating their chests and throwing themselves on the grave. Afterward, during the *shiva*—a week-long period of formal mourning for the dead—the *saheb azza* would hold open house from dawn till late into the night and provide three meals a day plus a constant supply of black tea, dates, and peeled cucumbers. Everyone wore black—close family members did so for an entire year.

This emphasis on mourning was, in turn, the outward manifestation of a more critical aspect of the post-Islamic Middle Eastern psyche: the centrality of grief. Up until the middle of the last century, nearly every household in Iran put on display one or more tear jars. Made of colored glass and decorated with drawings and pearls and other ornamental stones, it was shaped like a genie bottle, with a long, narrow neck and a flat, round bottom. In times of grief, the *saheb azza* offered the bottle to the visitors to cry into. Having literally gathered the callers’ tears, the *saheb azza* would add their own, then cap the bottle and save the contents as a reminder of their grief. To this day, my mother and her sisters will tell you how, before she left her husband because of his meanderings, Tavoos khanoom cried all night into her tear jar and, in the morning, drank her own tears. Then she took her children and walked out, grief and all, into family lore. She was, literally, made in part of her sorrows.

For every gem she carried or sold, Tavoos khanoom had a story to tell. *This ruby belonged to the wife of the governor of Shiraz; he gave it to her after he had ordered the execution of all the men in her family. This diamond has traveled thousands of kilometers from Africa; who knows how many men had to be buried for this marvel to be unearthed. This pearl . . .*

For every gain, a loss; every fortune, a cost. That was the lesson in all those stories, what she had learned in her own life, the price she had paid for “making it on her own.” She left her husband but never forgot the pain of being betrayed. She did rise out of poverty to hold many assets, but remained scathed by the hardships and heartbreaks she suffered. She took pride in being a businesswoman but understood that to do so, she had largely neglected her children.

A petite, dark-skinned woman dressed up like a girl who has happened upon a treasure chest in the attic—that’s what she was: an anachronism equally made up of what she had accomplished, and what she had lost.
Perhaps the greatest collective loss for the Mizrahi Jews of the Middle East is that of home and country—once, in 586 BCE, when they were brought as slaves into Babylon, and again, in modern times, when they were driven out of what they rightly believed was their native land. The first time, they lost Jerusalem and were forced to settle in lands belonging to the Babylonian Empire. By the time Cyrus the Great overthrew the Babylonians, established the Persian Empire, and freed the slaves, many had embraced the region as their new home. In 583 BCE, when Cyrus encouraged the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, about half chose to stay in Persia instead. Twenty-five hundred years later, when Arab Muslim governments expelled their Jewish citizens, they lost their homeland all over again.

Unlike those in Arab countries, Iranian Jews were not ordered to leave the country; they escaped for fear of their lives. Most believed that the departure was temporary. Nearly all identified as wholly and wholeheartedly Iranian. For us, there was no dichotomy between that and being Jewish, or between loving Iran and Israel at once. The history of antisemitism practiced by Shia clergy, the centuries of persecution and pogroms, the constant diatribe of “Jews are not real Iranians” reinforced our anxiety and kept us forever vigilant, often separate, but did not alter our Iranian identity.

We brought that identity, the product of that history, with us to the West. We brought our resilience against adversity, adherence to the Jewish faith no matter what the cost; we brought our resourcefulness and sense of survival, our appreciation of community and family, our love of education and respect for scholarship. And we brought, too, our grief over the loss of an ancient and cherished connection.

The day of her funeral, Tavoos khanoon embarked alone upon the hour-long journey from central Tehran to Beheshtieh—the Jewish cemetery. Since nothing began or ended on time in Iran, she planned her arrival well after the putative start of services—to make sure anyone who was going to be there had had a chance to show up before she took the tally.

On this occasion, Tavoos knew that her children and other close family, who were clued in to her continued residence in the terrestrial sphere, would sit out the funeral. But there were all the others—the myriad distant relatives, casual acquaintances, new and old neighbors; all the friends and relations of her four children and those of their spouses—literally hundreds of men and
women whose love and loyalty for her would be established or disproved depending on whether they attended the funeral and how passionately they mourned her. She arrived just as the rabbi was beginning the eulogy.

Even from a distance, she could sense the unease that hung over the funeral party at the grave site. Dead Tavoos was not nearly as well known and connected as Tavoos khanoom, so her—Dead Tavoos’s—family was mystified by the largeness of the attendance. They were especially puzzled by the presence of a very elegant, well-spoken, and perfumed contingent of women whose mannerism and speech gave them away immediately as Muslim, and who huddled together at a slight distance away from the Jews.

For their part, Tavoos khanoom’s mourners were wondering out loud why her children were not in attendance. Where, for example, was her handsome son, Manouchehr, who had never worked a day in his life but went around dressed like a millionaire and giving sizable tips? He carried in his coat pocket an airline ticket he said was for Hollywood, where he was forever promising to go, because, you see, he had a woman waiting for him—not just any woman, but the finest of them all, Elizabeth Taylor, the actress.

Where, for that matter, were her daughter Heshmat, with the rose petal skin and hazel eyes, her seven daughters, and blue-eyed husband? Where was Tavoos khanoom’s estranged husband, the tar player, Solomon Khan? He was a good man and a great lover, and he liked to spread the bounty around, to his own many wives and hundreds of lovers, and to other men’s wives as well, which became a problem every once in a while, like the time he was shot, at point blank, in the head, by an enraged husband. He lived to tell about it, physically unscathed because he was unusually strong, drinking down a dozen raw eggs every morning followed by shish-kebob for lunch and dinner every day of his adult life.

Then all at once, one of the distinguished Muslim ladies looked behind her, saw a vision resembling Tavoos khanoom ambling toward them, blanched and nearly choked on her own breath, and shrieked, “GHOST! GHOST! GHOST!”

* * * *

In the thirty-five years since the United States offered us safe harbor from the government of the mullahs, Iranian Jews have thrived, adapted, and succeeded far beyond what would have been possible in Iran. As with other immigrant communities, our presence has at once enriched and unsettled our host country. In Los Angeles and New York especially, where the largest concentrations
of Iranian Jews have put down roots, American Jewish community leaders, rabbis, and charitable and professional organizations have welcomed and embraced our presence. At the same time, our sudden appearance in the late 1970s evoked a good deal of resentment, even animosity, from the Ashkenazim. That friction persists today.

Some of the grievances are typical of what any immigrant group elicits: everyday habits that clash with the established norm, the tendency to congregate in specific pockets, to speak one’s native tongue. Some—disregard for the law, materialism, image consciousness—are society-wide issues not particular to any specific community. Like minorities everywhere, we are judged by our lowest common denominator, the sins of a few being held against the many. Like other minorities who’ve suffered persecution, we’re loath to air out our internal divisions for fear of inviting even greater oppression from the outside.

It’s a Jewish story, this eternal state of “otherness,” of being aware of the judgment of others—even other Jews—of wanting to prove oneself worthy of acceptance while remaining reluctant to assimilate. It’s what older generations of Ashkenazi Jews experienced when they first came to the Untied States and what many of their offspring now exert against a new generation of Jewish immigrants.

Here we are, a people who, until recently, had literally held on to tears shed in the past, suddenly uprooted against our own wishes and trying to navigate the land of what doesn't kill me makes me stronger every failure is a step closer to success I will make lemonade out of lemons I will enter a new chapter of my life I will move across the world or across the country and start over.

Here we are, a minority that for centuries was forced to remain insular, ordered by ruling monarchs or mullahs to live in ghettos, suddenly waking up among the most diverse population in the world.

Here we are, having survived millennia of adversity and hardship mostly by refusing to assimilate, suddenly blamed by our Ashkenazi cousins for not assimilating fast enough.

“When our grandparents came to this country from Europe,” so many Ashkenazi Americans have complained when addressing the subject of Iranian Jews, “they did their utmost to assimilate. They wanted to become American and for their children to be American. Iranian Jews, on the other hand, are reluctant to assimilate or to allow their children to assimilate. They keep to their own people, speak Persian even in the presence of non-Persian speakers, insist on keeping to their customs. . . .”
Whether first-generation European Jews were as eager, or able, to assimilate upon arrival in the United States, is debatable. So is the question of where that desired assimilation was to occur—into the existing Jewish community? The larger ethnic or religious groupings that constitute the majority in each state or region? Equally controversial is the question of the desirability and the extent of assimilation. What do we gain, and lose, when we give up one culture in favor of another?

Certainly, the American Jews’ mantra of “they should become more like us” presupposes that one group’s way of life and habits are superior to the other. It also requires a great deal of historical amnesia: What would have happened to the Jewish people had they assimilated into every culture, religion, and nation that became their home over time? What has happened, in contemporary times, to American Jewry as a result of ever-greater assimilation? Would it not be more ideal for our two communities—Mizrahi and Ashkenazi—to merge, rather than have one dissolve into the other? Isn’t progress a question of holding on to the good and shedding the undesirable aspects of humanity?

* * * *

Tavoos khanoom died in Iran on the day my daughter was born in Los Angeles. That was in 1988. Tavoos was well past a hundred, and would gladly have lived a few more centuries if the sleep didn’t take her. Toward the end, I’m told, she slept for increasingly longer spells until finally she didn’t wake up. I saw the coincidence of her passing and my daughter’s birth not as a continuation, nor a new beginning, but as an evolution of an ongoing tale. What I wish for my daughter, for all the children of Iranian Jews outside the country, is neither to repeat history, nor to squander an inheritance of history and tradition that, if used wisely, will enrich her life and enhance the contribution she can make to future generations.

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Iranian Jewish culture is a fusion of three thousand years’ worth of Persian, Jewish, and Muslim influence. We are, by any standard, a small minority within a minority: an optimistic estimate would place the total number of Jews of Iranian ancestry in the world at around three hundred thousand. Today, there are an estimated nine thousand to twenty-five thousand Jews still living in Iran (“Judeo-Persian Communities, i. Introduction”; Ben Zion), with another sixty thousand in the United States. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that what we lack in numbers, we make up for in individual achievement and collective
contribution. It would also be fair to say that, in the United States at least, we make ourselves more visible than our numbers intimate. But the real significance of Iranian Jews to the West is their hybrid identity.

Our identity as a people was forged as much by our Persian as our Jewish past. That we persisted in a single place of exile after the destruction of the First Temple meant we were spared the dislocation and cultural alienation suffered by other Jews. After Islam's conquest and, especially, the establishment of Shiism, our traditions, habits, and beliefs were shaped as much by Persian Jewish culture as the predominant Shia practices. It is a unique sensibility, similar in many ways to that of other Mizrahi Jews who lived among Arab or Asian populations, vastly different from that of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews of today. If there is value to be drawn from what Sir Edward Taylor defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Street), then Iranian Jewish culture in its current form in Iran, as well as in the United States, is worthy of safekeeping.

We are all, knowingly or not, made as much of the past as of the present. As Jews, we all carry our grandparents’ tears from one house to another. It is true that a Mizrahi Jew born and raised in America, or even one who has spent a significant amount of time here, is an altogether different creature than one from Iran. That’s because she has so much less of the Iranian in her. But most American Mizrahis still value the past—sorrows, grief, and all—to a larger extent than their American Ashkenazi cousins.

For us, a funeral is still not the end of a person's story; it's the continuation of a tale that began hundreds of generations ago and still continues.

Because somewhere on a dusty hill in an old and overcrowded graveyard, the ghost of mothers past stands watching—layers of outdated and mismatched, decomposing cloth on the outside, pocketfuls of ancient, gleaming gems on the inside.
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