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EDITOR'S NOTE

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank,* which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen.*

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.

All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

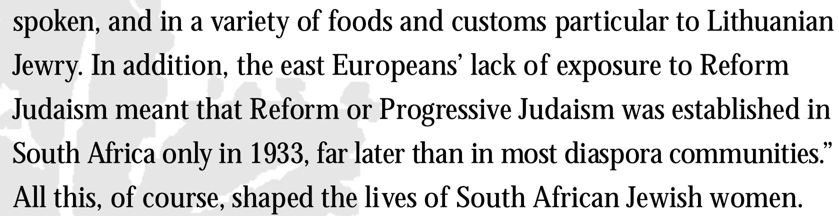
In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side. They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker.* The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or aquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.

My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes "Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them… The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society."

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental. "It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located," she writes. "In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa… the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish



spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin,* or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in.'* Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews

with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein
October, 1999

IRANIAN JEWISH DIASPORA WOMEN

by G.B.

As we reach the millenium, Iranian Jews are in the midst of a major diaspora triggered by the Iranian revolution of 1977. An estimated 40,000 Iranian Jews now live in the U.S. About 30,000 emigrated to Israel and 25,000 are dispersed in other parts of the world, leaving only about 20,000 Jews still living in Iran.[1] Wherever they have emigrated, Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews either know nothing about them or, if they do, are unimpressed by a Persian-Jewish tradition that is older than the predominant *ashkenazi* one.

"We go back a very long time," an Iranian Jewish emigré in her fifties told me, "It was 2500 years ago, when Cyrus the Great conquered Palestine, that the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Remember the 2500-year celebration that the Shah held? We always remember it as another celebration for the Jews *who could have returned to Jerusalem but did not.* We are very Persian, having lived for so long in Iran: our food, the music we like, our names, our lifestyle and taste, the way we like to arrange our homes has a lot of similarity with other Iranians. We also celebrate *No-Ruz* (the Iranian New Year/spring solstice) and all the festivities that start with *Chaar-Shambeh Souri* (the last Wednesday before the New Year), and end on *Sizdeh-Bedar* (the thirteenth day after the New Year). Now in L.A. some Jews are starting to celebrate other holidays that we didn't really do in Iran, like *Shab-eh-Yalda*, (the winter solstice). It's good that most of our community is here because the Jewish Americans and the Israelis are very different from us. For me it is important that my children remember that they are *Iranian* Jews, not just Jews."

North Americans often call all Middle Easterners Arabs, a broad term that renders invisible the diverse nationalities, ethnicities, religions, linguistic differences, cultural and social practices and tribal identities of these peoples. Most of the 20 countries in Southwest Asia, the Middle East and North Africa are predominantly Arab but the exceptions are Turkey, Israel, and the new republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Iran.

In Iran, cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity has long existed within a single nation-state. The official language in Iran – Persian or *Farsi* – is part of the Indo-European language family whereas Arabic is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. But in addition to Persian-speaking Iranian nationals, there are Azerbaijani Iranians who speak Turkish, Lors who speak Lori, and Kurds who speak Kurdish. All learn Persian at school. Persia's state religion was Zoroastrianism until 1642, when it was conquered by Arab Muslims.[2] Today, 98% of the population is Muslim (93 percent Shiites and 5% Sunni). There are

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[1] Pliskin, Karen 1987; G.B., 1999

[2] From the 16th through the 19th centuries, Islam was the state religion, in the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736) Shiism was practiced. During the reign of Nader Shah (1736-1747) who was a Sunni Moslem, the authority of the Shi'ite clergy was weakened. After Nader Shah was assassinated in 1747 there was tremendous instability in Persia until 1794 when the Qajjar dynasty came to power (1794-1925) and the Shiite doctrine of Islam became dominant again. In 1925 the Pahlavi dynasty was established and remained so until the revolution of 1978-1979 and the consequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This brief historical overview illustrates how for Iranians, the Arab conquest is a part of Iranian history that needs to be placed in context.

several non-Muslim religious minorities besides Jews; they include Christian Armenians and Assyrians, Zoroastrians and Bahais. But their numbers are small. The 1976 census, the last before the revolution in 1978-79, indicated that religious minorities, excluding the Bahais, amounted to less than one percent of Iran's total population of 34 million.

The Jewish community in Persia traces its history to the deportation of the Israelites during the reign of Tiglat Pilesser III (727 B.C.E) in Samaria, and the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.E.). Cyrus the Great, King of Persia (538 B.C.E.) allowed the Jews to return to Judea to rebuild the Temple. However, some of these exiled Jews chose not tro return and instead established permanent communities in Babylon and Persia.[3]

Along with the Zoroastrians and Christians, the Jews of Persia were among the non-Muslim religious groups that had sacred books and were considered "protected peoples." They were called *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book), protected under the sacred laws of the Quran, and permitted freedom of worship. However, social and political restrictions still applied to these populations.

With the establishment of the Pahlavi Regime in 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi eliminated many of the humiliating and discriminatory laws which Iranian Jews had been experiencing for hundreds of years: the *jesiyeh* or head tax was eliminated, as were dress codes, and restrictions in housing. The elimination of *najes* (impure) codes of contact with non-Muslims in public and governmental institutions of the new nation state, increased economic and social interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, allowing Jews to hire Muslim workers, and also permitting Jewish children to attend state schools and universities.

Reza Shah and his son's interest in rapidly centralizing and secularizing Iran markedly improved the status of Jews. Iranian Jews speak Persian – an important indicator of acculturation and Iranian identity. By the 1970's, Jews were often indistinguishable from other Iranians in work settings and in public life: they have Persian first and last names. Many – especially the urban elites – speak Persian without a dialect. Iranian Jews cook Persian food and observe the hot/cold dietary regulations. Food such as lamb, hen, dates and figs are classified as *garmi* (hot) and are thought to speed up the metabolism by thickening the blood. Beef rooster, plums, watermelon and oranges are considered *sardi* (cold) and slow down the metabolism by diluting the blood.

Many twentieth century Iranian Jews were active participants in the social,literary, and economic mainstream. During the revolution, many Iranian Jews – particularly the younger ones – were active in demonstrations and held gatherings to express their allegiance to Iran as citizens struggling to create a more democratic society.

The 1976 census estimates that 62,000 Jews were living in Iran in the seventies, but Jewish leaders claim that this official figure is too low. Their estimates – based on registered birth, circumcision, *bar mitzvah,* marriage, divorce or death records maintained by Rabbis in cities across Iran and therefore more accurate than the census data in which undercounting is possible – range from 120,000 to 150,000.[4] The census

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[3] Yegar, 1993

[4] These have been given to me at interviews with leaders in the Jewish Iranian communities in Los Angeles and New York.

does not distinguish between the two Jewish sub-groups among the Jews of Iran: the Kurdish Jews, who lived primarily in towns and villages in Kurdistan who speak Persian as well as Neo-Aramaic; and the Iraqi-Iranian Jews who had been emigrating to Iran from Iraq since 1914 (the official end of the Ottoman Empire) who speak Arabic and Persian.[5]

Prior to the Revolution, matters of personal status among Jews in Iran were left to the Jewish religious courts. The Jews had a legally recognized *bet din* (rabbinical court), which handled marriages, divorces and matters of inheritance for the state. This institution used to function with the aid of *dayanim* sent from Israel. The power of this rabbinical court over inheritance was a major factor in keeping Jews tied to the Jewish community. French *Alliance* schools were established in the major cities where Jews lived such as Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashad and Kermanshah. Between 1944 and 1979, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee established vocational and educational schools, as well as religious and cultural programs in Jewish communities across Iran.

The Iranian revolution changed the situation of Jews in Iran and contributed to the growth of the Iranian diaspora worldwide. Economic, social and cultural conditions deteriorated significantly for many Iranians who had ties with the Pahlavi regime. The past twenty years also mark the largest diaspora of Persian Jews in this century. After the revolution, cases of legal, economic and social discrimination and persecution of members of the Jewish Iranian community increased. Jews were no longer allowed to buy land in the oil-rich regions of the country, they faced job and other forms of discrimination: sometimes shopkeepers (such as the local breadmaker) would not sell their products to them. The current government, however, asserts that all "people of the book" are free to practice their religion in Iran. In fact, since the revolution, television and radio shows have portrayed in documentary style how Jews, Assyrians, Zoroastrian and Armenians practice their faith and religion. They point out that religious minorities are protected and should not experience persecution because of their religious practices.

The ethno-religious diversity of Iranians became much more noticeable after the revolution, when many religious minorities who actually experienced or feared increased persecution began to emigrate. Migration of Iranian Jews, Bahais, Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Assyrian Christians intensified because of the religious characteristics of the Islamic Republic. Political asylum was more readily granted to members of religious minorities who applied for refugee visas than to others.

"There were a lot of executions and everyone was scared they would come after someone in the family," an Iranian Jew who was 20 at the time told me. "The 'U.S. imperialist and Zionist alliance' was being denounced during demonstrations. After Alghanian (a prominent Jewish businessman) was accused of being a Zionist and executed, we all knew that we would have to leave. Many of our friends and family had already left but my father didn't think it would get this bad. He had a Muslim business partner and he trusted him. One evening this man came over to our house and told my father that we would all have to leave in the next few days. He had seen my father's name on a list. They would be coming to arrest him very soon. He could delay the process for a few days to give us enough time to get smuggled out. We had to leave everything behind and get to Turkey to apply for refugee status."

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[5] G.B., 1989

The Iranian diaspora illustrates the importance of addressing the presence of sub-groups within an ethnic group. Jewish Iranians are a good example of sub-ethnicity among Iranians. Since Iranians are not ethnically homogeneous, their ethnic rather than national identity was often primary. Being Jewish and part of a religious minority within the predominantly Muslim population of Iran was a major marker for Iranian Jews. But after emigration to the United States – particularly to Los Angeles which contains the second largest Jewish population in the United States – there was a major shift: Jewish Iranians became one sub-group of Jews rather than one sub-group of Iranians. Cultural, social and economic differences between them and other Jews, problems in immigrant adjustment and acculturation to a non-Sephardic tradition led Iranian Jews to emphasize their Iranian as well as Jewish identities. Very much like Cuban Jewish exiles in Florida, who have not – after four decades – integrated into the sizable Jewish community of Miami, Iranian Jews brought with them cultural, linguistic, social, culinary, religious and psycho-social lifestyles that resisted the assimilationist model of "melting" into a predominantly ashkenazi Jewish culture. By maintaining sub-ethnicity as mizrachi Jews and Middle Easterners, Iranian Jews are finding ways to retain their unique identity and to resist assimilation into North America as well as into traditional *ashkenazi* or *sephardi* Jewry.

The 1990 U.S. Censuses of Population indicate that the largest concentration of Iranians in the Western world is in Los Angeles County.[6] They have settled in affluent areas such as Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Bel-Air, Malibu and Santa Monica, and also in Woodland Hills, Encino and Sherman Oaks. Community figures now estimate that Los Angeles[7] also has the largest concentration of Iranian Jews, a community of over 30,000 people most of whom live on the West Side and in the San Fernando Valley but also in areas that have historically had a high concentration of Israeli Jews, such as the Fairfax district in Los Angeles. On the East Coast, Iranian Jews have primarily settled in Long Island, especially in Great Neck, Little Neck and Roslyn as well as in the Bronx, and Manhattan. There is a sizable population of Mashadi Jews concentrated in Great Neck. They have just recently completed building their synagogue.

Most Iranian Jews who emigrated to Los Angeles are from the higher social classes, the majority from the capital city of Tehran. In addition Jews from Hamadan (considered the burial place of Queen Esther), Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kashan, Mashad, Abadan, Khoramshahr and Kermanshah are also a part of the Iranian Jewish communities in exile.

The first wave of Iranian immigration to the United States was comprised primarily of students and visitors. Iranian students were a visible part of the international student body during the 70's and close to 50,000 Iranian students were registered at universities and colleges across the United States. It is estimated that in 1973 half of all the Iranians abroad were students studying in the U.S. They entered on student visas and the expectation was that they would return to Iran after completing their studies.[8]

It was also in the 1970's that many Iranian students abroad became active in branches of political/cultural Iranian organizations (such as the Confederation of Iranian Students) establishing a movement of opposition primarily aimed at exposing the repression and violation of human rights by the Pahlavi regime in Iran.

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[6] with 76,000 Iranians or 29% of all Iranians living in North America.

[7] Bozorgmehr 1998, G.B. 1997, Friedlander 1993

[8] Hossein Askari, et.al 1977

For these students, national identity as Iranians superceded ethno-religious diversity within the group. Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Baluchi students as well as Jewish, Armenian, Assyrian and Bahai students worked with Moslem students in opposing the Pahlavi regime. They drew international attention to the surveillance of Iranians by the secret police *(Savak)* and the increasing numbers of political prisoners in Iran.

The second wave of Iranian immigration to the United States occurred in the two decades since the Islamic revolution. In those two decades, the profile of Iranians in the United States changed dramatically to include larger numbers of economic migrants as well as religious and political exiles fleeing Iran for fear of persecution.[9] Given the Islamic republic's increasing repression of leftist and nationalist oppositional movements, many students were afraid to return to Iran and settled permanently in the United States.

Driving down the streets of Pico or Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles, signs in Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew script are very visible. An Iranian Jewish woman shopkeeper whom I was interviewing remarked:

"Sometimes I go for two days before I have to speak English. When I go shopping I first check the two Persian markets I always go to on Pico Ave, Sabze-Meidan (Green Pastures) or Elat Market (a city in Israel). They compete with each other and their prices are not so different in terms of the rice, vegetables, spices or herbs I need for cooking. Sometimes I'll find fresher vegetables in one and better fruit in the other so I just plan to going to both of them, I usually buy my *limou shirin* (sweet melon) and the other fruits that I need at Sabze Meidan and then I also buy my barbari and *sangak* bread there. Then I go across the street to Elias kosher meat market to get my chicken and other meats that I'll freeze. You know Elias was my butcher in Tehran. After the revolution he came to Los Angeles with his two sons, rented this store, fixed it up like his shop in Iran, taught his sons how to do the business and then went back. He's still there, and they say that a lot of Muslims buy meat from him too. There is another kosher meat across the block who are Russian Jews but I prefer to go in here. I can speak to him in *farsi* and ask for exactly what I want and the service is very good. He was smart to put his name on the store. Everyone knew Elias the *Ghassab* (Butcher) so he doesn't have to worry about advertising, it's already there. Then if I need to buy teacups or check the prices on the rice cookers in the market I drive over to Rimaco, a few blocks down. In 10 years things have changed a lot. Now I can choose which Iranian store I want to go to. When I first came in 1979 it wasn't like this, there were one or two stores around here in the Fairfax area and one in Westwood and one in Santa Monica. Now some jokingly call Westwood, Iranwood. The Iranians have influenced even the Americans, you know the Westward Ho market in Westwood has a little Middle Eastern, mostly Iranian section."

The Jewish population had already experienced social, economic and political restrictions due to their minority status in Iran and were therefore better prepared to cope with changes in status after emigration. For Iranian Jews, contact in synagogues and in Jewish organizations, as well as monetary support for Jewish refugees and poor immigrants through the Jewish Federation, has increased interaction and communication between Iranian Jews and North American Jews, despite the cultural differences between them. For example, in the early 1980s, several temples in Los Angeles provided space for Iranian Jews to organize and hold their own traditional services. Social agencies such as Vista Del Mar were also approached to help place refugee Jewish youth in homes in Los Angeles, and women affiliated with the National Council of Jewish Women helped locate housing and shelter for immigrants from Iran.

These institutionalized and informal contacts, as well as the existence of an established Jewish community with distinct neighborhoods (Fairfax and West Hollywood) with kosher food and stores catering to Jewish

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[9] Bozorgmehr 1991, Bozorgmehr, M.C. Der-Martiriosian and G. Sabagh 1996

customers are all factors that helped the adaptation process for Iranian Jews. As an Iranian Jewish businesswoman told me:

"I make it very clear that I am Jewish. Yes I am from Iran, but I am not Muslim and I left Iran because of Khomeni, so I am from the Middle East but now I am a U.S.citizen just like all the other immigrants who have come here because of persecution."

Another important factor that may have aided Jewish Iranians in their adjustment to life in Los Angeles was that Iranian Jews perceived themselves as settling permanently in Los Angeles, and consequently were more active in creating a sub-community and exile culture for themselves. A Jewish woman in her 30's, with two young children said:

"We are different from the Muslims, who keep saying that when Khomeini and the Islamic Republic fall, we will return to our homeland. Our homeland is gone forever, my whole family has left Iran, and I doubt that I will return there in my lifetime, and I doubt that even my children are ever going to go to Iran. Our history in Iran goes back thousands of years, but now this marks the end of this history, and we have to make a new identity for ourselves for the sake of our children. We are Iranian, and it is our duty to raise our children to know where they have come from, as Jewish Iranians, who are now also American."

During my interviews, it became evident that the feeling of permanent resettlement represents a distinct difference in the way Jewish and Muslim Iranians view their immigration, or self imposed exile since the revolution. A Muslim woman who has been in Los Angeles since 1980, remarked:

"I will go back to Iran immediately, as soon as this craziness is over. My mother, brother and sister live in Tehran. It is my homeland, and I hope that soon my family can be reunited in Iran, where all of us want to be... I am physically comfortable here, but my family and heart is in Iran.'

Attitudes toward immigration among Iranian Jews was strongly affected by whether family members have been able to join each other in Los Angeles, recreating extended family and friendship networks that were and still are an important aspect of social and communal life in Iran. In contrast to the frustrations and anxiety expressed by Muslim families, among Jewish families there was more evidence of larger kin networks having assembled in Los Angeles. For example I attended a Jewish wedding where four generations of the family were there to celebrate. It had taken five years before all members of the extended household were reunited. As one woman mentioned

"Our family is out. All of us, my husband's parents and my own, all my sisters and brothers, my aunts and uncles on both sides, and the same is true for my husband's family. He only has one brother who lives in Long Island. The rest are here, we are all here together, we have no-one left in Iran, so we have to keep the family together and live the way we used to in Tehran."

Some Jewish Iranian women I interviewed initially talked about planning to return to Iran when the situation improved for the Jews. But as time went by, more and more Jews left Iran and formed new communities in Los Angeles and New York and with each year the possibly of returning became less viable. By the early 90's, I noticed that many had resigned themselves to the fact that they would never return to Iran.
A Jewish woman in her fifties remarked:

"Here in Los Angeles, I have my whole family and that is what makes the difference. Unlike this Muslim friend of ours, who is part of our *doreh* (sequential gatherings), who always has an ear and a eye toward Tehran and her family that is still there; I have my children, my mother, my sisters and brother and their families, and my husband's family here. Many of our friends from Iran are here, so life has changed for us but not as much as for her. We have started to have the same kind of parties and family gatherings here too, and I don't think so much about Iran since our family is all out."

Economic and social ties between Iranians of different religious orientations have evolved in the United States. A Jewish women in her 40's mentioned to me that in Iran, her husband had to establish economic ties with Muslim men in order to engage in business endeavors. Despite these frequent economic affiliations, social interaction and reciprocal visitation to homes was not a common practice among Jewish and Muslim business partners. She added:

"I remember Mahmoud Agah coming over for tea and seeing my husband at home sometimes, but we never had his family come over for dinner and although we had good relations with each other, it was clear that our families were not going to mix and socialize much with each other."

In Iran, economic ties between Jewish and Muslim Iranians in Iran did not spill over into social and recreational interactions. Jewish Iranians were very strict about maintaining endogamous marriages. As an older woman said "we lived side by side, but we were different, and we wanted our children to know that we are Jews and Iranians, and they had to learn this at an early age." Forming economic partnerships with Muslims is no longer necessary for Iranian Jews in Los Angeles. In fact, in the early 80's the reverse situation existed in Los Angeles. Muslim businessmen found that having a Jewish partner added to their credibility, a reversal in minority position.

Iranian Jewish and Muslim women are establishing new economic and social ties in Los Angeles through contacts with each other in businesses as well as through family (intermarriages) and friendship networks. These social contacts are not a result of forced economic affiliations between male members of Muslim and Jewish households. Sharing certain common culinary, social and cultural traditions and desiring services specifically catering to the Iranian community has created avenues of increased interaction among sub-groups of Iranian immigrants.

Cultural, social, and economic differences in immigrant adjustment, accommodation, and acculturation has led many Iranian Jews to reinforce their Jewish and Iranian ethnicity. Thus one will often hear them express their Jewishness before their Iranian identity. North Americans are often unable to differentiate between Jewish and non-Jewish Iranians and express surprise when they hear an individual self-identify as an Iranian Jew.

One of the problems of using the 1990 census and other statistical data banks is the lack of identification of Middle Easterners in racial or ethnic terms. The available categories at present exclude Middle Easterners who do not identify their race as fitting in any of the following categories: Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black not Hispanic, and White not Hispanic. The categories identifying race and ethnicity in legal documents in the United States in the 1990's exclude Middle Eastern immigrants. Middle Easterners are often classified as "non-hispanic white," a category that includes persons who are

European as well as those who are Middle Eastern and North African. At present, Middle Easterners can only be identified in census data through responses to the question about place of birth, or ethnic origin.[10] Only the long form of the census questionnaire answered by every sixth household asks this question. Under this system, American-born Jewish Iranians will not have an opportunity to report their Iranian ancestry.

A professional Jewish Iranian woman told me:

"There are always a lot of forms to fill out as I apply for grants or sign up my children in programs. Every time I have to check off one of the boxes, it gets frustrating, I either have to not check off anything, or I check off "other" and then try to write in Middle Eastern on the side. Recently I have printed out about 20 copies of a short statement that I take with me to attach to forms, so I draw an X over the whole section and in red ink write "see attached," I basically just want them to change this arbitrary classification which hurts us as Middle Easterners since we are not considered a "minority," I know some of my Jewish friends tried to find ancestors who had fled Spain to claim Hispanic status, and others have tried to classify themselves as Asians. It gets really complicated. if only they would change this classification system, with all the racism against Middle Easterners. We are in a double bind: we are not white and what we have experienced here has a lot to do with racism and discrimination against us as Middle Easterners and so we experience institutional racism on top of everything else."

At present there is a sizeable 1.5 generation of Iranians in the U.S. (1.5 generation are those born in Iran and immigrating at under 12 years of age, 2nd generation refers to those born in the U.S.). Census data on Iranians in the U.S. today indicates that about one quarter of the population are under the age of 15, in 1990, and the bulk of Iranians, 44% were between 25 and 44 years of age.

More research is needed on this emerging descendent population to gauge the patterns of their incorporation into the diverse North American Jewish communities. New technology has made available an Iranian cyber-community, affording American Iranians to communicate among themselves, especially on the website Iranian.com. If self-identification and other forms of expressing cultural and ethnic identity become more widely used, *mizrahi* Jews in the United States might not have to re-experience the marginalization of their identity or the pressure to accomodate to the dominant *ashkenazi* Jewish culture. As Houman Kashani wrote in the monthly *Shofar,* "I have attended a Reform elementary school, a Conservative middle school, and a Modern Orthodox high school. Throughout these experiences I have learned and appreciated the different aspects of Judaism. However, I would strongly disagree with someone sending their children to strict orthodox schools. Unfortunately, in most of these schools, the rabbis are very insular individuals who attempt to teach the students their austere *ashkenazi* beliefs. We are one of the oldest groups of Jews in the world. One of the reasons we have lasted so long is because we have never labelled ourselves: there was no difference between a Persian Jew that went to the *kenisha* (temple) every Shabbat and one who went only on Yom Kippur. We were simply Jews."[11]

In the United States today, the Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all ariving

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[10] Bozorgmehr, 1997

[11] Kashani, Houman, Shofar #217 Pp 93

Jews regardless of their background. This *ashkenazi* standard is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society. By challenging this standard, narratives by Iranian Jewish immigrants indicate how they seek to retain and celebrate their Iranian identity as well as their *mizrahi* identity, and how they have created religious and cultural organizations to help them do so.

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