The Process of Immigration to the United States and the Acculturation of Iranian Jews

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The story of Iranian Jewish immigration and subsequent acculturation in the United States is, truly, not so unique; in many respects, it resembles the experiences of other Jewish communities’ moves to the United States. However, for Queen Esther’s descendants, the move to this country, in many ways, was an end to nearly twenty-seven centuries of the unique culture of Iranian Jews. Without the Iranian homeland tying them to their mixed tradition, it seemed that all was lost. This exodus which climaxed with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, brought the unthinkable to life.

To understand the community’s reactions to its own twentieth century mass immigration, it is necessary to look back at the history of the Iranian Jews in Iran. Iranian Jews are part of the greater Jewish subgroup of Mizrahi Jews. In large part, this distinction comes from the combination of Sephardic halakhic rules of the Shulkhan Arukh and ancient Iranian-Judaic traditions. Historically, Jews settled in the Persian Empire on four significant occasions. The first followed the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, when the Assyrian Empire relocated parts of the ten Israelite tribes to Nineveh. The second came when Cyrus II of Persia—most commonly known as Cyrus the Great—freed Jewish captives of Babylonia. The third came after the destruction of the Second Temple. The fourth and final of these distinct occasions took place as a result of the Spanish Inquisition in the fifteenth century, when Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman Empire were relocated from Georgia to Farahabad, a city by the Caspian Sea, and later to other parts of Iran.
After the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, the Israelites gained the moniker of the “Ten Lost Tribes.” They remained under Assyrian rule until the latter’s defeat by an alliance of the Medes and Babylonians (ca. 609–05). After their joint victory, the Medes and Babylonians agreed to split the land; the Medes took the northern territories, including Nineveh, where the Israelites were located, while the Babylonians took the rest of Mesopotamia and western territories. So, Jews were brought into the folds of Iranian society for the first time and under Median rule.

More Jews were drawn under Iranian rule with the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty in Iran. In 559 BCE, Cyrus II conquered the Medes and, in 539 BCE, Babylonia. He created a vast empire that encompassed all the previous civilized states of the ancient Near East and Southwest Asia. In Jewish history, the years between 538–331 BCE are known as the “Persian Period.” It began in the reign of Cyrus the Great and his Edict in 538 BCE, which left a lasting legacy on Jewish history as well as the Jews of Iran. During this period, the Jews were granted considerable religious autonomy, resulting in opportunities for prosperity. Jews were offered the option to live in Babylonia or move back to Jerusalem. Regardless of where they resided, their religious practices were tolerated in all territories belonging to the Achaemenid dynasty. Those Jews who remained in Babylonia gradually moved eastward to Lar, Khuzestan, Shush, Pasargadae and finally Isfahan.

*Mordechai and Esther in the presence of King Xerses (486-465 BCE) in the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria.*
Recognized as a liberator, Cyrus had high hopes of rebuilding the Temple for the Jews. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to fulfill this plan. This mission was finally accomplished years later by his son-in-law and major general of his army, Dariush I (522–486 BCE). The Second Temple, built between the years of 520–16 BCE, became the symbol of Iranian presence in Jerusalem.  

The third occasion of Jewish migration to Iran following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans resulted in the expansion of Jewish Academies in Babylonia and lured many Jewish scholars who for centuries worked on the interpretation of Mishnah, the codified Jewish law, and made the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud in the Diaspora. In regard to this, Jacob Neusner, the scholar of the Sasanian era, states that Jews at the time of the Sasanians (226–642 CE) were living in different parts of Iran, from Armenia to the Persian Gulf and from the Caspian Sea to Fars.  

Also, as Habib Levy suggests, considering the facts that the Babylonian Talmud was composed on Iranian soil, and that the religious scholars compiling it had communication with the Sasanian court and entered into polemics with the Zoroastrian scholars, the “Babylonian Talmud could be considered the Iranian Talmud.”

In fact, some of the Jewish scholars, Amoraim, had never been to Jerusalem.  

Throughout the pre-Islamic era, Iranian Jews maintained dual allegiance to their Iranian and Jewish identities. The loyalty of Iranian Jews to both their religious ethnicity and their new self-selected homeland can be seen throughout the history of that era. Such relations date back to the influence of the prophets Daniel, Haggai and Zechariah in the Iranian courts as well as the mission of Zerubbabel for the rebuilding of the Second Temple from the Iranian treasury (520–15 BCE). Furthermore, the impact of the dual role of Ezra and Nehemiah as Jews and Iranian agents in the expansion and reconstruction of the City of Jerusalem speaks of the place of Jews in the royal court. In fact, it was a tradition during the Persian Period to make sacrifices for the health and prosperity of the Shahanshah of Iran and the royal family at the altar, in the Second Temple. However, Iranian culture did not begin to permeate into the Jewish community until the early Sasanian era. Influenced by the friendly relationships maintained by the Jewish Academies and Shapur I and II, Rabbi Yossi (d. 323 CE), the religious leader of Jews in Diaspora, recommended that Jews learn to speak the language of the land. Iranian Jews, who at the time spoke Eastern Aramaic, gradually began speaking Middle Persian, and continued to speak New Persian in Islamic Iran.
In the same era of the Sasanians, Iranian Jewish soldiers are reported to have fought against the Romans as a part of the Iranian army. Rabbi Yossi’s recommendation laid the foundation for the Iranian Jewish cultural identity, which would later give birth to the vast literary contributions of Judeo-Persian literature, something unique for Iranian Jews to identify themselves with. This gesture was another milestone in the development of Jewish identity in their respective lands. The impact of this policy is probably the main reason for the survival of Iranian Jews and the development of their unique characteristics. Thus, Iranian culture and language got imprinted into the soul of many Iranian Jews. However, such attachments did not diminish their ties to their Judaic heritage or Zionist hopes. From the time of Ezra and Nehemiah until the end of First World War and the Balfour Declaration, Zionism was seen mostly in a religious context among Iranian Jews and Political Zionism was a faraway dream.

With the arrival of Islam in Iran under the Pact of Omar, Jews, as second class citizens, were considered “People of the Book.” Although protected by Islam, they were required to pay a “poll tax” and at some periods to wear patches or specific cloths. However, during a fifty-year period of the early Ilkhanid liberal rule in Iran (1258–96 CE), Jews again participated in the political and economic life and general affairs. At no time in Islamic Iran were Iranian Jews so prominent in public life as they were during those fifty years. During that time Jews were given the opportunity of becoming court officials, court physicians, court astronomers, and, above all, political leaders and prime ministers, taking part in the history as well as the political and economic affairs of the country.

Following that short period, with the conversion of Ilkhanid rulers to Islam, the regulations of the Omar Pact were enforced again. With the rise of Shi‘ism in Iran during the early sixteenth century, except for some occasional protections offered by local clerics and scholars, Jews were once again humiliated, persecuted and discriminated against until the dawn of the twentieth century. It is worth noting that while in the seventeenth century whole communities were forced to convert, by the nineteenth century the conditions for Jews were so unbearable that large numbers voluntarily converted to Islam and other minority religions. Aside from economic and political reasons, such conversions were mainly to Christianity through the effort of British and American Christian missionaries, or into the Bahai faith through having contacts with followers of that religion. One major reason for their conversion to Christianity and Bahai faith, was that they were treated as equals with no stigma of “impurity.”
Having gone through centuries of humiliation, the Jews were left with little pride in their social and religious identity. It was not until the emancipation of the Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century that some pride was restored to the Jewish Community. The emancipation first started with the Iranian constitution of 1906, which provided a national identity in place of religious identity for the Jews as citizens. The second element of emancipation was the educational opportunities provided for Jews by European Jewish organizations, such as the Alliance Israelite Universelle or other secular or Christian missionary schools.
These opportunities, especially in Tehran, allowed for a better life outside of the historical Jewish ghettos. The third element of emancipation was the Balfour Declaration of 1917, relating to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. As Iranian Jews were experiencing this rebirth of pride and identity in their religion, Jews worldwide were experiencing the birth of Zionism. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 gave Iranians the opportunity to express their Zionist passion and love of Jewish culture through the establishment of local Zionist associations and publications. By the 1920s, the first migrations to Israel had started. This migration was not successful due to the immigrants’ maltreatment by Palestinians and the harsh opposition expressed by the Iranian media to such migration. However, at that time many forced converts of Mashhad (1839) who lived for over eighty years under the pretense of Islam, were able to reveal their religious identity. Most of these Jews left Iran either for London, New York, or Australia, searching for a better life and freedom of religion.

From 1929 to the end of World War II, the flow of migration out of Iran slowed down due to its rapid modernization, and the desire of government officials not to inflame Muslim clerics in Iran and Arab countries with emigration to Palestine. According to the notes of the envoy of the National Jewish Agency to Iran in the 1940s, Iranian Jewish parliamentary representatives were reported to have been more concerned with the condition of Jewry in Iran than helping with immigration to Palestine.

After the Second World War, either for Zionist ideologies, economic reasons or personal ambition, Iranian Jews emigrated primarily to Israel and a smaller number to Western European countries. Among those emigrants to Israel were the families of the past Israeli President Moshe Katsav from Yazd, and past Minister of Defense General Shaul Mofaz, from Isfahan.

Following the de facto recognition of the Jewish State of Israel by Iran in 1950, Iran allowed and encouraged mass emigration of Iranian Jews to Israel, mostly those living in poverty. Once again, the speed of emigration was later slowed down due to the impact of the liquidation of Jewish assets on the economy, the improvement of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and the sudden rise of the socio-economic status of Iranian Jews from the 1950s through the 1970s.

The religious crisis that arose during the World Soccer Cup, Asian Games, held in Tehran in 1968, was another turning point in the modern history of Iranian Jews. The competition between the two finalists, the Israeli Maccabees and their Iranian counterparts, aroused the expression of anti-Semitic feeling on the streets of Tehran, through demonstrations and chanting slogans. This
incident served as a warning to Iranian Jews of hidden anti-Semitic feelings in the Iranian population. Coupled with other political, social and economic elements, that event was incentive enough for members of the Iranian Jewish community to contemplate alternative places to live, although not necessarily Israel. For the first time many intellectuals and affluent Jews, including the professionals and owners of large industries and trades, decided to either liquidate their assets or leave the country, moving to Europe, the United States and a marginal number to Israel.

By the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Iranian Jewish population was about 80,000 to 100,000, most of whom lived in Tehran and other major cities. The turmoil caused by the Revolution, once more brought out the radical anti-Semitic feelings of the clerical government, which cloaked its prejudice under the guise of anti-Zionism.
On May 14, 1979, during a visit paid by the Jewish religious and communal leaders to the Ayatollah Khomeini, he officially made a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. His statement later became the slogan of the Iranian Jewish community. Nevertheless, within the very first year of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, some of the prominent members of the Iranian Jewish Community were executed after being accused of being Zionists, including Habib Elghanian (May 9, 1979), Albert Danialpour (June 5, 1980) and Ebrahim Berookhim (July 31, 1980).
Ever since then, the Jewish community, realizing the imminent threat to its well-being, has done everything in its power to express its disapproval of Zionism and Israel. Holocaust denial by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2006 was another manifestation of a broad fusion between Iran’s anti-Zionist position and anti-Jewish messages. The current Jewish population in Iran is estimated at around 8,000–10,000 and surprisingly they are still the second largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel. Reports vary as to the condition and treatment of the small, tight-knit community of Iranian Jews, due to its isolation from world Jewry.

The history of mass migration out of Iran goes back to the Pre-Arab invasion, when Iranian Jews departed for India (Cochin) and China (Kaifung) due to the Zoroastrian suppression, and later in the seventeenth century to Bokhara and Herat in the north, due to the Shi’ite persecution.

As early as the 1930s, lower and middle class Iranian Jews left for Israel, while the upper class, intellectuals, and students went to Europe, the United States and Australia. With a few exceptions, it was not until the late 1940s that some Iranian Jews of a higher or upper middle socio-economic background began moving to California, mainly Los Angeles. Physicians and investors tended to go to the East Coast, settling in New York, New England, and some in midwestern Chicago. On the West Coast, immigrating students, at the beginning, landed in San Francisco, but later went to Southern California, attending the University of Southern California (USC), California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Migrating professionals were primarily physicians and traders of antiques and carpets, living mostly in Los Feliz, North Hollywood, Hollywood Hills and the Pico-Robertson area; they also attended local American temples. It was not until 1958 that the very first Iranian Jewish family settled in Beverly Hills.14

The small, closely knit Iranian community of the fifties found it easier to acculturate by adopting a more American life-style. With such a small Iranian community, Iranian Jews primarily married American and European Ashkenazi Jews. Had it not been for the second and third waves of Iranian immigrants coming to Los Angeles in the early 1970s and post 1979, the first group would have completely assimilated into American Jewish society by now.

Due to an anti-Israel demonstration because of the World Soccer Cup Asian Games in Tehran, in 1968, many intellectuals and affluent Jews including the professionals and owners of large industries and trades, decided to either leave the country or liquidate their assets. Large sums of capital were sent abroad to be invested in cities such as Los Angeles and Beverly Hills. These
investors often had two homes, one in Los Angeles and one in Tehran, where they still tried to enjoy the so-called economic benefits of the “Golden Era” of the Pahlavi Dynasty. 1976 saw the purchase of the Harold Lloyd Estate, in Beverly Hills, by Iranian investors, and the establishment of a boutique on Rodeo Drive, displaying the work of the late Iranian Muslim designer Bijan. A few years later, Iranian investments created the Rodeo-Collection and financed construction of the Peninsula Hotel. As for New York, most prominent Iranian Jews lived in Long Island and Forest Hills, while having businesses in the Garment District and Diamond District. Young students and physicians chose any location where they would be accepted for higher education or medical training at hospitals.

After September 1978, at the beginning of the Revolution, Jewish and non-Jewish Iranian families who could afford the expense were landing daily in JFK or Los Angeles International Airport, often believing they were coming for a temporary stay. As time went on, the dream of returning to Iran had to be abandoned. Even for those who could have returned, the fear of anti-Zionist threats and the absence of the rule of law did not allow those dreams to materialize.
While the first to arrive were culturally sophisticated and affluent members of the community, by the early 1980s members of the middle and lower socio-economic class also moved to Los Angeles. Due to economic reasons, many Iranian Jewish families were forced to seek housing outside of Beverly Hills despite their desire to send their children to the city’s prestigious public school system. In addition to the geographic divide, post Revolution immigrants took on a wider variety of professions including rabbis, shohets, bakers, butchers, educators and academics. These wandering Jews, filled with fear and anxiety of an unknown future, were in need of sharing their experiences with each other. On Friday nights during late 1978 and early 1979 many temples in Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley hosted the new immigrants who came to socialize and see familiar faces. It was at this point that, upon the complaint of some of his temple members for allowing so many non-members to “disturb” their Shabbat Services, Rabbi Zvi Dershowitz of Sinai Temple on Wilshire Boulevard gave a particularly memorable sermon. He reminded his congregation of the role and responsibility of the “synagogue” towards fellow Jews who needed a place to worship and gather in times of crisis. Many of these temples are now the beneficiaries of both financial support and leadership from their Iranian congregants.

Once the difficulties of re-settlement had been somewhat resolved, the even more difficult process of acculturation began. For those who went to Israel at the time of its independence, the issue of acculturation has already been solved. The older generation of the 1950s, already retired, have put the difficult years of adjustment and language acquisition behind. They enjoy the product of their efforts, having their children as academicians, politicians, military officers, media operators, computer experts and medical researchers. By 1978 and the rise of the Islamic Revolution, El Al planes flew many lower- and middle-class Iranian Jews to Israel, almost daily, for free. Also, for the first time we find some affluent Iranian Jews who migrated to Israel or invested in Israel, while switching their residency between Israel and some Western countries.

Those who settled in Europe or Australia, found success more difficult due to religious and language challenges. As for those who came to the United States, there were wide cultural and religious differences between those who settled on the East Coast (New York) and those on the West Coast (Los Angeles).

In terms of religious observance, Iranian Jews of New York are more observant but divided in their religious identity. The descendants of the forced converts of Mashhad (1839) have established their own communities and temples, considering other Iranian Jews not sufficiently observant. However,
immigrants from other Iranian cities belong to a different social and religious community in New York. Both groups are secluded in small neighborhoods such as Great Neck, Kings Point, Forest Hills, Queens and Roslyn based on their financial or professional status. At present, many hold medical and other professional positions, while others work in real estate, jewelry, clothing, carpet and antique businesses. Their cultural and philanthropic activities are mainly focused on Judaism and Israel, with very limited interaction with non-Jewish Iranians. The Iranian American Jewish Federation of New York, founded in 2002, has as its primary mission, “the establishment of unity among the large contingent of Iranian Jews in the greater New York metropolitan area and to act as a conduit between the community and other groups and organizations with respect to matters that affect their lives and matters pertaining to the State of Israel.”

Among the very few Iranian restaurants or social halls, in the New York area, Kosher dietary laws are observed if they are owned by Jews. Their very conservative habits of life and style of life have affected the face of the city and their children’s educational system.

As for Iranian Jews of Los Angeles, the challenges of adapting to a new life in a new place varied depending on the age and socio-economic background of the individual. Those immigrants who came after the age of sixty-five had the most difficult acculturation experience. A great number of them could not speak English and were unable to pursue a new profession or business. Such obstacles seemed overwhelming, and rather than trying to adapt, they devoted their time and energy trying to recreate their Iranian life and facilities. Thus, they imported the Iranian Jewish traditions and characteristics to certain parts of Los Angeles, with all its advantages and disadvantages that prior immigrants had tried to leave behind. They started setting up their own temples to read prayers with their own Persian-Sephardic rituals and tones.

Thus, it fell upon the generation of those forty to sixty-five years old to carry the burden of dual identity in the process of acculturation. Whether professionals or tradesmen, this group tried to remain loyal to the traditions and values of Iran while adjusting themselves to fit into the American lifestyle. It is within this generation that women of the middle class, who had come to this country either as professionals or without any profession or language skills, played a significant role both at home and at work. In that same generation, there is another category of women, following the tradition in Iran, who mostly devoted their spare time to setting up charitable and philanthropic organizations. One can hardly find any American Jewish or Israeli charitable organization that does not have one or two active and supportive Iranian chapters.
The third and the youngest generation of immigrants, those who came under the age of forty, benefited the most from the mass migration of Iranian Jews to the United States. The land provided them with the incentive to realize the American Dream. The limited educational opportunity in Iranian...
universities, due to their difficult entrance exams, could not have given them the vast level of higher education available in their new homeland. In professional settings, they have been prominent lawyers, physicians as well as owners of medical centers. They have excelled as scholars, researchers in nuclear medicine, professors, directors of university departments and divisions at national and international levels. Also, successful business entrepreneurs have earned the recognition and respect from their fellow Americans, both Jews and non-Jews.

While some Iranian Jewish groups, such as the Iranian Jewish Women's Organization (1976) and the Iranian American Jewish Cultural Organization of California (1978), were established before the Islamic Revolution, many others were founded after the arrival of the larger cohort of immigrants. Among the first ones were SIAMAK, Iranian American Jewish Association of Southern California (1979), Eretz Synagogue & Cultural Center (1980), Nessah Educational and Cultural Center-Nessah Synagogue (1980) and Iranian-American Jewish Federation (1980). Most of them have continued for decades, maintaining their own synagogues and publications in Persian.

Furthermore, along with the other non-Jewish Iranians, they developed community and academic centers, restaurants, catering services, supermarkets, bookstores, yellow pages and media to preserve their cultural identity. Certain areas became so heavily Iranian, that councilmen have dedicated plaques designating them as “Little Teheran” or some similar Iranian marking.
Unlike the Jewish community of New York, there is much more interaction between Iranian immigrants of all different faiths in Los Angeles. In terms of their level of assimilation, Iranian Jews have assimilated with American Jews as well as to a high degree with non-Jews and non-Iranians.

Like all immigrant populations, Iranian Jews have witnessed accomplishments and challenges during the process of their acculturation. After four decades, most Iranians of any ethnic or religious background, having received their US citizenships, successfully adjusted and excel within their new homeland. The older generation enjoys the medical and social benefits that the state and federal government provides. The middle-age generation of forty to sixty-five, has established itself comfortably in a wide range of small self-employed lines of work as well as growing industries such as textile, clothing, marble and furniture, doing business with Mexico, Latin America, Italy and the Far East. Iranian immigrants own industrial corporations, hotels and shopping centers, developments throughout California and the rest of the United States. As realtors and homeowners, they have had an impact on the architecture of certain areas of Beverly Hills and some other neighborhoods in which they live. Many houses built with columns and pretentious entries, are undoubtedly a reaction to centuries of being forced to live in Iranian ghettos and poor homes with very low entrances, as enforced by the seventeenth century Shi‘ite clerics.18

A new dimension to the acculturation of Iranian Jews has been in the political arena. This is an area that they did not have the opportunity to join in Iran. Their political involvement began through contacts with the federal government regarding issues of immigration, political asylum and social and medical benefits for their ethnic group. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and partisan activities have also drawn Iranian Jews into political forums. One such group, is Thirty Years After, a non-partisan
organization for the Iranian-American Jewish community founded on the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Its mission is to educate its members in the democratic processes of the United States. Its many activities include promoting civic action and voter registration drives.

Unlike most American Jewish communities, which are traditionally Democratic, the Iranian Jewish community is split between the two parties—affiliations often depending on the individual's level of wealth, social and political views as well as the current policies of each party towards the state of Israel. Iranian Jews have also won appointed positions at the state level and elected positions in the city councils including the office of the Mayor of the City of Beverly Hills.

In addition to their contribution to American politics, Iranian Jews have supported many academic programs not only at the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of California, Irvine and California State University, Northridge, but also out of state universities and colleges.

Los Angeles Iranians, Jews and non-Jews, actively support and participate in the areas of art, music, sports, entertainment, theatrical and motion picture production. Immigrants who lack language skills other than Persian, can access the outside world through Iranian radio and satellite television programs. Their entertainments include news about the Iranian National Soccer Team as well as tips for going to local Persian restaurants, theatrical performances or concerts by their favorite Persian musicians.

Having lived in a non-Jewish Middle Eastern country, the average Iranian Jewish level of religious observance and knowledge of Judaism, except for a small margin of religious leaders and scholars, has been very traditional
and somewhat shallow, whereas, in the United States where all faiths are recognized, people are given the opportunity to practice their religion with pride and openly. Such privilege has given the Iranian Jews the liberty to celebrate their Jewish identity and holidays more openly. For example, many non-Jewish Iranians had not necessarily heard about Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah, Rosh ha-Shanna or the terms Bar/Bat-Mitzvah. In addition, the wide range of Jewish life in the United States has given Iranian Jews a chance to re-assess their own religious attachments and level of their observance.

Nevertheless, the combination of the renewal of their Jewish identity, and financial prosperity have resulted a tendency towards extravagance. For some people, the pretentious celebration of solemn and joyous rituals has become a means to overcome and make up for the limitations they encountered in Iran.

The migration of Iranian Jews to Los Angeles after 1979 coincided with a worldwide swing towards more orthodox religiosity. Iranian Jews coming to America dealt both with this new trend as well as the cultural and generational gap that was growing among themselves. As a Jewish community steeped in tradition rather than religious textual knowledge, they were poorly equipped to deal with the variety of opportunities for the practice of Judaism. While the older generation kept to the traditions brought in from Iran, some of the middle aged were fascinated by the glory, adaptability and choral melodies in American conservative and reform temples. Thus, some of them, without really even understanding the language, attend the non-orthodox American temples, while sending their children to orthodox Jewish schools, unaware of the differences or consequences. Many of the children, not accepting their parents’ level of observance, started to question the religious dedication of their families, thus widening generational and cultural gaps.

As family gaps have grown wider, some parents and members of the community have shown resentment and anger towards their orthodox religious mentors and leaders. Other halakhic and gender issues also divide the community between Iranian traditional synagogues and those who have tried to model themselves after conservative American, Sephardic or Ashkenazi houses of worship. While some of the Iranian temples still have debates over the use of a microphone on Shabbat or the wisdom of having a mixed congregation, the community of Iranian Jewish women still has to fight to appear on the pulpit for an Aliya in most Iranian temples or to demand the refutation of Aguna and men’s right of Jewish divorce, named as get. In this respect, the joint effort of the Iranian Jewish Women’s Organization in Los Angeles and the Ima Group of Iranian Women in New York should not be overlooked.
In the meantime, we notice a level of tolerance about the issue of intermarriage with non-Jews, same sex marriages and transgender individuals. While thirty years ago such issues were a rarity, and still is by the older generation of immigrants, we see more tolerance from their offspring. For some parents, even though it has not been easy, keeping the family together is prioritized over keeping the faith or social norms. Marriage out of religion or same sex marriage has become more or less an accepted matter among the middle- and upper-class Iranian Jews, while the orthodox families have gone in the opposite directions, having separate ceremonies for males and females.

In Los Angeles, while accepting many of the new norms in the community, immigrants have implanted some of the Iranian or Middle Eastern customs and traditions into the larger non-Iranian Jewish community. For example, in a Jewish temple on joyous occasions, often one hears the rabbi requesting women to give a loud ritual thrilling cry, a quell, which is a symbol...
of joy. There is almost no American, who having socialized with Persians, does not list Persian foods among favorite cuisines. Kosher Iranian restaurants are filled with non-Iranian Jews, and some Iranian Jewish markets are the busiest markets in town.

UCLA Hillel. Photo provided by Nahid Pirnazar.

As part of the greater Jewish family, it seems likely that Iranian Jews will eventually acculturate into the American Jewish society. However, it seems more difficult to envision them giving up their Iranian identity, something they have been acculturated to for more than twenty-seven centuries now. Iranians of Los Angeles, Jewish and other, maintain a unity embedded in their shared historical, cultural, and patriotic attachments. It is not clear whether the future generation of Iranian Jews, now Iranian Jewish Americans—in whichever
order they prefer to place each aspect of their individual identities—will someday meld into the majority of American society, to become indistinguishable from their neighbors. Fortunately, whether assimilation is avoidable or not, an appreciation for multi-cultural societies seems to be gaining, slowly but surely, from the inside to the out. For now, it allows people of different backgrounds to be a part of American life and still maintain their individuality, religion and ethnic background.
Notes


The idea of having Middle Persian vocabulary, as well as non-Jewish concepts during the Sasanid period, suggest the name of “Iranian Talmud.” Among such examples are: “proverbs and commentaries that run contrary to the teachings of the Torah and the prophets of Israel.”

Also see: Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Baba Kamma Folio 83a: “‘[where] either the Holy Tongue or the Greek language [could be employed]?’ And R. Jose said: ‘Why use the Aramaic language in Babylon [where] the Holy Tongue or the Persian language [could be used]?’”


8. Netzer, Padyavand, 1:42.


14. Interview with Cyrus Karubian, one of the early settlers in the United States in the early 1940s, first in New York and later in Los Angeles (2005).

15. Among those Jewish Temples who first opened their arms to Iranian Jews in Los Angeles were Temple Beth Jacob, on Pico Blvd and Temple Sinai, on Wilshire Blvd. As for the San Fernando Valley, Temple Valley Beth Shalom was among the first hosts. Up to the present time, they all have a large number of Iranian members.


18. See the list of the forty-five restrictions imposed on Jews during the seventeenth century: Levy, *Comprehensive History*, 293–95: “17. Jews may not build fancy houses. 18. Jews many not paint the rooms of their homes white, 18. The door of a Jew’s House must be low and must be a single [not double] door.”
Bibliography


