The Jews of Persia: Their History, Culture, and Music

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a Persian Jew? As a Persian American Jew I cannot personally answer that question but for my parents and relatives who were born and raised in Iran it was simply their heritage, their identity a cultural differentiation from their Islamic neighbors. It also meant that occasionally that they ate different foods or heard the older generation speaking in Judeo-Persian a dialect of Isfahan, it was the breaking of a glass during a wedding ceremony or sitting quietly for seven days to observe someone's passing. Unfortunately being a Persian Jew in Iran also meant having to occasionally lie about who you are and what you believe in. According to Houman Sarshar the editor of *Esther's Children*, to lie about who you were was not meant to be deceitful or treacherous but rather an initiation into a 2,700 year old legacy of what it means to be an Iranian Jew, a legacy as old as the Bible, one that started when Esther is warned by her Uncle Mordecai to keep her Jewish faith from King Ahasuerus in order for her to become his wife and the Queen of Persia.[1] "Esther did not reveal her people to her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it" (Esther 2:10).

One of the principal goals of writing this thesis is to tell the story of the Jews of Persia; their history from the Achamenid empire through the Islamic revolution, their culture, traditions, life events and their music. By exploring their history I will focus on their attempt to hold on to their tradition, religion, and music both in Iran and in the United States. I will try to identify some of the reasons that made the Iranian Jewish

[1] Houman Sarshar,"The Culture Heroes. Dissimulation and the Legacy of Esther's Children ", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. xviii.

immigration experience to the United States so unique as well as how they maintain their Persian Jewish identity outside of Iran.[2]

Conclusions and assumptions about the Persian Jewish community have been made based on an examination of the writings of scholars writing about many different aspects of these unique histories and cultures. Other ideas have been gathered through personal interviews from members of the Persian community as well as recordings published by cultural organizations from within the community.

[2] Please note that Persian Jews or Iranian Jews are Jews historically associated Iran, which was known internationally as Persia until 1935.

Chapter 1

The History of the Jews of Persia

During the sixth century B.C.E., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Judea and exiled the Jews to surrounding regions. This marked the start of the Jews in Iran. History shows us that the Jews of Iran went though both good and bad times. Despite the trials and tribulations they endured, to this day, there still exists a significant Jewish community in Iran. History and the community's resilience is the epicenter of their identity and their pride.

Amongst the world's Jewish communities today, it is the Jews of Iran who have the longest continuous presence in any specific country.[3] Theirs is a priceless legacy of three thousand years of culture including: artwork, monuments, documentation, photographic records, and individual histories. This collective heritage that has made an important contribution to the history of Iran and to our understanding of their Jewish experience. Jews have lived in Persia for over 2,700 years, including approximately 1,400 years under Islamic rule. The Jewish community is the oldest religious minority group in Iran and the political instabilities endured by the Iranian people throughout history have clearly affected the local Jewish community. The different cultures of the dynasties and nations that conquered Iran have shaped and enriched the local way of life. These cultures and influences are manifested in the community's daily conduct, its unique features and material culture.

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[3] http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/PDF/IranLevin.pdf, (accessed on October 1, 2009).

Persian Jews are amongst the oldest inhabitants of Iran and they have played a large role in the history of the Jewish people during the last two millennia. Judaism is one of the oldest religions in Persia and dates back to Biblical times. The country of Iran is referred to throughout the Bible, not as Iran, but as Elam, Media, and Persia. References to Jews in Persia can be found in books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Chronicles and Esther. In the late 6th century BCE beginning with Cyrus the great and his successors, under their rule they were able to put an end to the Babylonian exile enabling Jews to return to their homeland. There, with Persian aid, they rebuilt the Temple and laid the foundations for the second Jewish commonwealth[4].

> In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of The Lord spoken by Jeremiah, The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, The God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a Temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you - may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build The Temple of The Lord, The God of Israel, The God who is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:1-3)

This famous "Cyrus Declaration" allowed the Jews who were living in exile to return to their homeland, Judea, to rebuild their lives. But some who had established themselves economically and socially preferred to remain on Babylonian-Persian soil.

These remaining exiles can be regarded as the core of the permanent Jewish settlements that gradually expanded from the center to the provinces. From what we

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[4] Vera Basch Morren, Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism (New York: The Academy for Jewish Research, 1987), p. vii.

know of Judeo-Persian history, after their settlement on the Iranian plateau the Jew's faired no differently than other religious minorities. Up until the 15th century C.E. some Jews enjoyed places of privilege in the courts of kings, while others rose to important positions in government, law and the military. The tolerant attitude of the rulers toward Jewish subjects brought gratitude from the Jews and found expression in subsequent generations. "The Talmud says a picture of Susa, the capital of the Persian kings, should be carved on the eastern gate of the temple in Jerusalem. Many scholars say this was intended in memory of good relations with Persia's Achaemenid kings".[5]

Even after Alexander the Great's conquests, Judeo-Persian connections continued throughout antiquity, especially under the Sassanian regime from the third through seventh centuries C.E. This period saw many Jews in high-ranking positions in Iranian society and government. This period also had the highest population of Jews in Iran. It was under this regime that several generations of eminent Jewish sages created the Babylonian Talmud (Jewish text containing Jewish theology, text and law) which eventually became the fundamental guide for normative Judaism to the present day.[6] The long course of Persia's Jews changed when, in 642 C.E., the Battle of Nehavend took place, and the twelve centuries-long independence of Persia ended with the victory of Arab-Muslim forces. Islam became the official state religion, Arabic influence spread, and all non-Muslims essentially became second-class citizens. Jews were made to wear a yellow ribbon on their arms and Christians a blue ribbon to distinguish them from Muslims. Forbidden from working in the government, many Persian Jews worked as

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[5] http://www.parstimes.com/history/jews_persia.html, (accessed on October 5, 2009)
[6] Morren, *Esther's Children*, p. vii.

merchants in banking and money lending, sometimes facing official persecutions, which intensified during the Safavid dynasty.

The Safavid Dynasty (1501-1731)

The Safavid Era, which lasted two centuries and two decades, brought about major political, religious, and social changes in Iran that affected all sectors of the population including Persian Jews. The founders of the Safavid dynasty put the country on entirely new political and religious bases. They introduced Shi'ism as the state religion and established a hierarchy of clergy with almost unlimited power and influence in every sphere of life.[7] These changes negatively affected the Jewish population and brought about numerous persecutions.

Shah Esma 'il I (r.1501-1524), the founder of the dynasty introduced a policy of forcible conversion to the Shiite form of Islam from the largely Sunni population. As a result of Shah Esma 'il's policy there was a rise in the level of intolerance toward all minorities however, because the Shah's primary goal was to convert the Sunni population, the persecution of Jews was limited.[8] Shi'ia Islam differs in some important ways with Sunni Islam, the dominant denomination in the Muslim world. One difference is a greater emphasis on ritual purity, *tahara*. All non-Muslims, including Jews, are viewed as ritually unclean, *najis*. Physical contact with Jews and other non-Muslims requires Shi'as to conduct ritual purification before participating in prayer services. Because of this belief, Persian Shi'a avoided contacts with Jews and other non-Muslims

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[7] "Persia," in Encyclopedia Judaica 15:788.
[8] Vera B. Moreen, "The Safavid Era", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. 73.

and they were excluded from public baths. Walter J. Fischel, a scholar of the Jews of Iran in the 20th century has argued:

> The Safavid rulers made the conception of the ritual uncleanliness of the non-believers one of the principal cornerstones of their inter-confessional relationship. Under no other Persian dynasty was the hatred against non-believers more intense. The conception of the ritual uncleanliness of non-Muslims led to innumerable restrictions upon the daily life of all non-believers and aimed at the ultimate elimination from Persian soil.[9]

It wasn't until the reign of Shah Esma 'il's son Shah Abbas that non-Shiite minorities including Christians and Jews began experiencing sporadic and localized pressures to convert to Shiism. Interestingly at the beginning of his reign, Shah'Abbas did not mistreat the Jews. In the beginning he was more interested in increasing Persia's population and economic ties with the outside world by changing the policy of the state toward non-Muslims and foreigners. The Shah encouraged the immigration of foreigners – merchants, settlers and artisans from neighboring countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Turkey and Europe. This liberal and tolerant attitude made Persia the meeting place for European envoys, diplomats and merchants. Never again in history has Persia's relationship with Europe been stronger or closer.[10]

> During his campaign in Georgia he permitted them to establish a new community at Farahabad ("City of Joy") on the Caspian Sea, in recognition of their military help. The transfer of his capital from Kazvan to Isfahan brought the Jewish

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[9] Walter, J. Fischel, "The Jews of Persia, 1795-1940," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April 1950): 121.
[10] Encycolpedia Judaica, 15:788.

> community there. Shah Abbas I was the first Muslim ruler in Persian to show an interest in the Hebrew Bible. In the later part of his reign the position of Jews deteriorated, partly due to the instigations of apostates who, with the permission of the Shah, enforced discriminatory measures against them.[11]

Recently a Judeo-Persian chronicle has come to light. The *Ketab-e anusi* (The Book of a Forced Convert) by Babai ben Lotf deals primarily with the period of prosecution of Jewish Iranians between 1617 and 1662 and refers to a few other events in the reigns of Shah'Abbas I., Shah Safi I (r. 1629-1642), and Shah'Abbas II (r. 1642-1666). The *Ketab-e anusi* as well as other European sources show the Jews were compelled to abandon their religion, how their synagogues were closed and they were lead to the mosque to proclaim their new Muslim faith. After their forced conversion, they were called new Muslims and were freed from the payment of the poll tax and from the wearing of special headgear or badge.[12] The *Ketab-e anusi* is not explicit about the number of Jews who converted to Shiite Islam but the conversions seem to have been contained to the city of Isfahan and took place over a short period of time.[13] Despite the measures that the Shi'ite clergy took to supervise the Islamization, most fearlessly held fast in secret to their religion and began to live dual lives as secret Jews, repeating the phenomenon of the Marranos in Spain. Babai ben Loft also states that there was a return of full religious liberty to the Jews, including the recent converts upon the accession of Shah Safi I, the grandson of Shah Abbas. However, this freedom was short lived. From 1656-1662 there was an increase in the in the number of persecutions against all non-Shiites in Iran and

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[11] Habib Levy, Comprehensive History of The Jews of Iran, The Outset of the Diaspora (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), p. 266.
[12] Encycolpedia Judaica, 15:788.
[13] Moreen, *Esther's Children*, p. 64.

was a time of great suffering for the Jews. The Armenians who formed the wealthier merchant class was the first victims but soon the Jews and Zoroastrians were affected as well. It is believed that the instigator of this wave of persecutions was not Shah Abbas II but his vizier Mohammad Beg. He gave the Jewish community two options, either convert to Islam or leave Iran. Most the major communities chose to convert and they reminded *anusim* (forced converts who still believed in their faith) for close to six years.[14] Babai ben Loft writes in the *Ketab-e anusi* about the government of Kashan during this period.

> In the time we became *anusim*, we lost our name and our dignity. There was a vizier in our abode who feared not God – a disgraceful man. That commander's name was Shafi. That cause for shame came from Yzad.[15]

Although most Jews were forced to convert the authorities in some cities eventually had second thoughts. It was a costly step for them as the converted Jews no longer had to pay *jizya* (tax on non-Muslims).

While Shah Abbas II was in power, Iran was still a prosperous and thriving kingdom but the persecutions against stateless minorities signaled the deterioration of the entire Safavid structure. With the succession of Shah Soleyman (r. 1666-1694) the decline escalated. The *mojtabeds* (eminent scholars of Shiite law and theology) became increasingly independent of the Shah and claimed to be the only legitimate source of authority in the Shiite kingdom.

Little is known about the lives of Persian Jews between 1662 when the *Ketab-e-anusi* ends through 1721 when accounts begin to be recorded in the second Judeo-Persian

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[14] Ibid., p. 65.
[15] Levy, p. 338.

chronicles, the *Ketab-e sargozasht-e kashan dar bab-e ebri va-guyimi-ye sani* (The Book of Events in Kashan Concerning the Jews; Their second conversion) written by Babai ben Farhad, the grandson of Babai ben Lotf. The *Ketab-e sargozasht* records the trials of the Jewish community of Kasham during a very turbulent time in Iranian history. Babai ben Farhad witnessed the downfall of the Safavid dynasty, the Afghan invasion of Iran (1722), the rule of two Afghan monarchs, the invasion of northwest Iran by the Russians (1722-1725) followed by the Ottomans (1726-1730). Although the book stressed that the Jews suffered greatly as a result of numerous battles, sieges and famines, he does not single them out.

Despite the trials and tribulations the Jewish community experienced during the Safavid dynasty, the period was not a disaster for Iranian-Jewry. There were numerous Jewish communities that were able to prosper under self-governing communal structures. Surviving Judeo-Persian manuscripts have preserved enough material to indicate that Iranian Jews were aware of and involved in the culture and artistic trends of their environment. Most notably, three Jewish Iranian poets came from the Safavid era, Emrani, Aharon ben Mashiah, and Benyamin ben Misha'el. Their works display their knowledge and expertise in the literary and poetic trends of their Iranian environment as well as their desire to emulate them.[16]

> The Safavid era introduced a more pronouncedly religious dimension to the social and economic tensions present in Iranian society as a whole, which caused

[16] Moreen, *Esther's Childen*, p. 73.

additional hardships to all religious minorities, including the Jews. Nevertheless, Iranian Jew's successfully weathered these difficulties.[17]

The Zand Dynasty (1747-1787)

After the downfall of the Safavid's the Jews might have been hopeful that their situation wound improve however because of the afflictions of the preceding years and the payment of exorbitant taxes and bribes, they were left vulnerable and were living in poverty.

Many historians place the end of the Safavid dynasty at 1736, four years after Shah Tahmasp II, son of Shah Sultan Husayn was over thrown by Nadir Qoli however in his book "The comprehensive history of the Jews of Iran" Habib Levy considers 1722 to be the end of the Safavid dynasty because from that forward the country was run by general Nadir Shah. The inner corruption of the Safavid period caused it's façade to crumble during the reign of Sultan Husayb, paving the way for the Afghans to enter Iran. The Afghan military surrounded Isfahan and the city fell into the hands of the enemy. The Afghan Mahmud massacred all of the viziers and nobles of the city, 31 of the Safavid princes and the people of Isfahan. Soon after other Iranian cities fell to the Afghans and even after the death of Mahmud, his son Ashraf continued to rule from Isfahan.

Iran was thrown into turmoil. A young man named Nadir from the Asfar tribe came to the aid of King of Iran, assembling an army and after eight years of fighting, eventually drove the Afghans out. After many more military accomplishments, Nadir was eventually crowned as the King of Iran in 1736. Nadir accepted the throne on five

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[17] Ibid., p. 74.

conditions, one being the propagation of Sunni Islam in Iran and the end of Shi'i domination. The condition of Iranian Jews improved briefly during the reign of the Sunni. During Nadir's rule, he attempted to amalgamate Shiism and Sunnism, encouraging the Jews to settle in his capital city of Mashhad an important center of Shiism in Iran as well as Kalat (50 miles north of Mashhad). Nadir's Sunni faith, his mistrust of the string Shiite establishment in Mashhad and his interest in introducing a new religion with elements from all forms of religion may have led him to this decision.[18] Nadir's kindness towards the Persian Jews saved them from complete annihilation.

Over time the relocated Jewish families arrived in Kalat and Mashhad. In Kalat they faced rejection and mistreatment. Some of the families chose to not to stay and they moved on to Afghanistan where the Sunni population was more tolerant toward religious minorities. In Mashhad the Jew's bought land just inside the city in an area called *Idgah* (Feast-place). The land was purchased from the Zoroastrian community in Mashhad that had decided to leave due to prejudice treatment. Gradually that area developed into a large Jewish *mahalleh* (quarter, district or neighborhood separating the Jews from the Christians and Muslims), and the community thrived in spite of the hostile sentiments from the town's Muslim citizens. There, the Jews of Mashhad established their own public institutions, religious schools, synagogues, shops, *mikveh* (A building, room, or fixture in which this bath takes place), and cemetery.[19] As Mashhad developed into a politically and economically flourishing center, the Jewish community began to benefit from the opportunities in the city. They engaged in the production and trade of silk,

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[18] Jaleh Pirnaza, "The Anusim of Mashad", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. 118.
[19] Ibid., p. 119.

cotton yarns, textiles and other services. With the rise in British trade and imports in Mashhad, and Britain's strong interest in India, new opportunities for trade became available for Mashhad's Jewish residents outside of the city. By 1770, following a famine in Yzad more Jewish families migrated to Mashhad and later by others from Kashan and Lar. At least for a short period of time, the situation for the Jews of Persia seemed to have improved.

Shah Nadir was killed in 1747 in a conspiracy by his enemies and with Nadir's death, the military collapsed and independent governments were established throughout Iran, each claiming their city as the new capital. Eventually the Zand tribe and Qajar tribe fought each other to take rule. The Qajar's were defeated in 1750 and in 1750 Karim Khan Zand assumed control over Iran, remaining in power until 1779 making Shiraz his capital city.[20] Following Karim Khan Zand's death, Iran was thrust into Chaos and the predicament of the Jews worsened.

The Qajar Dynasty (1787-1925)

The political and religious foundations of the Qajar dynasty which ruled over Persia were essentially a continuation of those of the Safavid dynasty and the Shiite concept of the ritual uncleanliness of the nonbelievers prevailed. Upon gaining control of the country in 1787, Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar attributed his victory to the clerics and mullahs who had bitter memories of Nadir and his religious reforms. They made a comeback with the beginning of the Qajar dynasty and with the support of the royal court took control of the kingdom's administration. The Qajars gave the mullahs a free hand in state affairs, which lead to the renewal of anti-Semitism. Mohammad Taqi Majlesi, a

[20] Levy, p. 350.

leading member of the 'ulama during the reign of Shah 'Abbas II, was one of the key theologians of this period. He revived earlier forms of discrimination against the Jews first expressed in tenth-century Shiite texts.[21] Habib Levy writes:

> During the Qajar period, human rights in Iran took a precipitous dive. The various forms of torture which were adopted are indicative of the bloodthirstiness of the rulers of the day. Any courageous, dynamic statesman like Qa'im Maqam Farahani or Amir Kabir who sought the prosperity of Iran was sentenced to death. The pseudo-mullahs, with their erroneous interpretations of divine law, considered themselves absolute rulers. In towns and villages, each established his own absolute power base. Apart from the few great, distinguished clerics who put an end to this corrupt system, the country was in the hands of pseudo mullahs who vied with the Qajars in tyranny, and in order to bring the kings under their sway, they observed no distinction between religion and politics.[22]

During the 19th century, Iran's Jews were subject to an endless number of prosecutions that lasted through the 20th century. In contrast, Jews in other parts of the Ottoman Empire such as Syria and Iraq held a number of influential political and economic positions in the 19th century.

At the beginning of the 19th century approximately 30,000 Jews lived in Iran. By its end that number increased to 50,000 out of a population of nine million. They lived in large cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Hamadan, and Kermanshah. Some were bankers, tax collectors, and treasurers in the courts of the sultans and other officials, they

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[21] Janet Afary, "From Outcastes to Citizens", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Irania Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002) p. 139.
[22] Levy, p. 367.

were the exceptions. The majority of Jews held more humble positions such as shopkeepers, moneylenders, and small businessmen dealing with textiles, Jewelry, antiques, spices, and medicine. Others became entertainers, singers, musicians, dancers, or minstrels. Some Jews also became the merchants of wine, and alcohol since the Shiite community regarded these professions as *najes* (ritually impure). [23] One of the few positions of higher esteem that was open to Jews was medicine. The tradition of practicing medicine in the community went back to the medieval period. Knowledge of herbs, potions, and other medicines was passed down from father to son and from mother to daughter.[24]

Like the Safavid era, the Jews during the Qajar dynasty did not receive much relief from forced conversions and murder. In 1830, the Jews of Tabriz were massacred and that same year saw a forcible conversion of the Jews of Shiraz. One of the greatest atrocities to the Jewish community took place in 1839 in the holy city of Mashhad. According to accounts, on a religious Muslim holiday, March 26, 1839 supposedly a Jewish woman whose hand was allegedly infected with leprosy was instructed by an illiterate Muslim physician to kill a dog, cut open its belly, and soak her hand in its warm blood. Such treatments were common in Iran at the time and were practiced by both Jews and Muslims. The woman, who lived in the neighborhood of *Idgah* (Feast-place), followed the physician's instructions by luring a stray dog into her home but neither she nor her husband had the heart to kill the dog. The husband asked a Muslim man passing be their home to kill the dog. After he killed the dog, the two men argued about his fee. Once the Muslim man realized he wouldn't be paid the amount he wanted, he left the

[23] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p. 140.
[24] Ibid., p. 143.

house saying "the Jews are sacrificing dogs!"[25] News of the slaughtered dog reached the Muslim community and they were lead to believe that the dog had been killed in mockery of the day's religious processions. Over the next few days, the rumor's escalated from agitation to uncontrollable rage and an angry crowd stormed the *mahalleh* (Jewish quarter), attacking its inhabitants. The mob burned down the synagogue, destroying the Torah and other sacred objects. They then proceeded to break into and loot homes, injure their residents, steal property, and abduct some of their young girls. Nearly 50 Jews were killed on that day.[26] Seeing conversion as the only way to save their community from further violence, a number of Jewish leaders decided that all the Jews in Mashhad should convert to Islam They announced their decision and their Hebrew names were changed to Muslims ones. On their part, the Jews also had to adopt the name Allahdad (God's justice), interpreting the previous events as dispensation of God's just punishment on the community for their sins.[27]

With this forced conversion, the Jew's of Mashhad (2,400 individuals, 400 households) ceased to exist. Some families escaped Mashhad migrating to Afghanistan bringing with them their preserved Jewish heritage, Persian customs and traditions. Others went to India and Bukhara. Those who chose not to leave Iran assimilated into the existing Jewish communities in Kermanshah and Shiraz. The Jews who remained in Mashhad were known as *jadid-al-islam* (new to Islam), or *jadidis* for short. However, once the flames died down many of the Mashhadi Jews secretly observed their religious

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[25] Levy, p. 432.
[26] Pirnaza, *Esther's Children*, p. 122.
[27] Ibid.

laws and ceremonies.[28]For these forced converts, living life as dual Jews became increasingly difficult. To maintain this life, the anusim of Mashhad demonstratively practiced Islam in public while they faithfully observed traditional Judaism in the privacy of their own homes. For example, on Fridays they would go to the mosque where they publicly embraced Islam. They would receive instructions on Muslim precepts and were taught to recite Arabic prayers. That same evening behind closed doors they would secretly gather in the synagogue and hold Shabbat services. In order to demonstrate their abandonment of their Jewish faith, some were forced in public to eat foods forbidden in by Jewish law and others were watched on Yom Kippur to see if they would keep the fast. In spite of the scrutiny, they kept kosher homes. The meat bought in Muslims markets was given to beggars and traditional kosher slaughtering was performed at night in their homes and the meat was distributed to other houses in secret. Marriage customs were also affected. To keep their daughters from marrying Muslim suitors, parents would give their daughters away in marriage at a very young age to another *Jadidi* family. They would also have two marriage ceremonies, first an Islamic ceremony followed by a secret Jewish ceremony a few days later. As a community they existed as Muslims but they survived as Jews.[29]

Western Influence in Persia

By the late 19th century, the financial efforts of the Muslim clerical establishment and the dynasties under their influence had succeeded in decimating non-Shiite communities in terms of population, wealth, culture, and purpose. While western

[28] Levy, p. 430.
[29] Pirnaza, *Esther's Children,* p.131.

missionaries and the newly emerging Baha'i faith were each struggling to introduce liberalism and modernism in this oppressive atmosphere. Iran's Jewish population, estimated between thirty and forty thousand was now on the brink of extinction.

During the years when the Jews of Iran were declining under persecution, Jews in Europe were making remarkable advances after the French Revolution. From this time rose great men, "leaders whose credo was the protection of the Jews throughout the world" (Levy)[30]. Following an international effort to save Syrian Jews from the consequences of a blood libel in 1840, a new movement began, particularly among French Jews to save international Jewry from similar situations in the future.[31] The establishment of the Alliance Israelite universal (Universal Israelite Alliance), formed in Paris in 1860 and the plight of the Jews of Persia became a great concern for them. In 1865 Mullah Rabbi Ishaq, the spiritual leader of Tehran, wrote a letter to the Alliance in France:

> Let us, they said, present before you our complaints. You will not suffer that your brethren, your flesh, your blood perish in a frightful misery, victims of incessant persecutions. We are scorned by our enemies, who see us without protection, and who may do with us as they please; there is not a day, not an hour, not a moment that passes that does not lead us to a new calamity; our life, our fortune, all that we most cherish is subjected to the most abhorrent outrages, worse than slavery...A Muslim who kills an Israelite is not brought to justice, and If the testimony of a Muslim who kills an Israelite is not brought to justice, and if the

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[30] Levy, p. 451.

[31] Faryar Nikbakht, "As with Moses in Egypt, Alliance Israelite Universelle Schools in Iran", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Irania Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p.199.

testimony of a Muslim would prove the crime, the most that could happen is the murderer would be required to pay a fine.[32]

After receiving this letter and hearing that the leader of the Jewish community in Iran might be executed, Sir Moses Montefiore decided to leave for Persia and to obtain from the Shah am order of safety for the persecuted Jews. However, he was dissuaded to go by the British Foreign Office because of his young age and the high risk to his life.

Jewish education in the 19th century was only made available to boys and was limited only to the study of Hebrew, Torah, and the prayers of the home and local Rabbi's. In general, Persian Jews were illiterate but in comparison to most Muslims who were illiterate in Persian, they had a higher education. Most Jews learned from their fathers or merchants the traditional Iranian accounting and notating system called *siaq*. Some were able to teach this system to themselves as children while working for merchants or doctors. The few modern schools that opened in the late 19th century were not open to Jews and minorities. However, toward the end of the 19th century European and American missionaries opened schools and hospitals attracting many Jews. Many of these Jews became doctors in American hospitals, and most of them converted to Christianity.[33]

In the first half of 1873, Naser al-Din Shah made a trip to Europe in an effort to come across as a tolerant and progressive monarch. The Alliance Israelite Universelle seized this opportunity and the Anglo-Jewish Association organized a movement intended to impress the Shah with the importance and influence of European Jewry and to

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[32] Levy, p. 453.
[33] Nikbakht, *Esther's Children*, p. 200.

stress their equality and emancipation on all European countries and their desire to see an improvement in the condition of the Jews of Persia.[34]

Jewish committees were formed in each European city that the Shah visited to seek the improvement of the status and living condition of the Iranian Jews. These demonstrations were carried out in Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, London, Paris, Vienna, and even Rome, which was not on the King's itinerary. There, the Jewish community sent a detailed letter to the King asking that he guarantee the liberty if Iranian Jews and an end to their persecution. On July 12, 1873, the Jewish industrialist Barron Rothschild and the French diplomat Adolph Cremieux, president of the Alliance Israelite Universelle met with the Shah reminding him of the Cyrus declaration towards the Jews of Palestine in Babylonia and gave a passionate and detailed account of the atrocities presently being committed against Iranian Jews. To improve their situation, they asked the Shah to allow the formation of Alliance schools in Iran.[35] The Shah tried to argue that the treatment of the Jews in Persia was not so terrible but he did approve of the formation of the Alliance schools on the country. The Shah also wrote an amusing account of this meeting in his diary:

> The well known Rothschild, likewise a Jew, who is extraordinarily wealthy, came for an audience; and in the ensuing conversation he defended the cause of the Jews of Iran, and pleaded that they might be given rest. I said to him: "I have heard that you, brother, possess1,000 Kurur of money. I think the best thing would be to give 80 Kurur to some state, large or small, in exchange for a province (*mamlekat*) in which to gather the Jews of the whole world. You

[34] Encyclopedia Judaica, 15:790.
[35] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p. 151-152.

yourself would be their chief and rule them all peacefully, so that they would no longer be scattered and driven about."... We laughed heartily, but he made no reply, and I assured him I would protect all the foreign nationalities in Iran.[36]

Once the Shah's returned to Iran, he transferred the responsibility for the affairs of Jews to the Foreign Ministry. Another edict in 1880 banned Muslim clerics and judges from seizing land and property of deceased Jews. In 1983, some anti-Jewish laws were abolished in Tehran, such as the right of Jewish converts to Islam to claim their entire family inheritance.

Despite all the well-meaning promises of the Shah, the central government in Persia failed to prevent new outbreaks of hostilities against the Jews, the promised schools were not established and periodic killings of Jews continued in many cities. The Alliance once again felt the need to intervene on the behalf of Persian Jews and on the Shah's second visit to Europe in 1889, Nasir al-Din Shah met with another delegation of English Jews at Buckingham palace, led by Albert Sassoon. The members of the committee included Barron Rothschild, Sir G. Goldsmid and Sebag Montefiore. In this meeting, the main topic of conversation was the establishment of Jewish schools in Iran.[37]

Finally, fifteen years later, on April 15, 1898, during the reign of Mozaffar al-Din Shah (r.1896-1907) the Alliance was able to open its first school in Tehran with the assurance that AIU schools would be under the protection of the French and British consulates in Iran. Soon other Alliance schools were established in major Jewish community centers throughout Iran. By 1908, there were 11 Jewish schools in Iran with

[36] Afary, *Esther's children*, p. 152.
[37] Levy, p. 464.

2,225 students.[38] The Alliance may have saved countless Jewish lives, particularly in the tumultuous decades early in the 20th century. In some cases where Jews were forced to wear a distinctive humiliating patch in public, Alliance Israelite succeeded in replacing it with the honorable Alliance medallion, which instead gave its students a respected status on the street.[39] One of AIU greatest achievements in the establishing these schools was changing the perception that only boys should be educated. Through extracurricular activities, such as extensive community work and the production of student plays that ridiculed tradition arranged marriages (traditionally girls were married between the ages of 9 and 13), the Alliance successfully brought about a change in Persian tradition. Within a few years of the schools opening, there were an equal number of male and female students enrolled in the schools. Not only were young boys and girls encouraged to learn, but adults too were invited to study at evening adult literacy classes. One hundred fifty people were registered for the school's first adult session.[40]

Under Shah Muzaffar- al-Din a definite improvement in the destiny of Persian Jews took place in connection with the constitutional movement, which had far reaching consequences for all religious groups in Persia. His decree establishing constitutionalism was the beginning of the Iranian peoples struggle for freedom.[41]

This revolution took place as a result of both internal and external influences. The country's expanded economic ties with the West, the exposure of merchants, politicians, and students to European liberalism and parliamentary democracy, and the

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[38] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p.1 54.
[39] Nikbakht, *Esther's Children*, p. 203.
[40] Levy, p. 469.
[41] Ibid., p. 473.

growth of religious reform movements within Persia formed these radical changes.[42] For Persian Jews the constitutional movement meant a step forward toward their emancipation and equality. The dualism in legislation between the religious law and civil law was abolished as were the discriminatory and humiliating medieval restrictions against the Jews.[43]

In the summer on 1906, constitutionalists met in a shrine in Qom, a major religious center and at the garden of the British Legation in Tehran. As a result of these discussions, the earlier vague demands for a House of Justice were replaced with a call for a National Consultative parliament. Finally, on August 15, 1906, the constitutionalists received a proclamation from the King that specifically called for the formation of a National Consultative. Jewish political activists, along with other minorities, actively participated in the movement. They were instrumental in forming the first multiethnic Secret Society of 1905, which began the debate on political change. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and reformist Muslims fought hard in the ranks of the constitutionalists to form a National Consultative Assembly instead of an Islamic *Majlis* (a place of sitting" used to describe various types of formal legislative assemblies), as demanded by the religious hierarchy. Along with other religious minorities they succeeded in their efforts to ratify laws that gave equality to Muslim and non-Muslim (male) citizens and defined a new concept of citizenship not based on religious and ethnic identity. The 1906 constitution recognized Jews as a religious minority and allocated a seat in the Iranian parliament to a representative elected by the country's Jewish

[42] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p. 160.
[43] Encyclopedia Judaica, 15:790.

community. Iran's newfound democracy was therefore based on the principal of the coexistence of multiple religions within one nation.[44]

Unfortunately for the country, three months after the parliament convened Shah Muzaffar- al-Din died, and under the new ruler, Shah Muhammad Ali (r. 1907-1909), the constitutional movement quickly disappointed the high hopes of equality between the Muslim and minority communities in Persia.[45] By 1910, the public had become disillusioned with the constitutionalist who had done little to improve the social conditions of its citizens. Conservative and anti-constitutional forces regained power in some quarters and unleashed mob violence. *Mahallehs* in the provinces of Kurdistan, Shiraz, and Kerman were pillaged. Many people were killed and many more lost all their possessions.[46] Despite these setbacks, the first steps for the equal rights of recognized non-Muslims were sanctioned and a democratic party was established.

Russia did not support Persia's liberal movement fearing the growth of democracy in Iran would cause Russia to lose its sphere of influence in that region.

> Fortune was on the side of Russia in this matter, and Muhammad Ali Mirza Qajar-a duplicitous and mendacious man-acceded to the throne. He swore by the Quran before the representatives of the nation that he would remain faithful to constitutionalism, but he secretly harbored other designs. Muhammad Ali Shah was a Russian stooge. His Russian tutor, Shapshal, had instructed him since his youth…[47]

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[44] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p.164.
[45] Encyclopedia Judaica, p.790.
[46] Afary, *Esther's Children*, p. 174.
[47] Levy, p. 474.

The Shah who reigned from 1907-1909 conspired with Iran's enemies from the outset of his reign and before long the Islamic clerics the sharply divided. In 1907 Mohammad Ali dissolved the Iranian parliament/National assembly and declared the Constitution abolished because it was contrary to Islamic law and he bombarded the *Majles* with the military and political support of Russia and Britain. A rebellion broke out in Tabriz in protest of the Shah's actions and after nearly one year of fighting a group in Isfahan rose against the government in armed rebellion. Tehran was liberated and Muhammad Ali Shah fled to the Russian embassy. His 12 year old son Amad was chosen to succeed him but due to his young age and older patriarch of the Qajar clan was chosen to minister over him. Ahmad Shah held the throne until 1925.[48]

During WWI, an Iranian officer in the Cossack Brigade (an elite military unit in the armed forces of Persia) by the name of Reza Khan entered the arena of Iranian politics. In 1921 with the help of the sensationalist journalist, Sayyid Ziya al-Din Tabataba'I, he staged a successful coup and seized the command of the Iranian armed forces. His remarkable success as minister of war and prime minister from 1921-1925 gained him the army's loyalty and the people confidence. In 1925, a constitutional convention disposed of Ahmad Shah, the last of the Qajars, and granted the throne to Reza Shah Pahlavi.[49]

The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979)

The political and social conditions of Persian Jews were fundamentally changed with Reza Khan Pahlavi's (r. 1925-1941) ascent to the throne and the establishment of

[48] Levy, p. 475.
[49] Ibid., p. 477.

the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. The two decades of Reza Shahs rule were marked by impressive stability, authoritarian rule, and modernization. He aspired to turn Persia into a strong nation-state in a secular and western mode, making nationalism rather than faith the cohesive element of the Persian people. His goals allowed greater freedom for religious minorities and brought much relief to the Jews as well as other non-Muslims.[50] The social and economic situation of the Jews began to improve. All discriminatory laws and decrees were repealed. Jews and members of other religious minorities could join the army, enroll in government schools, and live wherever they wanted. The ghettos (*mahalleh*) were a thing of the past. They no longer had to pay a *jeziyeh* (poll tax) and they were able to find jobs at government offices.

One decree by Reza Shah ordered the Sunni Muslim population to wear European-style hats instead of their traditional fezzes (flat-topped conical red hat with a black tassel on top). Most of the Sunni obeyed without protest; a minority, led by Muslim clergy, rioted, and several were killed. The government next abolished all feudal titles and began a long-range program for the economic modernization of the country. Early in 1936 the shah's wife and daughters appeared in public without veils, violating an ancient national tradition. Thereafter, most Persian women gradually stopped wearing their veils (*chador*) and revisions benefiting women were made to the divorce law.

Jews wanted to integrate themselves into Persian society at all costs and identify with the symbols of secular nationalism, but they also wanted to remain Jewish. They loved Persian poetry and literature, appreciated Persian music and celebrated national

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[50] David Manashri, "The Pahlavi Monarcy and the Islamic Revolution", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. 386.

holidays with genuine joy. They abandoned their Jewish names for Persian names and glorified Iran's pre-Islamic past. The secular nationalist tendency, at least from the standpoint of historical and cultural consciousness, seemed to have paved the way for reconciliation between the Jews and the Persian people.[51]

Toward the end of Reza Shah's reign, which coincided with WWII (1939-1945), he was drawn toward Nazi Germany. "Like some other Germanophilles, he was spellbound by Germany's lightning-fast victories".[52] The rise of the Nazi party in Germany and the growing Iranian-German ties in the 1930's led to outbursts of anti-Semitism in Iran. Unlike previous religious motivated prejudice, this new wave was ethno-national in its character. This time people started seeing themselves as "superior Aryans" and "genuine Persians". One article in a local paper blamed Jews for all the miseries of mankind. It termed Jews money-grubbing and selfish people and attacked Jewish merchants.[53]

Persia's name changed Internationally in 1935. The suggestion for the name change from Persia to Iran is said to have come from the Persian ambassador to Germany, who was a Nazi sympathizer. Apparently his Nazi friends persuaded the Persian ambassador that Persia would be better off as an ally of Nazi Germany. Moreover, he became convinced that the country should be called by its Persian name, Iran, in Western languages. This was to signal a new beginning and bring home to the world the new era in Iranian history, one that would emphasize the Aryan aspect of its

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[51] http://www.projetaladin.org/en/muslims-and-jews/muslims-and-jews-in-history/the-jews-of-iran.html, (accessed on October 11, 2009).
[52] Levy, p. 479.
[53] Manashri, *Esther's Children*, p. 386.

people.[54] Another source, the Iran chamber of congress gives another reason for the name change and does not attribute it to German influence:

> In 1935 by the direct order of Reza Shah the office of foreign affairs requested the foreign embassies and missions in Tehran that the country should be called Iran and not Persia any more. As Persia chauvinistically bore the name of one Iranian ethnical group and not all of them and the name of Iran was always called by all inhabitants of the country for thousands of years.[55]

Given Iran's political ties with Germany, the Soviet Union and Britain could no longer tolerate Iran's friendship with the Germans. The Allies needed to provide aid to the Soviet army that was fighting the Nazi's and wanted to use a route through Iran. Therefore in 1941 the Soviet Union and Britain warned Reza Shah that he was to rescind the concessions he granted the Germans and while maintaining Iranian Independence, allow the allies to use the trans-Iranian railroad as well as other roads. When the Shah refused they attacked Iran and in September 1941 exiled Reza Shah to Johannesburg and accepted his son Mohammad Reza Shah as King.[56]

Mohammad Reza Shah was crowned in the midst of a world war and was king of Iran a total of 38 years, from 1941-1979. Starting out as a figurehead under the thumbs of local power groups and super-powers, the Shah went on to make himself an absolute monarch. The year's of his rule was a period of impressive improvement in the life of Iran's Jews, a period which reached its peak from 1963 to1979 – The Golden era of Iranian Jewry. During this period, Jews enjoyed almost total cultural and religious

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[54] http://www.payvand.com/news/04/dec/1153.html, (accessed on October 11, 2009)
[55] http://www.iranchamber.com/history/pahlavi/pahlavi.php, (accessed on October 11, 2009).
[56] Levy, p.479.

autonomy, unprecedented economic progress and political right equaling their Muslim neighbors. Several factors lead to this change such as modernization, the formation of a strong and centralized government, strengthening ties with the West, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the power of World Jewry in media, finance and politics.[57]

Despite the improvement in the status of Iranian Jews, that status was interrupted by periods of instability and growing difficulties. Anti-Jewish propaganda became even more evident following the establishment of Israel in the early 1950's and anti-Semitic literature, lead by Khomeini in the late 60's continued to be published. From 1948–1953, about one-third of Iranian Jews, most of them poor, immigrated to Israel. David Littman puts the total figure of emigrants to Israel in 1948-1978 at 70,000.[58]

On the positive end of the spectrum several educational organizations (*Otzar ha torah, Ort*) and international organizations were active in Iran. Ties with Israeli agencies were also strengthened. Numerous publications were issued and new Jewish organizations were active. David Manashri writes about a two year period when he lived and conducted research in Tehran:

> I witnessed a Jewish community that was free, educated, and wealthy. Their part in economic, scientific, and professional life was disproportionate to their share in society (more the 80,000 Jews from a total of less than 40 million). In per capita terms, they may well have been one of the richest Jewish communities worldwide, with the young generation being also highly educated. They were over represented among the country's student population and university faculty body,

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[57] Manashri, *Esther's Children*, p. 386-389.
[58] http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Persian_Jews, (accessed on October 12, 2009).

among medical doctors and other professionals. Although there were people of low income among them, the vast majority could be defined as middle class, or upper middle class. Some became very rich, taking full advantage of the freedom granted to them, the reform programs, and the growing oil income. There were Jewish day schools, active social and cultural organizations, and some thirty synagogues in Tehran alone. There were numerous Hebrew classes, lectures, seminars, and various other cultural activities. Israeli's were invited to lecture, and contributions for Israel were solicited. They organized conventions, lectures, and tours, and maintained close contact with the Israeli embassy, the Jewish Agency, and Jewish organizations in the West.[59]

The new realities also presented some challenges to the community. The exit from the *mahalleh* made it more difficult for Jewish schools and synagogues to function and for the community to expand its activities. On many occasion Jews in small towns or on the bazaars were threatened, insulted or beaten up but considering their past, they gained unprecedented security and progress.[60]

Despite growing prosperity during the 1970s, owing to greatly increased oil revenues, opposition to the shah was widespread, fanned mainly by conservative religious leaders. The shah's responses to such opposition were increasingly repressive, and he relied heavily on his secret police, the *Savak*, which was much dreaded for its harsh methods. In the late 1970s there were antigovernment demonstrations, both in Iran and abroad, over alleged human rights violations, most of which could be traced to the *Savak*. In 1978, riots in several Iranian cities were led by the conservative Shiite

[59] Manashri, *Esther's Children*, p. 395.
[60] Ibid.

Muslims, who wanted the nation governed by Islamic law. They were directed-from his refuge in France-by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a revered Muslim clergyman and long-time rival of the Pahlavi regime, who had been exiled in 1963. By late autumn the country was virtually in a state of civil war, and in January 1979 the Ayatollah's followers forced the shah to flee abroad, ending his 37-year reign. Shortly afterward, Khomeini returned to Iran to assume power.

When the revolution broke out, Israel-Iran relations and the diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation between the countries were noticeably strong. Consequently the situation of the Jews became dangerous, because of the anti-Zionist attitude and character of the revolution. The Jews of Iran were accused of being the supporters of the Shah, Israel, the Mossad, the CIA and the U.S. All were defined as "Satan." A few wealthy Jews, among them the former head of the Jewish Community of Teheran, Habib Elghanian, were tried by the revolutionary courts and sentenced to death on May 9, 1979. Jewish-owned property worth at least one billion dollars was confiscated by the regime. This alarming situation caused many Jews to leave Iran.[61]

With the change of the regime and Khomeini 's rise to power, about three-quarters of Iran's 80,000 Jews left. Many immigrated to Israel and the United States, but a part preferred to settle in European countries. The official statistics of Israel show that in 2001 there were 135,200 Jews who were considered Iranian either as *olim* or as individuals one of whose parents was Iranian-Jewish.[62] Those who remained kept a low profile and demonstratively shifted their loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Khomeini attacked Israel, Zionism, and world Jewry. But he also tried to ease the anxieties of Iran's Jewish

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[61] "Iran" in Encyclopedia Judaica, 10:13.
[62] Ibid., 10:12.

community by issuing a fatwa saying the Jews are people of the book and are to be protected and permitted freedom of religion. He also said that the Iranian government differentiates between Iranian Jews and the Zionist government of Israel.

The Islamization of the country has brought about strict control over Jewish educational institutions. Before the revolution, there were 20 Jewish schools functioning throughout the country. In recent years, most of these have been closed down. In the remaining schools, Jewish principals have been replaced by Muslim ones. In Teheran there are still three schools in which Jewish pupils constitute a majority. The curriculum is Islamic, and Persian is forbidden as the language of instruction for Jewish studies. Special Hebrew lessons are conducted on Fridays by the Orthodox *Otzar ha torah* agency, which is responsible for Jewish religious education. Saturday is no longer officially recognized as the Jewish Sabbath, and Jewish pupils are compelled to attend school on that day. There are three synagogues in Teheran, but since 1994, there has been no rabbi in Iran, and the bet din does not function. [63]

Persian Jews outside of Iran

It is estimated that during the first 10 years of the Islamic regime about 60,000 Jews left Iran; the rest, some 20,000, remained in Teheran, Shiraz, Isfahan, and other provincial cities. Of the 60,000 Jews who emigrated, about 35,000 preferred to immigrate to the U.S.; some 20,000 left for Israel, and the remaining 5,000 chose to live in Europe, mainly in England, France, Germany, Italy, or Switzerland. Of the 35,000 Iranian Jews living in the U.S. around 25,000 live in California, of whom about 20,000 live in Los Angeles; 8,000 Iranian Jews live in the city of New York and on Long Island, mainly in

[63] http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org, (accessed on October 15, 2009).

Great Neck Long Island and the remaining 2,000 live in other cities, mainly in Boston, Baltimore, Washington, Detroit, or Chicago.[64] In every city abroad, the Jews of Iran tried to establish themselves in their own newly founded organizations and synagogues. In Los Angeles alone, they set up more than 40 organizations, 10 synagogues, about 6 magazines, and one television station. The Iranian Jewish community in the U.S. is, for the most part, well educated and financially stable. And education is one of the strongest values stressed by the Iranian Jewish community.

The Iranian Jews escaped to America because they wanted a life of economic and religious freedom. Although many Iranian Jews came here with little or no financial capital, they did come with human capital and a determination to succeed. Eighty-five percent of Iranian Jews are self-employed; their knowledge of business and their extreme work ethic have made their businesses extremely successful in Los Angeles and New York. Many of the top companies, primarily in the fields of technology, sales, and administrative support, belong to Iranian Jews. However, I believe the religious freedom available outside of Iran is highly valued by Iranian Jews, even more than economic freedom.

Los Angeles is home to the largest concentration of Iranian's outside of Iran. In Iran, Jewish religious expression was a large aspect of life. They consider themselves Jewish before they are Iranian or American. Even after coming to Los Angeles, 90 percent of Iranian Jews maintain their pre-immigration levels of religious observance.[65]

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[64] http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org , (accessed on October 15, 2009).
[65] Shoshanah Feher, , "From the Rivers of Babylon to the Valleys of Los Angeles: The Exodus and Adaptation of Iranian Jews", in Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious communities and the New Immigration, edited by R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 71.

Judaism is what defines Iranian Jews. Iranians assert that Judaism is what kept them alive in an anti-Semitic country and it is what will maintain their identity in a pluralistic country. Therefore, it is a top priority for Iranian parents to send their children to religious day schools. In Los Angeles, over half of the students at Ashkenazi Jewish day schools are Iranian children. This new generation having grown up in religious day schools is becoming more religiously observant than their parents.[66]

This leads me to believe that religion is one of the most important symbols of identity used by the Persian Jewish minority in Iran to preserve self awareness and group cohesion and possibly one of the main reasons as to why the Jewish community survived despite endless years of persecution. However, like other immigrant groups coming to the United States, Iranian Jews have had to juggle their religious and national identities.[67]

In Many ways the Iranian Jewish experience is unique among Jewish immigrants to the United States. Unlike many other Jewish groups, Iranians did not receive a warm reception both from the Jewish Ashkenazi community or the larger American community. The Iranian Jews learned that they had very little in common with American Jews. Because the Jewish standard in North America is predominately the German-based Ashkenazi one, that is the type of Judaism that has come to be identified as normative in ritual and cultural aspects.[68] But Iranian Jews do not share the Ashkenazi culture common to the majority of American Jews, nor do they share the Iberian experience of the much smaller Sephardic minority. One additional factor contributing to the segregation of the community is that when other Jewish immigrants came to the United

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[66] Saba Soomekh, "Tehrangeles: Capital, Culture, and Faith among Iranian Jews". (UC Santa Barbara, 2003), p.4.
[67] Feher, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious communities and the New Immigration*, p.72
[68] Ibid., p.73.

States, they had no intention of returning to their homelands. Iranian Jews on the other hand frequently had one eye on this country and the other eye back on Iran. Many believed that their time in the United States was going to only be a temporary refuge from the Islamic fundamentalism that had taken over Iran. Despite all of the persecution and forced conversions they went through they still rejected the possibility of assimilation because they were acculturated and profoundly attached to their homeland. This helps explain why the Iranian community in the United States became so insular and segregated. Many older members of the Persian community only go to Persian restaurants, Persian kosher bakeries, Doctors, mechanics, etc. and have never learned to speak English. As the older generation passes it will be interesting to see how the younger generation of Persian American Jews continues to honor their heritage while assimilating into American society.

Chapter Two

The Culture and Traditions of Persian Jews in Iran

The word culture has many different meanings for different people. For some it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns. The Miriam Webster online dictionary defines culture as:

> The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time as well the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.[69]

Since Cyrus the Great occupied Babylon, Jews have been a visible presence in Iran despite the varying degrees of tolerance and succession of rulers and dynasties have shown toward them. Throughout this period they have contributed to the history and culture of Iran and World Jewry in a multitude of capacities ranging from government, medicine, theology, music, literature, and wine making. In Iran, religion and culture were bound up into a single formulation where all facets of life were authorized and regulated by religious boundaries. The constraints of these boundaries were determined by Islamic Shiite beliefs causing the Jewish minority population to reflect the values of this

[69] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture (accessed on Dec. 2, 2009).

dominant society, and often evolve as a consequence of historical events. In looking specifically at music and culture it is sometimes hard to discern weather the Jews borrowed from Muslim tradition or if Islamic tradition was influenced by the Jews.

Though Jews from every political, legal, social, and cultural background have much of the same belief system, each community has its own specific culture. At its core, their beliefs are founded in Torah law, while cultural values are dependent on their specific environmental factors. Iranian Jewish rituals and ceremonies are a fusion of Jewish law with Iranian culture.[70] Festivities surrounding birth, circumcision, engagement and marriage as well as somber rituals such as burial and mourning have evolved into defined and sometimes spontaneous celebrations. In addition to these naturally occurring life events, the Persian Jewish communities social customs and interaction, food, dress, ritual, music and dance enhance their uniqueness and continues to be the way the community defines and distinguishes itself.

Social and Family Life

As previously mentioned, in Iran most Jews traditionally lived in quarters called *mahalles*. These *mahalles* were not walled like European ghettos but instead neighborhoods within the city. The houses in the *mahalles* stood next to each other with connected roofs and in the city of Mashhad Jewish homes were connected by doors in the basement that would allow residents to gather in secret for religious ceremonies or to

[70] Leah R. Baer, "Life's Events", in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p.313.

escape when they were attacked.[71] These close quarters helped to make the interactions and socialization between the Jews more comfortable and frequent.

The Persians are extremely social people. They are vivacious and entertaining, fond of jokes, storytelling and banter. Though social interactions between men and women are not permitted by Muslim society, social gatherings and feasting remains one of the highlights of the Persian community.[72] Men visit with men, women with women. The Persians are very polite people and they have elaborate rules of etiquette, and many set phrases and compliments suitable for every occasion. Time is of little value and a simple social call can last for three or four hours.

Family in the center the Persian community and for the Jews it is no different. Family ties have always been strong and even into the twentieth century in was not unusual to see three generations of family living together in the same household. Despite restrictions that have kept Persian Jews separate from the larger society, over the centuries they have adopted many Iranian traditions. For example, it is customary to visit friends and relatives for the *Nowruz* (the Iranian New Year), which is the first day of spring. It is also customary to sprout wheat or grain as a symbol of prosperity and the regeneration of vegetation. Passover is celebrated relatively close to *Nowruz* and the Jews would visit each other's homes and sprout grains for this holiday. When Passover ends, Jews go out for a picnic just as other Iranians do on the thirteenth day of the New

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[71] Haideh Sahim, "Iran and Afghanistan", in The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times, edited by Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003,) p. 379.
[72] Rev. S.G Wilson. Persian life and Customs (New York: AMS Press, 1973), p. 243.

Year. Since 1950, the Jewish community in Iran has also celebrated *Nowruz* as a national holiday. [73]

Cuisine

For centuries, the food in Iran has been a symbol of the culture, their beliefs, and their tradition. For the Persian Jewish community living in Iran, food symbolizes more than just sustenance. The meal was the central component in keeping tradition, family and the community together especially living in a Muslim society. Gatherings were used as a means to socialize and the food was the center of these social events. For the host, the more diverse the food was, the higher their status was in society; besides being considered a Mitzvah to invite someone into your home for a meal[74] it was also used as a way to display the culinary skills of the host's wife.

In ancient times, Iran was considered to have the most complex and interesting food.[75] Iran is geographically large and widespread with many ethnic groups and religions and each region has its own culinary traditions and flavors. All these components in addition to the Jews relocating throughout the different areas of Iran and surrounding countries bringing with them their own flavors has played a large role on the Persian Jewish Kitchen. Throughout their travels, the Jews learned and gathered information about the different varieties of foods in each specific area creating diverse recipes. It is not uncommon to find meat, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and raisins all combined into one dish. Even though there are contradictions in the flavors of the food such as

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[73] Sahim, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. p. 380.
[74] Esther Shkalim,"Hospitality and Cuisine" in Iran, edited by Haim Saadoun (Tel Aviv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005), p. 241.
[75] Ibid., pg. 241.

sweet and sour, Persian cooking has found a way to combine these unique flavors in a harmonious way. Sour pomegranates, unripe grapes, and Persian limes are commonly used to create the sour taste and dried fruit is added to provide the sweetness and balance the flavors.

The Persian diet generally consists of bread, cheese, yogurt, eggs, vegetables, raisins, nuts, dried fruits, fresh fruits, fish, meat and herbs. Unlike other areas in the Mideast, Persians do not like peppery or highly garlicky food and instead like to accent their foods with an abundance of herbs such as tarragon, cilantro, mint, chives, and parsley. Some Iranian foods are flavored with turmeric, but the most loved spice is saffron, used in numerous rice dishes and meat marinades. Saffron, rose water, honey and pistachios are also widely used in Persian sweets.[76]

Those in the middle and upper classes also ate a great variety of *dolmas* (grape leaves stuffed with a mixture of meat, rice, herbs, preserves, sauces and stews). Rice is also a large and important component of the Persian diet and was often prepared with meat, herbs, vegetables and spices. The most popular dishes are *Chelow-Kabab* (broiled rice and roasted meat), *Abgousht* (lamb-meat broth mixed with grains, potatoes and spices), and *Fessenjan* (a stew of chicken mixed with walnuts, pomegranate paste and eaten with rice).[77] Yogurt was often used in combination with meat, but most of the Jews in Iran kept a kosher kitchen. They separated meat and dairy and though it was much more expensive, they ate only kosher meat. One other difference between Persian Jewish cooking and their non-Jewish neighbors is in the type of oil used in the food. Most non-

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[76] Faye Levy, Feast from the Mideast 250 sun-drenched dishes from the lands of the Bible (New York: Harper Collins Press, 2003), p. 6.
[77] Mukesh Kumar Sinham, The Persian World: Understanding People, Polity and Life in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan (Shandra, Delhi: Nagri Printers, 2005), p. 51.

Jews cooked with animal fat including pork fat while Persian Jews used only vegetable oil for reasons of kashrut.[78] Unfortunately there was a Muslim prohibition (a custom that continued into the 20th century) stating that Jews visiting in the house of a Muslim were not allowed to touch anything, lest they defile it. Because of this prohibition, many Muslim shopkeepers took advantage of this restriction by not allowing Jews to touch fruits and vegetables when shopping, selling them their rotten produce.[79]

Clothing

Very little is known about the clothing of the Jews of Iran in ancient times, however based on ancient Jewish religious texts "it can be assumed that Jews at the courts – be they queens, like Esther or the historical Shushandokht, or advisors, like Mordecai or Daniel – dressed as other courtiers did, with the exception of any religious item of clothing or religious symbol that they may have chosen to wear."[80] After the establishment of Islam during the 7th century, Jews and other minorities were considered second class citizens and in order to differentiate them from Muslims, demeaning dress codes were established to distinguish these religious minorities.[81] Under the order of Umar ben Khattab (r. 634-644), Jews were permitted to wear only clothing of a specific color and in 807 ruler Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-807), imposed an order forcing Christians to wear a blue patch, and then a yellow patch for the Jews making

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[78] Esther Shkalim,"Dress" in Iran, edited by Haim Saadoun (Tel Aviv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005), p. 232.
[79] Sahim, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in modern times*, p. 371.
[80] Haideh Sahim, "Clothing and Makeup" in Esther's Children, a portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. 177.
[81] Shkalim, *Iran,* p. 233.

these minorities targets of discrimination.[82] The restrictions on minorities became stricter during the reign of Caliph Motavakkel (r. 847-861) when he ordered Jews to wear a specific yellow outfit but the peak of these degrading restrictions took place under the reign of Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (r. 996-1021) when he decreed that the Jews wear a picture of a calf around their necks. In 1091, in addition to wearing the yellow patch, Jewish women were also ordered to wear mismatched shoes of different colors. However, in subsequent years the enforcement of these laws was only enforced periodically and depended on the local governors and rulers.[83] Some of the wealthier Jews were able to pay a bribe (*Jezah*) to the local authorities in order to allow them to dress like the Muslims and avoid discrimination.[84]

After the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century, religious zeal reached new heights and the persecution of Jews heightened. The rules regarding minority (*Najes*) dress became stricter yet the peak of these restrictions took place under the reign of Shah Abbas I.[85] Beside's using the dress codes as a way to distinguish Muslims from Jews it was also a way to limit contact between them, buy the main purpose was to humiliate Jews.[86] Men were not allowed to wear turbans like the Muslims but instead a hat of eleven folds, each of a different color with three *zars* (3 ½ yards) of red cloth wrapped around it and women were required to sew bells onto the bottom of their *chadors* (large veil that covered the whole body) to warn Muslims of their arrival.[87] The rules regarding minority (*Najes*) dress became stricter and the restrictions reached its

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[82] Sahim, *Esther's Children*, p. 177.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Shkalim, *Iran*, p. 234.
[85] Ibid., p. 235.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Sahim, *Esther's Children*, p. 178.

height under the reign of Shah Abbas II.[88] In addition to all of the previously mentioned ordinances, Jews were not allowed to wear socks, and they had to wear mismatched shoes. They were not allowed to wear nice clothing and the men were required to shave their heads. Jewish women were not allowed to cover their faces (this was considered a sign of looseness) and their *chador* had to be of two different colors.[89]

According to photos taken during the nineteenth century, it does not appear that there were additional clothing rules or restrictions and the Jews were not distinguishable from the Muslins. In the photos, Jewish men were wearing clothing similar to Muslim men of the same status. Photos of Jewish women during the mid- 19th century were almost non-existent but like the men but we can assume that they dressed in a similar fashion to Muslim women. [90] In general, the quality of the fabric used for clothing depended on the wealth of the wearer. Jackets and scarves were embroidered with gold and were very popular among Jews that could afford them as they were a symbol of portable wealth. For women, Jewelry and clothing embroidered in gold was considered a symbol of the love and interest of a husband. Because women are not entitled to an inheritance, these items signified a woman's wealth and the only thing she could keep incase of divorce or a husband's death. For these reasons, clothing and Jewels were coveted and women did not hesitate to display what they had acquired. However these items were not worn on the street for fear of being noticed and attacked by Muslims.[91]

Once again in 1892, by the instigation of a minor clergyman, particular rules of distinguishing clothing were once again established and regulations such as a red

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[88] Shkalim, *Iran*, p. 235.
[89] Sahim, *Esther's Children*, p. 178.
[90] Ibid., p. 182.
[91] Ibid., p. 188-189.

"Jewish" patch were enforced. In addition, Jews were ordered not to wear socks and to wear torn clothing as well as outwear of a special color. Enforcement of the red patch remained until 1892, when the head of the Alliance Israelite Universelle school in Tehran negotiated with the clergy and Iranian authorities and substituted the patch for a pin bearing the schools emblem. Students of the school also wore a uniform based on European clothing styles. Influenced by the missionaries in Iran, the Jews were the first to adopt this new Western style of clothing.[92]

In 1928 during the reign of Shah Reza Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941), the way of dressing in Iran changed. He wanted to bring a new modern European style of dressing to Iranians. The cultural way of dressing lessened and Western clothing was adopted in its place. One major decree was the abolishment of the *chador* and scarf for women in 1936. Although the decree was initially resisted, even by Jewish women, the Shahs order eventually prevailed. Eventually all kinds of distinguishing clothing was completely abolished.[93]

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution Iran once again became an Islamic Republic. During this era of Islamic rule, Iranian women lost many of the opportunities they had and faced more restrictions in most matters and a dress code was imposed on all Iranian women. Women were ordered to dress more conservatively and to cover their hair and face with a *chador*. Even foreign women visiting Iran have to wear scarves to cover their head. Although most men in cities wore western outfits, men were encouraged to

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[92] Ibid., p. 189.
[93] Shkalim, *Iran*, p. 235.

grow beards and mustaches.[94] Unfortunately restrictions on women were more severe in the early days of the Islamic Republic. Females who didn't cover all parts of their body, except hands and face, were subject to punishment of up to seventy lashes or sixty days imprisonment.[95] Previously under the shah's rule, Iran's Jews, as well as other religious minorities in Iran, had become accustomed to being treated with respect, albeit as separate, distinct cultures. Now they were second-class citizens, and the atmosphere of hostility led thousands of them to flee the country. Though the majority of Iranian Jews have fled Iran, those who have remained must continue to abide by the Islamic dress code.

Life Cycle Events

In celebrating life cycle events on Iran, not only did the Jewish community follow Jewish tradition but they also included traditions and customs that belonged to the non-Jewish community in Iran. Though there was very little written about customary Jewish practices, information about life cycle's in Iran were meticulously gathered from oral testimonies and a large array of first-hand source. Ritual acts were spread by word of mouth from community to community.[96]

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[94] Sinham, *The Persian World: Understanding People, Polity and Life in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan,* p. 51.
[95] Robin Wright, The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran (New York: Random House, 2000) p. 136.
[96] Sarah S. Soroudi, "The Life Cycle" in Iran edited by Haim Saadoun (Tel Aviv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005) p. 219.

Birth:

The pregnancy of a woman and the birth of a child is one of the most joyful celebrations among the Jews of Iran and from the moment a woman is pregnant until she gives birth the family would surround her and give her any help she would need. It was an extremely happy occasion once the baby was born, especially if a boy was born after a series of girls, or after a difficult pregnancy. On the first Shabbat following the baby's birth, prayers would be recited at the *kenisa* (synagogue) and the father would be invited to recite an *aliyah* (called up to read Torah).[97]

The ceremony of the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) would take place eight days after the baby's birth in the home of the parents. That same evening the parents entertained at a party with festive food and sweets, music, entertainment and dancing.[98] The ceremony was called *Safrah Eliyahu Hanavi* because it was believed that the prophet Elijah was the guardian of children. They would invite Elijah to the circumcision to protect the child by placing a chair for him, *sandali-ye elyahu hannavi* (prophet Elijah's chair). This chair was the property of the local *kenisa* and was brought to the family's home for the ceremony.[99] For added protection, a decorated cane known as Elijah's staff would be placed near the baby boy's bed for two-three weeks as protection against the evil eye.[100]

During the ceremony the Rabbi or *mollah* (religious leader) would perform the circumcision while the baby was held by the father and one other man whom the parents would want to honor. While the prayers are being recited, the women would undulate a

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[97] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 220.
[98] Leah R. Baer, "Life's Events" in Esther's Children, a portrait of Irania Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: The Center for Iranian Jewish History, 2002), p. 313.
[99] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 220.
[100] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 313.

high pitched guttural yell called a *kel* (ki-li-li) every time they heard the baby's name. Rose water would be provided so that guests would have the opportunity to sprinkle a few drops on their fingers and to recite blessings acknowledging the creation of plants that grow on the ground. Fruit and nuts would also be provided for the guests so they would be able to recite the appropriate blessings for food from various sources without having to question where the food came from and if it complied with religious dietary laws.[101]

Baby girls would be given their name during services on the first Shabbat following their birth. Following Persian customs and superstitions, a ceremony called *shab-e shishi* (6th night) was held on the sixth night following the birth. During the ceremony, a midwife would take a flat metal blade or skewer and drew an imaginary line three times along four walls of the room of the mother and baby to protect them from *Al*, the evil doer who snatches babies or causes the death of a new mother.[102] It was also believed that if the lines were not drawn, disease would come on violently and the mother would die.[103] In addition to warding off evil, water dyed with turmeric was used to paint a dot on the ankles and wrists of both the mother and baby while family and friends brought gifts of gold and clothing for the child.[104] In more modern times due to integration into Persian society, babies now receive both an Iranian and Jewish name.[105]

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Bess A. Donaldson, The wild rue. A study of Muhammadan Magic and folklore in Iran (London: Luzac & Co., 1938), p.28-31.
[103] James Atkinson, Customs and manners of the women of Persia and their domestic superstitions (New York: J.L. Cox and SON, 1971), P.50.
[104] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 315.
[105] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 220.

Bar Mitzvah:

Although traditionally boys have their Bar Mitzvah at the age of thirteen, in Iran a boy at the age of six or seven would be taught the Torah blessings and would be given the opportunity to recite the blessings before and after the Torah portion was read. This rite of passage was known as *tefilin-bandan* was the occasion for a boy's first *aliya* (going up) to the Torah.[106] *Bandan* (binding) refers to the strapping of *tfilin* (phylacteries - leather boxes worn on the arm and head during certain Jewish services) on the left arm and on the forehead during the morning prayers.[107] Some families celebrated this event at the age of thirteen while others chose to delay the ceremony until their sons were in their mid teens.[108]

The ceremony of *tefilin-bandan* usually took place on a Monday or Thursday morning. These two days were considered to have particular religious significance for the Jewish community because it is on those days that Torah is read publically. Due to the holiness of these days most religious or spiritual events were scheduled for a Monday or Thursday.

On the evening prior to the *tefilin-bandan* ceremony, friends and family of the boy would gather at the home of the parents and sweets with hot tea would be served all night long. Grandfathers or honored uncles would read various sections of the Torah portion and at day break family and friends would accompany the boy to the *kenisa* where he would put on his *tfilin* for the first time and he would be given an *aliyah*. On

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[106] Ibid., p. 224.
[107] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 316.
[108] Ibid.

the following Shabbat, the boy would once again go the *kenisa* and chant a portion from the Prophets. From the women's section, the women would throw candies and nuts and after the ceremony sweets would be served at the *kenisa*.[109] That same evening the family would provide a dinner for well wishers who would bring modest gifts for the boy. There were no formal invitations and everyone in the community was welcomed to join in the celebration. [110] During the Pahlavi era in Iran, Jewish schools were established in Tehran and some of these schools also had a program for girls who were between twelve and thirteen years old. The girls would sing a few songs in front of their parents and classmates and were given a token gift to celebrate their coming of age.[111]

Betrothal and Marriage:

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was not uncommon for parents to arrange the marriage of their children. At that time, most girls would be betrothed between the ages of twelve through fifteen although sometimes much younger at around age nine or ten years old. Most men however were betrothed in their late teens or early twenties. If a girl wasn't betrothed by the time she reached the age of sixteen she was considered *torshid –eh* (sour or rotten).[112] The betrothal could last anywhere from a few months to as long as two or three years.[113] The financial status of a family was a large component in these arrangements. Ideally the families would try to match their children to families of similar status although occasionally there were exceptions such as the

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[109] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 224.
[110] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 317.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 224
[113] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 317.

education of the boy or the beauty of the girl.[114] Although these marriages were arranged, some parents would take into consideration the opinion of their child and wouldn't force them into a marriage they were against. The arrangement was usually made through friends of the family but in cases where a match was difficult to be found a match maker would be used.[115]

The arrangement would take place after a young man's mother would go to the homes of families with available daughters. Once a girl was selected, the mother would go to the *hammam* (public bath house) on a day when she knew the girl would be there and at that time she would try to see if the girl had any skin diseases or deformities that would indicate poor health and not a good match. In addition to looking her over, the mother would also inquire of the other women about the girl and the families reputation, and if they were socially acceptable. [116]

When the girl and her family were found suitable, several men from the boy's family would approach the girl's father to find out if he would agree to the marriage. This occasion was referred to as *baleh boran* (getting approval). How the girls family greeted the men would indicated the families' interest in making a match. For instance if the family offered sweets and tea, they were most likely interested in the match but if nothing was offered they were not interested in further arrangements.[117] Once both families agreed on the match, a list of dowry items called a *shattar* was made. This contract included clothing, household items, money, rose water bottles, and bedding embroidered with silver or gold thread. Some of these contracts included a stipulation

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[114] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 225.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 319.
[117] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 225.

that in the event of a divorce the husband would have to provide his wife with double the amount of her dowry.[118]

Once the dowry contract was finalized, the bride's parents gave a party called *Shirini-Khoran* (the eating of sweetmeats) to celebrate the engagement (*nomzadi*). The women would gather in the afternoon at the home of the bride and either the sister or aunt of the groom would escort the bride into the room. The mother of the groom would hold a tray filled with gold jewelry above her head, dancing around the seated bride while the other women clapped and undulated *kels* (ki-li-li-li). Other women from the groom's family also took turns holding the jewelry and dancing around the bride; the men joined later in the evening for dinner. Following the dinner it was the bride's families' turn to bestow gifts upon the groom. In modern times the bride's family would give him clothing embellished with silver or gold thread as well as gold watch also displayed on trays. Candies wrapped in colorful paper were served to guests to signify the upcoming happiness of the couple[119]

Both families arranged the wedding date and times and generally the *Nomzadi* period would last up to two years. At this time the bride's family began preparing the *nedunia* (household gifts) such as bedding, kitchen supplies, crystal, carpets, and Shabbat candle stick holders.[120] During that period the groom would visit the bride and her family every Saturday night as a sign of respect as well as most of the Jewish holidays. This long time period was also used as an opportunity for the families to get to know each

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[118] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 319.
[119] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 226.
[120] Ibid.

other prior to the wedding.[121] When the wedding time arrived the celebration would last for five or six days. The celebration usually started on a Monday due to the religious significance of the day and would be concluded by the following Shabbat. [122]

The festivities began with female friends and relatives escorting the bride to the *hammam* (bath house) for several hours of bathing and chatting. That same evening a henna party called *hana-bandan* was held at the home of the bride. There, the women would decorate the bride's fingertips, hand, feet and forehead with henna; they would cover her hair with the henna as well. The following morning all of the women would once again go to the *hammam* where they washed the henna from her hair while musicians entertained them with singing and dancing. Occasionally a belly dancer would be brought to the *hammam* to entertain the women with a tambourine while charcoal was burned to ward off the evil eye.[123]

That evening the marriage ceremony took place at the home of the bride. Four men, usually family members or close family friends would hold the four posts the *chuppah* (bridal canopy) above the couple. During the ceremony, two or three children would stand behind the bride and groom rubbing together sugar cones so crystals would fall on them assuring them of a sweet life.[124] Like most Middle Eastern countries, Iran also has many superstitious rituals which they partook in to ward off the evil eye. The Jewish community in Iran also implemented some of these rituals into their ceremonies. For instance, only close family was invited to the ceremony and during the wedding ceremony one family member would continually open and close a pair of scissors to keep

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[121] Ibid.
[122] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 324.
[123] Ibid., p. 326.
[124] Ibid.

the evil eye away, and to insure good sexual relations between the bride and the groom another family member would open and close a lock with a key.[125]

The Jew's of Mashhad had a slightly different marriage custom. They would have two wedding ceremonies. A traditional Muslim ceremony that was open to the entire community with a marriage contract written in Farsi. The next day the family would then have a traditional Jewish ceremony with a *Ketubah* (Jewish wedding contract) written in Hebrew.[126]

Following the ceremony the bride's parents entertained at a festive dinner with musicians and although the couple was married they were not permitted to be alone. When the guests departed later in the evening, the groom also left and returned to his parent's home while the bride remained in her parent's home.[127]

The following day started preparations for the next celebration. Early that morning an aunt or sister would go to the *hammam* with the bride. When she returned home her face was fully made up with makeup, perfume and lotions, and dressed in her bridal clothes. Traditionally, bridal dress was white with tulle embroidered with either silver or gold thread. Dinner that evening was gala held at the home of the groom's parents for their family and friends. At sunset a group of people from the groom's side would go to the bride's home in a slow procession while neighbors and children watched from their homes. Once they arrived to the bride's home, the groom's brother or an elder would enter the home and bring the bride out to greet the groom. Together they processed back to the groom's home while friends carried lit candles.

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[125] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 227.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 326

Once they arrived to the groom's home, the *molla* sacrificed a sheep on the threshold and chanted blessings.[128] The groom then went to the rooftop and threw two or three apples toward the bride before she entered the home. She then stepped over the sheep's blood for good luck while a male member from the groom's side welcomed her into her new home. Once they were both in the house they were seated next to each other; groom on the right, bride on the left. Her right foot was placed on top of the groom's left foot and her right hand was placed in his left hand. While in this position a water basin was brought and the bride and groom's intertwined limbs were washed. During the washing the bride's mother tied a small bundle of bread, cheese and fresh herbs wrapped in a cloth around her daughter's waist. After the completion of the ritual, the bride and groom made their way to the bridal chamber.[129]

Like other Mediterranean countries the bride was expected to remain a virgin until marriage and proof would be required. The family of the bride would wait by the bedroom door of the new couple until morning in order to retrieve and display the evidence of her virginity on the bloodied white bed sheet.[130] That same morning the bride's parents gave her a small mirror and *tanakh* (five books of Moses) with a warning to obey God in the role willed for her as wife and mother, and to be faithful and honest in her dedication to her husband and children.[131]

Friday evening the family brought the bride's dowry and the grooms gifts to her new home. The gifts were displayed on large trays and brought to the home in a slow procession. Each new dress for the bride was displayed on its own tray while the

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[128] Ibid., p. 327.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 228.
[131] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 327

groom's gift of clothing was displayed on two or three different trays but more expensive gifts such as a watch or ring was displayed on its own tray. The remaining trays were filled with the household items.[132]

That Shabbat morning the entire family would go to the *kenisa* where the bride wore an embroidered *charghad* (scarf, worn on the head and tied around the neck) given to her from her mother-in-law. Sweets were served throughout the day, especially *noghl*, a small while candy made of ground nuts, sugar and egg whites. That Shabbat was also know as *Shabbat Chatan* (literally the groom's Shabbat) where the groom was called to read Torah.[133] Following the service the groom's parents held a Shabbat meal for 80-100 guests. A large feast and *araq* (an alcoholic drink) was served to the guests and the party continued late into the afternoon. Guests were entertained by musicians and dancers and gifts of gold, money and sugar cubes were given to the couple concluding the weeklong festivities celebrating their marriage.[134]

In modern Iran, the weeklong wedding celebration was shortened; the bride would carry a bouquet of fresh flowers and she wore a veil during dinner that evening. The sacrifice of the sheep was still a part of the wedding ritual however most couples now stayed in a hotel for a few days following the ceremony. Though virginity is still very much respected, the displaying of the bridal sheet is not as intensely observed.[135]

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[132] Ibid., p. 330.
[133] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 228.
[134] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 330.
[135] Ibid.

Death:

Death and mourning in Iran was observed as according to traditional *halakha* (Jewish law). Each Jewish community in Iran had its own cemetery and the graves were dug in a way that the head of the deceased would be facing Jerusalem.[136] The burial usually took place on the day following the death with all of the pre-burial rituals taking place at the cemetery site. The body was washed and wrapped in a shroud of cashmere while mourners waited in a room nearby. When the preparations were completed, the body was placed in an open box and carried to the gravesite while Psalms were read both during the procession and at the burial site. After the body was lowered into the ground and the grave was filled, the men would recite *Kaddish* (Mourners prayer) and rose water was sprinkled on the grave.

Following the gravesite the mourners would return to their home where a *molla* (spiritual leader) came to the house each day during the Shiva period (seven day mourning period), *haft ruz* in Farsi to read psalms and throughout this period those in mourning would sit on a mattress on the floor dressed in black; they would do nothing.[137] A traditional Iranian dish *kuku* (fried herb omelet) was prepared for the mourners and during the preparation the name of the deceased was pronounced when each egg was cracked open.[138]. A candle, *ner nishama* (light of the soul) also burned continuously during those seven days. Tea was replaced with coffee and although candies and other sweets were not served in a house of mourning, fresh mint, rosewater, and a combination of chickpeas and raisins were proved so that blessings could be recited as they ate the

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[136] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 230.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 333.

various foods. Meals were provided for the mourners and as many as 40 or 50 people would visit each day; a group of at least 10 men known as *asara* in Farsi or *Minyan* in Hebrew would also gather for the daily prayers.[139]

At the end of the *shiva* period, the mourners visited the grave and upon leaving the cemetery they washed their hands and faces while reciting prayers. Following the visit to the grave site, the mourners visited the *hammam* to bath themselves; this ritual was believed to aid in cleansing the soul from grief.[140] Male mourners refrained from shaving during the thirty day period of *sholoshim* however in many communities the Jews adopted the Muslim custom of observing a forty day mourning period and instead did not shave for forty day. After the *shloshim* period the family would return to the gravesite to unveil the grave and for that entire first year, women would wear only black, and no one attended parties of social gatherings, especially if there would be music or entertainment there. The yearly memorials are known as *zakharun* or *sal*.[141] On the first anniversary of the death, the family would once again gather at the gravesite where a flat stone marker was placed on the grave. When the family returned home, *Kaddish* was recited and the *molla* would read consoling Jewish texts in both Hebrew and Farsi. That same evening there would be a meal where friends would bring new colorful clothing for the mourners as a way a putting aside their grief and resuming a full and social life.[142]

A feature of Iranian Jewish celebrations is the involvement of the extended family and a great number of friends, including young children. The gatherings are a continuity of their history and the social life that they enjoyed for generations in Iran. Here in the

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[139] Ibid.
[140] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 231.
[141] Baer, *Esther's Children*, p. 334.
[142] Soroudi, *Iran*, p. 233.

United States, these gatherings have continued. Growing up in a Persian household, I have so many memories of *mehmoonis* (large gathering or party), memories of my family, not just immediate family but rather the circle of extended family. Everyone from my Mothers Grandparent's siblings, to my parent's cousins and their cousins would be there. Everyone knows each other; everyone is valued and respected; we are all related and our identity is strong because we are a big group. *Mehmoonis* aren't family reunions; they are a part of a weekly or monthly routine and somewhat of a commitment and form of respect for your family. One week you'll be at your Uncles home with their big circle of people and the following week you'll be your second cousins home with yet again another group of their family and friends. Most *Mehmoonis* consist of an over abundance of delicious Irooni (our way of saying Iranian) food rich with herbs and spices, fruit, nuts and tea; customs that have transferred here from Iran.

One of my favorite memories was a *Mehmooni* held at my parent's home. I was probably seven or eight years old and there were around 40 guests that evening. This particular night was different from previous *mehmoonis* held at my house. My father is an amateur singer of classical Iranian music and he has many friends that either play Iranian music professionally or just as a hobby. After dinner this particular evening my father and three of his good friends came together for an impromptu concert. My father was the singer, his best friend Dr. Manavi played the *santur* (hammered dulcimer), another friend Mr. Habib played the *Tar*, and my Uncle Mansour played the *domback* (drum). It was such an exhilarating evening for me. Even though I grew up hearing my father play recordings of Persian music or singing around the house, this was the first

time I was exposed to it in a live setting, and to hear my father who I knew loved to sing perform in front of all these people, it was amazing and I felt so proud.

I talked to my father recently about that night. He laughed when I brought it up, surprised that I would remember it. He said that unfortunately that was one of the only times all of them were able to get together to play music. Since then night two of the men have died and the third gentleman lives in Northern California and they were rarely able to see each other. I was curious if they had gotten together prior to the *Mehmooni* to practice but apparently they decided on what to play that same evening. I guess you could say it was their version of an impromptu "jam session". They were all fans of the same type of classical Persian music so playing together came naturally for them. My father described how he felt that night while singing with the group:

> Iranian music is one of my loves. I wanted to study music when I was young but my parents discouraged me. Everything I learned, everything I know about Iranian music comes from listening and studying recordings, especially the recordings of Banan. Being with my friends and singing this music reminds of the times in Iran when the entire family would be together. In Iran everyone lived closer to each other so we were able to see each other more often. Whenever we would go to a gathering in Iran, there would always be professional live music and dancers, but not so much in America anymore. The only time we have live music now is at a wedding.[143]

One of the most noticeable changes in tradition can be observed at a modern day wedding. Marriages are no longer arranged at an early age however it is still common to

[143] Interview with Amir Mashhadi, April, 3 2009.

see families setting up their children on "arranged dates". The week long wedding celebrations with daily beauty rituals that took place in Iran no longer take place in United States. However the ritual of applying Henna to the bride is often incorporated into the American bridal shower. In lieu of the numerous parties, the bride's family instead gives an elaborate engagement party while the groom's family pays for the wedding. At the engagement party, the custom of displaying the jewelry and clothing on trys for the bride and groom is still present. These traditions have been carried over from Iran but in the last few years with so many couples marring non-Persians, these customs are slowly dying out. The tradition of an animal sacrifice is also no longer in existence. In its place many couples donate a portion of the money they receive as wedding gifts to various charities. The superstitious acts that accompanied the wedding ceremony have also vanished, however throughout the ceremony you will hear women undulating *kels* (ki li li) of joy throughout.

Unfortunately at this time due to the political climate in Iran and the government's attitude towards Israel, the new generation of Iranian Jews outside of Iran, including my-self will most likely never have the opportunity to visit the country of our ancestors. Our unique cultural heritage has to live through what is passed down from generation to generation. Though there are some adaptations in the United States and elsewhere, the gatherings and celebrations remain a significant and central part of community life. The culture, customs, traditions and rituals surrounding life and daily events are an important way for the new generation of Iranian Jews to learn and continue their family traditions and cultural heritage.

Chapter Three

The Music of the Jew's of Persia

Persia is a country with rich and diverse musical traditions and though the musical culture of Persia is distinct, it is closely related to other musical systems of the Middle East and Central Asia. Famed for its creative genius, Islamic Persia has exerted powerful influences on other civilizations and, in turn, it has absorbed the impact of contact with other cultures and its history can be traced to some extent through these relationships.[144] Persian music also has similarities to the musical cultures of India, Greece, and to a certain degree even to those of Africa. Like most of the world's cultures, the music of Persia has depended on oral/aural transmission and learning. Despite the fact that native notation systems seem to have been developed periodically, and even while Western notation, in adapted form, has come to be widespread in classical music, music is normally learned through hearing; and the reading of notes during a performance (as is common in Western music) has never become a norm. This is due in part to the importance of teacher-specific instruction and the importance of improvisation.[145]

Throughout this chapter I will give an overview of the history of secular Persian music and its theory, Jewish contributions to Persian music as well as the different types of Persian Jewish music and its usage. I will also analyze two pieces of music that have been written for the Persian Synagogue

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[144] Hormoz Farhat, "Iran: classical traditions", Grove Music Online, http: www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed December 24, 2009).
[145] Bruno Nettl, "Iran: Persian Music", Encyclopedia Iranica Online, http:www.iranica.com (accessed December 25, 2009).

History:

In 642 the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire began and eventually resulted in the integration of Iranian nations within the greater Islamic Empire. With the ascendancy of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) and transfer of the seat of the Caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad, Persian political and cultural influences became dominant. The Arabs placed high value on Persian culture and soon Persian musicians and musical scholars were to be found throughout the Muslim world.[146]

With the reunification of the Persia Empire in the 16th century during, the nationalistic Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), Persia became increasingly isolated from the rest of the Middle East where Ottoman rule was paramount. The Safavids established the Shi'a faith as the state religion, creating an even greater separation from other Muslim states. The Shi'a religious leaders have generally maintained a hostile attitude towards music and music making; it was viewed with suspicion because the effect on the listener could not be reasoned or logically explained. Furthermore, music was generally seen as an accompaniment to idleness and merriment, which in turn could lead to impiety. The consequence of these religious leader's attitudes towards music resulted in the gradual decline of musical knowledge and culture from the 16th century to the mid-19th. Within urban settings, music was gradually reduced to a private, somewhat concealed art where solo performance and improvisation became the dominant features.[147]

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[146] Farhat, *Grove Music Online,* (accessed on Dec. 24, 2009).
[147] Ibid.

Persian Music Theory:

Like other Middle Eastern music, the music of Iran is modal in nature. Initially (before the Qajar dynasty) each of the major modes had an associated formula for melodic invention (*mayeh*). The *mayeh* included rules for cadences, a hierarchy of tones, and acceptable melodic patterns. Using the *mayeh* as a guideline, the musician was expected to improvise within a single mode for the duration of the performance. Gradually, this method became tedious for the musicians as well as for the listeners. As a result, during the Qajar dynasty, the old modes and *mayehs* were restructured and the *dastgah* (musical modal system) system was developed. The modes were replaced by the twelve *dastgah*s. Each *dastagah* has an associated eight note scale, and each tone in the scale has a special significance, with one note being designated the analogue of the tonic in Western diatonic music.[148]

The *dastgah* also has its own repertoire of melodies, each of which is called a *gushe*. The first of these is always called *daramad* (introduction) and contains the most characterizing motifs; these continue to reappear in the *radif*, a collection of melodic figures. It organizes the melodies in a number of different tonal spaces and should be referred to in performances based upon the *radif*.[149] A *gushe* is actually a melodic type which usually spans only four or five tones, and serves as a model for improvisation. Generally the *gushe* are played in an order that fills the lower, middle, and upper portions of the *dastgah* scale. Aside from that, the order and mode of each *gushe* may not have a logical relationship to that of the *dastgah* itself. The different *gusheh* are linked together by melodic fragments known as *forud*s (decent), which eventually resolves the *dastgah*

[148] Ibid.
[149] Nettl, *Encyclopedia Iranica.* (accessed on Dec. 25, 2009).

with a concluding melodic cadence. Within each *dastgah* are also encoded rules for achieving that resolution. As mentioned before, the initial *gusheh* in a *dastgah* is called the *daramad*, and it lends its name to the *dastgah*. Therefore, the *dastgah-e-Shur* is that *dastgah* which has the modal melody *Shur* as its *daramad*.[150]

> The *dastgāh*s are most easily distinguished by the configuration of pitches or notes that they use. These distinctions are somewhat analogous to the differences between major and minor scales in European music or the church modes of medieval European music, and the Indian system of ragas. The bases of Western modes are whole and half tones; these are used in Persian music as well, but additionally there are intervals approximating three-fourths and five-fourths of a European whole tone. The specifics of the tuning have been the subject of debates among theorists, some of whom use ancient Greek music theory as points of departure, while others maintain that the history is substantially Persian, and others again argue for modernized European-based solutions.[151]

The rhythmic character of the *radif* is complex and varied. While it is easiest simply to distinguish non-metric (free) rhythms and those that have meter (like the European three-fourths or four-fourths), there is in fact a great variety of rhythmic character, with different degrees of predictability and adherence to metric principles, much of it being based on the metric schemes of poetry.[152]

> It is important to some teachers that the *radif* be learned slowly, with meditation and contemplation of the individual parts. The pedagogical genealogy of a

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[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

musician is thus important in establishing his claim to authenticity in his use of the *radif*. The reputation of a musician rests to a large extent on his knowledge of the *radif*, and on his ability to show both originality and understanding of the learned tradition in a performance.[153]

Integration of Musical Tradition:

Iranian civilization has long been sustained by complex interdependencies among settled and nomadic peoples, cities and remote rural areas. As musical instruments, performance genres and melody-types were transported from one environment to another, some were distinguished as 'regional', 'rural' or 'tribal'. The names of a great many classical *gushehs* refer to cities, regions or tribes. Similarly, within regional traditions, the principle of marking musical differences with geographic and ethnic names is widely practiced.

Regional musical traditions are closely correlated with differences of language, and many performers have been bilingual or multilingual. Farsi is the primary language of only half of Iran's population, but most people are exposed to it. Sorani Kurdish, Kurmanji Kurdish and Baluchi are the other major Persian languages. While the various non-Persian speaking groups of Persia maintained their own musical traditions, many of the musicians of Persian classical and modern mainstream popular genres have been members of minority communities; particularly the Jews, Christians, and Armenians.[154]

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[153] Ibid.

[154] William O Beeman, "You can Take Music out of the Country, but...: The dynamics of change in Iranian Musical Tradition", Asian Music, Vol. 7. No. 2, Symposium on the Ethnomusicology of Culture Change in Asia (1976): p. 7.

In regional traditions, knowledge of repertories and performance techniques is often transmitted from master (*morshed*) to pupil. This applies both to instrumentalists learning a repertoire of melody types and rhythmic patterns and to singers specializing in sung poetry. A *morshed* who recites poetry learns his art of recitation and drumming from a recognized master. Long periods of study are made necessary by the esoteric aspects of much musical knowledge, whether these involve the trade secrets of service professionals or the spiritual insights attained by musicians who take pride in their status as amateurs. The value placed on amateur or semi-professional standing is one consequence of the low social status traditionally assigned to service professionals.[155]

Musical tradition in Iran has never been very well integrated; however the distinct quality of Persian music is rooted in the social conditions under which the performances took place. However, prior to 1908 there were no public performances of classical Persian music. All music was either performed in private for the wealthy or in private ceremonies.[156] The contact between urban and rural populations in Iran was also very limited. Musicians as a class were likewise isolated to a great degree. In rural areas, musicians constituted a kind of 'caste' group where the specific ethnic communities passed on their traditions within family groups. In tribal regions you would find lineages of musicians who perform for wedding and other ceremonies but who do not intermarry with the rest of the tribe.[157]

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[155] Farhat, *Grove Music Online.*
[156] Beeman, p. 7.
[157] Ibid.

Jewish Contributions to Persian Music:

As previously mentioned in the chapter one, Jews were among the oldest inhabitants in Persia. By the 9th century, Jews were counted as one the largest and most powerful nomadic groups and by the 11th century, Jews were established in towns and cities throughout Persia subsisting mainly on the heavy caravan trade passing through. Over the centuries, Jews as well as other minorities were gradually relegated by the dominate Muslim population to the level of outcaste. This attitude reached its peak during the Safavid dynasty in 1502 and continued through the early 20th century ending with the rise of the Pahlavis in1925.[158]

When the Safavids declared Shi'a Islam as Persia's state religion, numerous new reforms went into effect. In particular, the prohibition placed on Muslim participation in the performing arts, especially music and dance reduced their participation in professional music making, especially outside of the capital city of Isfahan and later, Tehran. In addition to music making, other forbidden activities included wine-selling/ making, acting, and dancing.[159]

It can be argued that Persian music could have all but ceased in its development during this period if it wasn't for the minority musicians. Of these, the Jews, being so large and widely dispersed, as well as the most detested of populations became most popularly identified and associated with professional music making.[160] Shirazi Jews have

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[158] Ibid., p. 8.
[159] Laurence Loeb, "The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars", *Asian Music*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Near East-Turkestan Issue (1972): p. 4-5.
[160] Laurence Loeb, *Outcast: Jewish life in Southern Iran* (Gordan and Breach. NY. 1942), p. 155.

long been considered the finest musicians in all of Iran; they are said to have best preserved the classical Persian art music tradition. [161] In studying Jewish musicians in Shiraz, Laurence Loeb writes:

> The *motreb's* talents were in great demand as the main source of entertainment for the populace. No Persian could entertain guests, whether at home or in a garden, without a musical performance. No celebration, Jewish or non-Jewish, was complete without music. Music and poetry were intellectual stimuli to the Persian, turning his thoughts from the mundane to the philosophic.[162]

Excluded from courts, mosques, and other locales of Muslim ritual, Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian musicians thus became practice-for-hire popular musicians or *motrebs* who, in the face of existing prohibitions, performed at life-cycle ceremonies and other social gatherings. Though reasonably lucrative, professional music-making came at a considerable social cost for the Jewish *motrebs*, who generally belonged to the lowest levels of society. They were viewed by both Muslims and Jews as "enablers and agents of various moral and physical laxities." [163] They were further looked down upon by many Muslims simply for being Jewish, and marginalized by Jews for socializing with Muslims, eating non-kosher food in their employer's homes, working at all hours of the night, and sleeping late into the day. Primarily for this reason, professional music making became a familial trait, with families intermarrying more out of necessity than

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[161] Loeb, "*The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars*", p. 5.
[162] Ibid., p.8.
[163] Houman Sarshar, "Judeo Persian Communities", Encyclopedia Iranica Online, http:www.iranica.com (accessed December 25, 2009).

choice, thereby creating dynasties of musicians from whose ranks some of 20th-century's Jewish masters of Persian classical music would eventually emerge.[164]

Though the *motreb* was looked down on, their services were nevertheless needed by society and their talents were sought after for social gatherings and life cycle celebrations. Houman Sarshar writes:

> The negative social values associated with and often unjustly attributed to the *motreb* should by no means be taken as a reflection of his or her artistic creativity and musical expertise, as the *motreb's* music is no less grounded in the traditional modal system (*dastgāh*s) of Persian classical music than that of the master musician. Furthermore, over the course of the past five centuries, *motreb's* have practiced, preserved, and passed on specific techniques and particular songs and melodies that would have otherwise been lost, and without which the heritage of Persian music would be unquestionably impoverished. As such, *motreb's* merit equal recognition for their respective part in the preservation of the Persian musical tradition. In light of the fact that the *motreb* was often the exclusive source of music for every member of society prior to the broad distribution of gramophones and radios in Persia in the early to mid-20th century, it further becomes more than apparent that the professional musician's contribution to Persian music was not only in its preservation but also in its proliferation. [165]

One of the most revered Jewish musicians to come out of Iran was Morteza Khan Ney-Davud. Ney-Davud was a master *Tar* (a long necked string instrument similar to a lute) player. He is among the very few Persian master musicians to have created a style

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[165] Ibid.

of *tar* playing so distinctly his own that it bears his name. He is also credited with the discovery and training of a number of Iranian master musicians; in particular, two of the most famous and gifted vocalist in Iran. The first Gholamhoseyn Banan (1911-1985), a pianist and singer. Banan became one of the greatest vocal masters of his time. Morteza's second discovery was Qamar al-Moluk Vaziri, the first female vocalist in Iran's history to perform in a public setting, unveiled on stage. Besides his discovery and teaching of great talent, Morteza had a large role in the preservation and development of Persian music by Iranian Jews. In the 1970's he recorded the first and only existing repertoire of classical Persian music's *radif* (the only complete canon of traditional Persian music ever). This undertaking consists of 300 hours of recorded music and can be found in Jerusalem University's music library as well as the Ministry of Education in Teheran.[166]

Jewish Music in Persia:

It is a difficult task to define Persian Jewish music. First, no thorough and comprehensive research on the subject has yet been conducted. Second, Persian Jewish music is integrated with secular Jewish music and cannot be entirely detached from other existing types of Persian music. Jewish musical development is even harder to understand, since no such body of information exists for it prior to that of Avraham Zvi Idelsohn. The majority of his research was conducted from 1918-1920 in Israel but mainly Jerusalem by visiting the Jews that had immigrated to Israel from different communities within Iran and recording the songs they sang. In total Idelsohn recorded

[166] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morteza_Neydavoud (accessed on December 26, 2009).

134 liturgical melodies were recorded and categorized under various topics. These groupings included *Shabbat, S'lichot, Yamim Noramim, Lamentations* (synagogue songs and poems) and *Zmirot* (semi religious songs). In Idelsohn's research, he discovered that the music sung in the synagogue was very similar to the synagogue music of Yemenite Jews and that it was characterized by a spirit of gloom, sorrow, pain, and grief. At the end of his research, Idelsohn came to the conclusion that secular Persian music effected the development of Persian Jewish Music and likewise, Jewish music also affected secular Persian music. [167] To date there is no reliable information on the way in which non-Jewish and Jewish Persian music influenced each other in ancient times. As far as is known, Persian music absorbed musical elements from other ancient nearby cultures such as India, Mesopotamia, and Greece. In addition, Persia functioned, to a certain extent, as a bridge for musical interaction between the regions and cultures to its east and west.[168]

Because Jews were dispersed throughout Persia, it can be assumed that they were subject to various influences. Yet, to a certain degree, their music retained its unique character. According to Ammon Netzer, this was due to two factors: (1) Jewish music had greater durability because it was primarily religious music; (2) the social and cultural isolation of the Jews prevented the penetration of external influences to a certain extent.

> Despite these factors, it is difficult to imagine that Persian music would not penetrate into the musical experience of Persian Jews during their long sojourn in the land. This is particularly true in the light of the Iranian Jews' complete

[167] Ammon Netzer, "Between Sacred and Secular Music", translated by Zadok Azu, found in Iran, edited by Haim Saadoun (Tel Aviv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005) p. 174.
[168] Ibid., p. 175.

> linguistic assimilation and their extensive acculturation in many other areas. It may indeed be said that Persian Jewry is more fully adapted to Persian culture than any other religious minority present in the country today with the exception of the Zoroastrians. Armenians and Assyrians, for example, not only retained their language and a good portion of their cultural heritage, but also maintained their own music, both religious and secular. In the field of poetry, however, Persian Jewry took the format and framework of Persian poetry and filled them with Jewish content.[169]

Jewish Persian music can be divided into three categories (1) religious/liturgical music, (2) para-liturgical music, and (3) secular music. [170]

Religious Music:

Religious music referrers to synagogue music, including Torah reading, Haftarah, prayers, as well as other liturgical readings that take place within the synagogue with no instrumental accompaniment. This kind of music is usually monophonic, and in many cases responsorial. The music is usually led by a *sheliach-tsibbur*, a rabbi or an adult Jew with a pleasant voice and knowledge of the prayer service, but never by a professional singer who supports himself as a *motreb because of the low status that accompanies that profession.* [171]

It is important to note that in Iran, the *Hazzan* and the *Sheliach-tsibbur* are not the same. The *Hazzan* serves a completely function in the synagogue in comparison to

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[169] Sarshar, *Judeo Persian communities in Iran.*
[170] Netzer, *Iran*, p. 176.
[171] Ibid.

Western synagogues. In Iran, the *Hazzan* serves as the administrator of the synagogue; he announces all of the important events in the life of his congregation as well as important community decisions.[172] However, anyone in the congregation may serve as the *Sheliach-tsibbur* and each *kenisa* (synagogue) has several people to serve in this role.[173]

Outside the Mahalleh, most *Shlichey tsibbur* are graduates of the Yeshiva who are in great demand for their command of Hebrew and ability to ready Torah according to the *ta'amim*. Though the prayers are almost always recited in Hebrew on occasion the Haftarah may be translated into Judeo-Persian (refers to both a group of Jewish dialects spoken by the Jews living in Iran and Judeo-Persian texts written in Hebrew alphabet). In Iran, a *Sheliach-tsibbur* does not receive compensation for his duties and he usually learn's his trade from his father who was most likely also a *Sheliach-tsibbur* at the same *kenisa*.[174] Synagogue melodies were preserved from external influence to a greater degree than the other types of musical traditions. However, even outside influences could penetrate this citadel occasionally, whether through mass media or by of scholars and rabbis from Israel who visited Persia, or Persian Jews who studied for the rabbinate outside the country of their birth.[175]

The melody accompanying the Torah reading and the prayers is Persian in character and structure, and a connection can be detected between it and the melodies of one of the modes (*dastgahs*) of Persian classical music. Despite the existence of a relationship between the two musical traditions, the Persian Jewish ritual melody is not

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[172] Laurence Loeb, "Hazanut in Iran", *Journal of Synagogue music*, 1/3 (1968): p. 3-4.
[173] Ibid., p. 4.
[174] Ibid., p. 5.
[175] Netzer, *Iran*, p. 176.

identical with Persian classical music. The technique of yodeling (*tahrir*) and florid style of trills and bleats characterizing the free improvisatory secular *Avaz* is rarely found in liturgical music and chanting. In addition he cannot span an entire octave or more, and he cannot incorporate known melodies from the broad spectrum of those melodies known to the general public. [176] Anthropologist Laurence Loeb did a survey of synagogues in Iran between 1967 and 1968 and he found little evidence of borrowing by Jews in their sacred synagogue music.

> Muslim sacred music, for instance, is present in only a very few examples of synagogue music. Although there are certain surface stylistic similarities between Jewish penitential prayer and the mourning chant of Shi'a Muslims on Ashura during Muharram, they are no more similar than one might expect, considering the purpose of the music and the shared underlying musical system.[177]

Tempo and meter are difficult to analyze in studies of this type of vocal music because it has been hard for researchers to monitor the frequency of changes in tempo and meter in prayers and the melodic chanting of Torah verses. Even poems and songs classified as liturgical tend to be rhythmical and metrical are prone to changes in meter and tempo. A melody is usually syllabic, meaning each written syllable is meant to correspond to a sound, but toward the end of each line the reader or the *Sheliach-tsibbur* breaks into an improvised passage of several notes sung to one syllable of text whose purpose is usually to return the tone to the *finalis as a way of indicating the ending of the chant*. Retaining the *finalis* makes it somewhat easier to assign the melody correctly to a

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[176] Ibid.
[177] Loeb, *The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars*, p. 10.

scale that corresponds to one of the Persian classical *dastgahs*.[178] It should be also noted that their positioning and their character are generally dependent upon the subjective mood of the cantor.[179]

Para-Liturgical Music:

This type of music includes songs and poems sung on Shabbat and holidays outside of the synagogue at weddings, circumcisions and ritual-feasts. These songs were usually sung in Hebrew, and were occasionally accompanied by an interpretation (*tafsir)*. More than liturgical music, there songs were likely to have been influenced by Persian classical music. In several Judeo-Persian manuscripts, preserved in the collection at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the names of the Persian *dastgahs* are written above the Hebrew songs and poems and their *tafsirim*, indicating that they were sung to these melodies. In everyday practice, however, not everyone was strict about adhering to the melodies, and not everyone was familiar with the entire *dastgah* system. It is likely that a poem meant to be sung to a specific tune was sung to a different one, or that during the course of the singing changes would be made to the melody. Usually more attention was paid to the pleasantness of the singer's voice than to the melodic rules. Similar to what was found with religious music, the tones do not deviate from a range of a fourth; quarter-tones and improvised ornamentation are also incorporated into the singing.[180]

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[178] Netzer, *Iran*, p. 176.
[179] Loeb, *Hazzanut in Iran*, p.6.
[180] Netzer, *Iran*, p. 177.

Para-liturgical music differs significantly from religious music in its free use of secular classical music as well as the use of instrumentation such as a *tomback* (one faced drum) or *daft* (tambourine). However, these musical freedoms do not apply to songs and poems sung in mourning situations, or those which are in the style of lamentations.[181]

Secular Music:

Persian Jewish secular songs are sung in Farsi and are intended for non-religious events, but they are also sometimes used for events with some connection to religious practice, such as circumcision or wedding ceremonies. These types of songs are similar in character and quality to local and regional Persian songs called *taranaha-ye mahalli.* The melodies of this type of Persian Jewish music are Persian in their scale structure, but a listener sensitive to Persian music can identify the uniquely Jewish characteristics of the song. Secular songs were not meant to be sung at the synagogue, but rather at home for joyous events on Sabbath and holidays. The most important and central works sung throughout the year, on Sabbath and holidays, at weddings, circumcisions, and other events is the poetry of Sahin, one of the greatest Jewish poet's of the 14th century.[182] There are secular songs common to nearly all of the Persian communities but there are also songs specific to certain communities and unknown to others, such as the *Kaksuri* song, sung in the Jewish dialect of Isfahan and unique to the Jewish community of that city.[183]

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., p.178.
[183] Ibid., p.179.

According to Ammon Netzer, of the three types of Persian Jewish music, it is the secular that is the most likely to disappear, for the following reasons:

> First, unlike religious music, secular music lacks staying power; second, a very large number of secular songs and melodies sung on radio and television serve as alternatives to the specifically Jewish secular songs and are taking their place; and third, Iranian Jews, particularly the younger generation, associate these songs with ghetto life, and they have a similar attitude toward the Jewish dialects that they speak. Many Jewish families, particularly the more affluent, prefer to hire Persian singers for their weddings and to listen to modern and classical Persian music, and regard the playing of Jewish music as somewhat infra dig and detrimental to their social standing. [184]

Musical Examples

In looking at the Chatsi Kaddish for selichot (Appendix - music example 1) sung by Nessah Synagogue, a Persian Synagogue in Los Angeles by Rabbi David Shofet, we can see based on prior information about the structure of religious music in Iran, there are both similarities and discrepancies from what might have been sung in a traditional synagogue in Iran. Though the entire piece is just over an octave, an acceptable vocal range for the synagogue, throughout the piece there are several times where the *Sheliach -tsibbur* loosely incorporates the technique of yodeling (*tahrir*) and florid style of trills and bleats characterizing the free improvisatory secular *Avaz* which is rarely found in liturgical music and chanting.

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[184] Ibid.

The structure of the overall piece is very straight forward and the shape of the piece is defined with in the first 8 measures. The piece starts on the F above middle C and sits around B*b* and C with E*b* as the highest note in the phrase and ends back on F on measure 8 with a steady rhythm. Once again this same musical phrase is repeated three more times between the pick-up to measure 10 though 24 however this time the highest note in each of the repeated phrases is a high F above middle C. The phrase is repeated at measure 29. Measure 35 starts in same way as the original pattern, however on measure 39 the high E*b*, D*b*, and F are slowed down and it seems as though the meter has vanished allowing the singer for freedom, this measure is followed up with series of freely sung runs. Interestingly, these runs take place on the words *v'imru amen* which literally means "and together we say". However the congregation that has chimed in during the previous phrases on word *amen* does not join the *Sheliach-tsibbur* on the phrase *y'hei sh'mei ra-ba m'va-rach, l'al-lam ul'al-mei al-ma-ya.* Instead, the *Shaliach Tsibbur* sings five full measures of runs and trills.

Measure 53 introduces a new section in the piece. This section is much more rhythmic then the previous sections and more melodic as well. The shape of this portion begins on an F above middle C and remains within a fourth of that note. Finally when get to measure 60 the *Sheliach-tsibbur* sings another run that reaches to C above middle C (a fifth above the opening pitch) with the phrase ending at measure 62 back on the high F. The climax of the piece start's on the pickup to measure 65 on *l'ei-la* with 10 more measures of freely sung runs and trills ending on a held B*b* on the word *b'al-ma.* The final two measures *v'imru amen* is simply sung with just a slight elongation on the word "amen" ending back on the original F above middle C.

Unfortunately because much of Persian music is transmitted orally, very little written music can be found. However Bracha Zefira (1910-1990), a singer born into a Yemenite family in Jerusalem learned the melodies of the Persian Jews who had immigrated to Palestine from Iran. She was orphaned at a young age and lived among several different communities in her youth, raised by several volunteer foster families of different ethnic origins. From these different backgrounds she learned a large repertory of traditional songs. She was exposed to many songs of the Yemenite, Sephardic and Persian Jewish traditions.[185] When she was sixteen, she was sent to a music school in Jerusalem, which was staffed primarily with European-trained musicians. While in music school, Zefira developed a love for singing, especially singing the songs from her youth. She became passionate about sharing these songs with audiences of Western orientation and through the 1930s and 1940s she was a well-respected vocalist who performed folk, popular and art music dubbed "ethnic-fusion." Part of Zefira's success was due to the help of her accompanists, Paul Ben-Haim. Ben-Haim was not only Zefira's accompanist, he was also responsible for arranging many of her songs. In most cases, he first had to transcribe her melodies into Western musical notation. Zefira's melodies stemmed from Sephardic, Persian, Bucharian, Yemenite, Turkish and Syrian traditions.[186]

One of the melodies Bracha Zefira notated in her songbook Kolot Rabbim, Oriental Jewish Hymns and songs is "Elohei Tzid'ki" (Appendix - Music Example 2).

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[185] Jehoash Hirshberg, "The Vision of the East and the Heritage of the West: Ideological Pressures in the *Yishuv* Period and their Offshoots in Israeli Art Music during the Recent Two Decades" in Iyunim Bitkumat Israel, Studies in Zionism, the Yishuv and the State of Israel, The Ben Gurion Research Institute, Sede Boker, Ben Gurion University, vol. 14 (2004) p. 3.

[186] Kimberly Veenstra, "Paul Ben-Haim: Father of Modern Israeli Music" in The Ohio State Online Music Journal, Vol. 1, no. 2 (2008). http://www.osomjournal.org/issues/1-2/veenstra.html. (Accessed on January 10, 2010).

This para-liturgical song asks G-d for daily supplications such as a shelter, money, food and good health. When looking at the overall structure of the piece, it looks as though it is written in four parts A, B, C, and D. The shape of part A seems to consist of three measure phrases beginning on the F# above middle C with a very small step-wise vocal range, the third measure bringing us back to the opening note F#. This same movement is repeated four additional times in section A with the vocal range widening slightly with each repetition. Part B is only five measures long starting on an A eventually making its way down the scale finally ending on the B below middle C with the range widening to almost an octave. Part C's range expands even further to over an octave and consists mainly on elongated runs with the A alternating between A natural and A#. This nine measure passage start's the on B above middle C and through a series of step wise movements descends down the octave to the B below middle C. The climax of the entire piece occurs in the final section, D. On the first measure, the B above middle C is held out for the full 6 beats on the word *retze* (I need). Although at other points there are notes held out for that same amount of time, this is the first time it has occurred on a high note and comes across almost as a yell or a plea to G-d and follows the same pattern as the previous section. The vocal line makes its way down the scale introducing C naturals, D#'s and once again alternating between A natural and A#. Once this section arrives to the B below middle C the vocal line again goes back up and ends back on F#. At the end of the D section there is the D.C. al Fine ,which takes us back to the beginning and section A once more time.

Both of these musical examples a gives us clear examples of the vocal small vocal range (rarely over an octave), step wise movement, vocal trills and yodeling (*avaz*) which are common to Persian music

Conclusion

Of the eighty thousand Jews that lived in Iran on the eve of the Revolution, today some fifteen-twenty thousand remain and the community is aging. The trademark of post-Revolutionary Jewish life has been the community's absolute allegiance to the state. Given the Iranian government's spiteful stance toward Israel and Zionism, Iranian Jews have been forced to practice a difficult balancing act; they are able to practice Judaism in peace so long as they put aside any sense of connection to the Jewish state. However, the existing ambience in the country cannot but affect the long-term viability of the Jewish community. Anti-Semitism is not officially sanctioned by the government but ever present is the fear that the widespread hostility toward Israel will translate into acts of violence against Jewish individuals or institutions. Moreover, the government's official policy of promoting Holocaust denial cannot but be interpreted as anti-Semitic.

Today, Jewish life is mainly concentrated in Tehran. The local communities are in an irreversible state of decline. Moreover, there is real concern about intermarriage because of the scarcity of Jews of marriageable age. At least from a material point of view most Jews lead a comfortable life, earning their living in traditional, small-scale, commerce. However, most young Jews do not see a promising future for themselves in Iran.

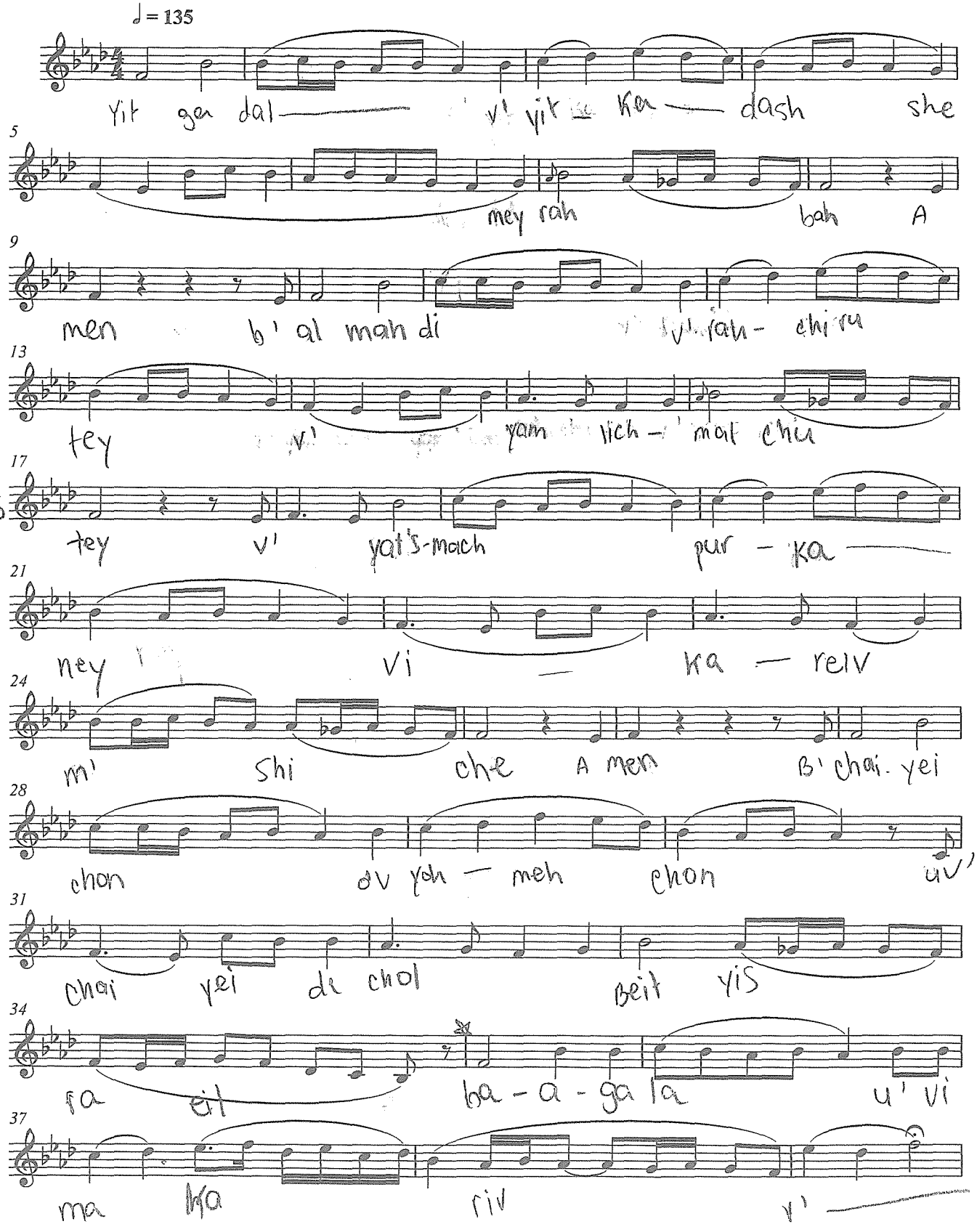
Though the Jews have been a presence in Iran for more than 2,700 years, their future is in Jeopardy. Twenty years from now, will there still be a Jewish community in Iran? During their many years of hardships it was their community, Judaism, traditions and music that held them together. Though they lived difficult lives, for the Jewish

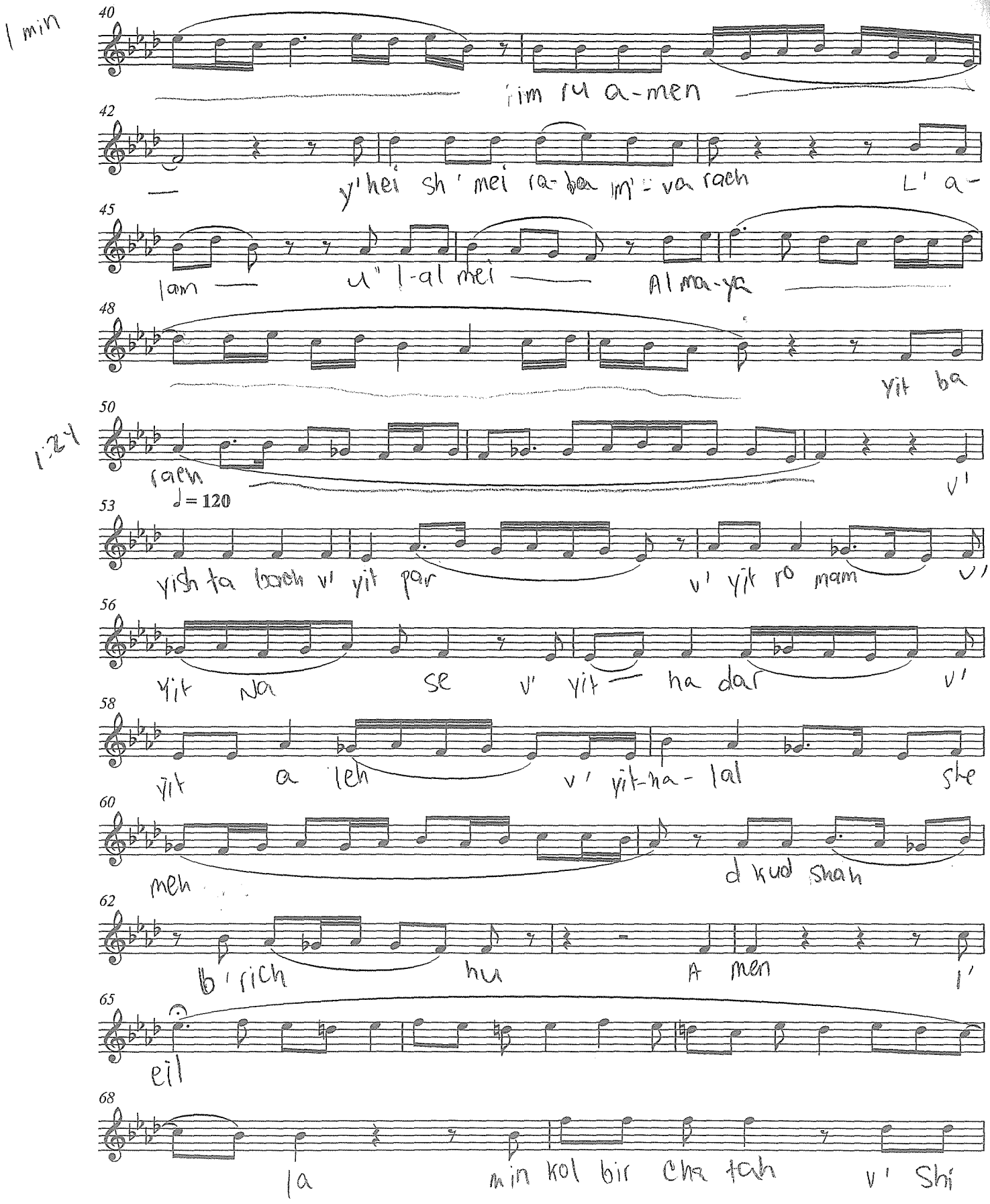
audience, music represented a true refuge from the problems of survival while religion focused the individual's attention on their personal troubles, providing them with the means to actively participate in a communal catharsis through prayer and ritual. Through religion, Jew's were able to understand their suffering and hope for eventual deliverance. Through music, however, they could escape from thinking about their problems, and simply enjoy the experience.

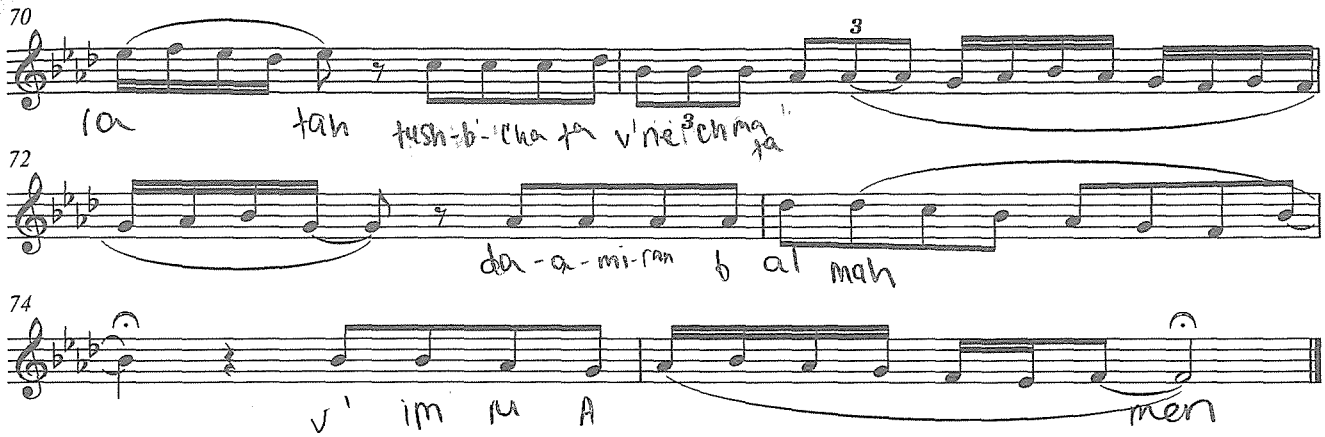
Each year more and more Jews leave Iran, most of them making new lives in Los Angeles, Great Neck, and Israel. While they are strengthened by the numbers in their community, what will their future be? Though there are numerous institutions set up to preserve the culture and history of the Persian Jews, both assimilation and intermarriage are on the rise and fewer members of the younger generation speak Farsi. However, the Jews of Iran have had a long history with a strong connection to the past that will develop in new ways.

music example 1

Hatzi Kaddish

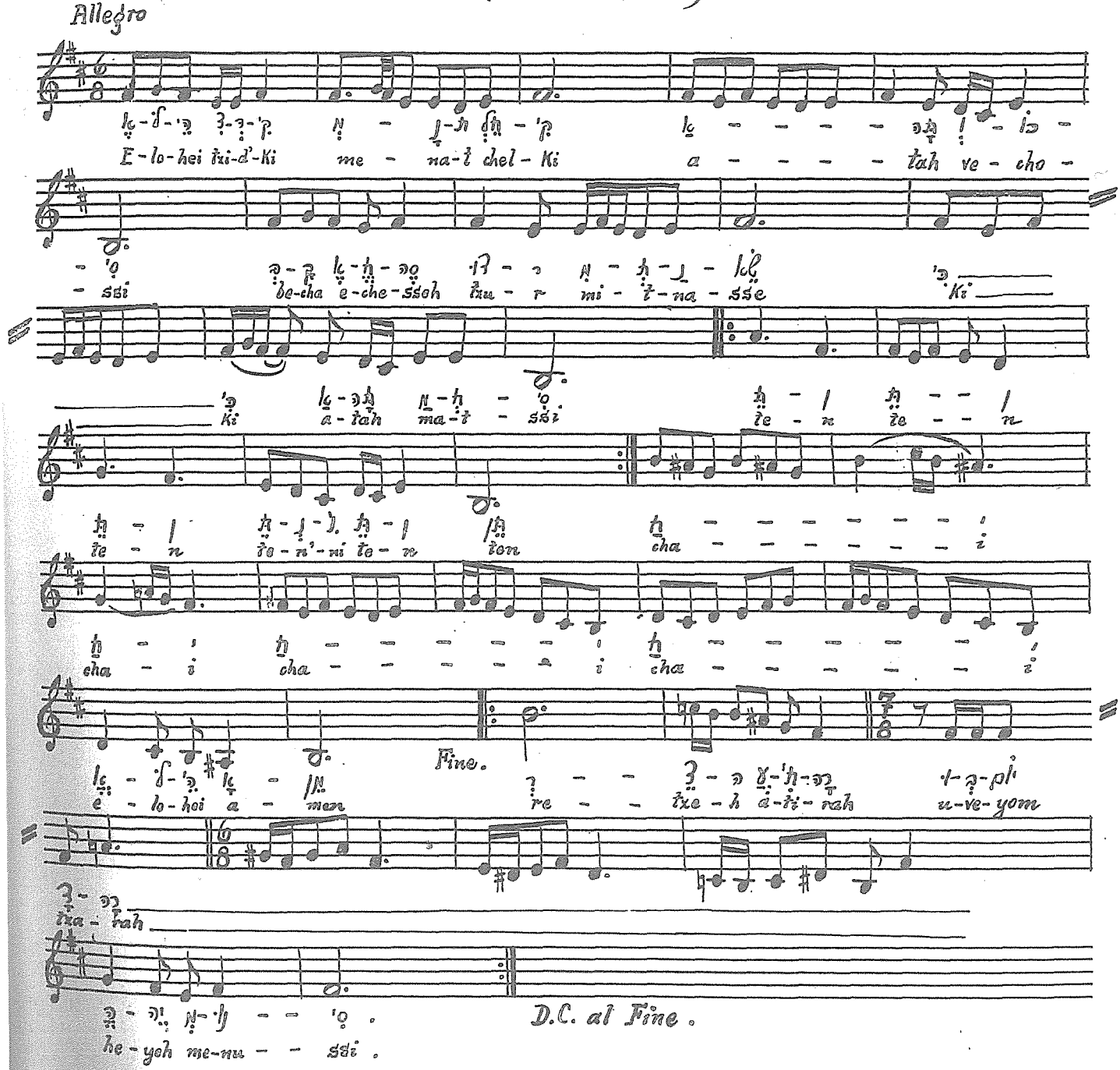



1 min
40
im ru a-men
42
y'hei sh' mei ra-ba im' va rach
L' a-
45
lam
u" l-al mei
Al ma-ya
48
Yit ba
1:24
50
raeh
♩= 120
v'
53
yish ta bach v' yit par
v' yit ro mam
v'
56
Yit na se v' yit ha dar
v'
58
yit a leh v' yit-ha- lal she
60
meh
d kud shah
62
b' rich hu A men l'
65
eil
68
la min kol bir cha tah v' shi


70
3
la tan tush-b'-cha ta v'ne'echma ta
72
da-a-mi-ran b al mah
74
v' im m A men

music example 2

אֱלֹהֵי עִדְקִי
(Elohei ṯxid'Ki)



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