

AT THE CROSSROADS OF THREE CULTURES: YOUNG IRANIAN AMERICAN
JEWS IN LOS ANGELES AND THEIR NEW ORGANIZATIONS

By

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Abstract

Iranian American Jews are a large and highly visible community in Los Angeles. The intricate intermingling of cultures and values from Western and Eastern society results in unique needs for members of this diaspora community. One notable trend in this population is the recent spurt of newly established nonprofit organizations created by and catering to young adults. These organizations focus on subjects such as increasing political awareness, illuminating social problems such as drunk driving, encouraging philanthropic giving, and providing education about Judaism. The purpose of this study was to analyze these new nonprofit organizations to find out what they are doing well and what elements of their programming can be improved. The study also aimed to find if there are members of the community who feel disconnected from these organizations and, if so, why.

This study included interviews with 20 young adult members of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles as well as observational data collected at organization events. Interviews highlighted several positive contributions of new Iranian Jewish organizations, including high numbers of community members reached, providing opportunities for networking, and encouragement of philanthropy among young community members. Interviews also revealed some criticisms of current organizations, including a lack of diverse opinions in organization programming, too much fear-based programming, and an excessive focus on Israel-related issues. Information gathered from interviews points to several recommendations that current organizations can incorporate into their programming to address the criticisms. Comments from interviews also underscore the possible need for a socially or politically progressive organization within the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. Understanding

the needs and organizations within the Iranian Jewish community is relevant to understanding other immigrant Jewish communities and has implications for the Jewish community as a whole.

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Introduction

In the years following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, large numbers of Iranians left their country to find a more stable and safe living situation. A significant number of these exiles were Iranian Jews who eventually settled in Los Angeles, creating a large diaspora community. With a few exceptions, the community was slow to develop formal organizations and institutions to cater to the multitude of specific needs within the population. Recently, 1st and 2nd generation Persian Jews¹ have countered this lack of formal community involvement by forming a wealth of organizations. These thriving organizations have been spearheaded by young community members who are utilizing American models of community organizing and political activism and making them uniquely Persian. As documented in the *Jewish Journal*, young Iranian Jews “have fully embraced life in America and are championing greater political activity for the Iranian Jewish community in Southern California” (Melamed, 2008b). The surge of new Iranian American Jewish groups and nonprofit organizations developed by and for young adults include The Lev Foundation, 30 Years After, Society of Young Philanthropists (SYP), Ledor Vador, Reach-U-All, Jewlosophy, Nessah Israel Young Professionals (NIYP), and Jewish Unity Network (JUN). These organizations address issues as varied as political activism, philanthropy, Jewish education, and drunk driving, yet many directly and indirectly maintain conservative or traditional values.

The purpose of this project is to gain a greater understanding of the current groups and nonprofit organizations that serve young adults in the Iranian American Jewish community of Los Angeles. Through interviews and observations at organizational events, I investigated the types of programming that Iranian Jewish organizations provide for community members in their

¹ The terms Iranian and Persian are used interchangeably in this thesis.

20s and 30s. This included an assessment of what the organizations are doing well, what aspects of their programming can be improved, and an analysis of whether there are organizational needs that have not yet been acknowledged or addressed. This study also aimed to find whether politically or socially progressive people in the community who are disconnected from these organizations might be engaged through slight changes in programming or the establishment of a new organization.

Brief History of Iranian Jews

Before any examination of today's Persian Jewish community can be made, it is vital to first explore the experience of those who settled in the United States nearly thirty years ago after a brutal and violent exile. From 1925 until 1975, the country was ruled by the Pahlavi dynasty, which granted greater freedom and opportunity to the Jews in Iran. While Jews enjoyed more security and acceptance under this rule, they were still marginalized and lived a completely separate existence from the Muslim majority (Daftari, 2008). In 1979, the fundamentalist Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and took over the government of Iran. At this time, the regime began handing out death sentences to prominent Iranian Jews and confiscating property from citizens. Fearing for their lives, about 60,000 Jews left Iran and migrated to the United States, Israel, and various European countries. This number represented a majority of the Iranian Jewish population.

Currently, Los Angeles is home to the largest diaspora community of Iranian Jews. The most recent numbers (including first and second generation Iranian-Americans) estimate the range of Iranian Jews in the Los Angeles at 45,000 to 72,000 (Ansari, 2009; Hoffman, 2011). In magazines, newspaper articles, and elsewhere, the city is sometimes humorously referred to as "Irangelles" or "Tehrangeles" because of the large and influential Iranian community

(Bahrapour, 2003; Wells, 2006). Since the revolution, the diaspora community in Los Angeles has continued to thrive and has established prominent synagogues, Iranian Jewish magazines, and various nonprofit organizations, including an Iranian American Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.

Growing Interest in Iranian Jews

A recent surge of articles about Iranian communities in the United States reflects a growing interest by the general American public to more fully understand the nuances of this immigrant group. Notable articles include “Persian Gulf” in Tablet and “Persia on the Pacific” in the New Yorker. Another visible indication of this increased interest is the Iranian Studies initiative started by the Farhang Foundation, which seeks to implement an Iranian Studies program at the University of Southern California. A recent international museum exhibit also demonstrates an increasing interest in the Iranian community. The exhibit, which debuted in 2010 at Beit Hatfutsot in Israel, is called “Light and Shadows: The story of Iran and the Jews” and is sponsored by the Y&S Nazarian Family Foundation, which is based in Los Angeles. Artifacts highlighted by the exhibit include ancient manuscripts, musical instruments, and traditional wedding clothes. This exhibit, the Iranian Studies initiative, and the various articles written about the community reveal a growing interest by the general public to understand Iranian Jews.

Unique Characteristics of the Community

While the breadth of research on the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles is small, some studies have attempted to identify general trends and patterns. In analyzing the current state of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles, it is important to consider this community’s status as an immigrant subgroup: Iranian Jews were a minority in their country of origin as well

as in the United States. Bozorgmehr (1997) argues that past research on acculturation and assimilation has focused primarily on major immigrant groups, while ignoring immigrant subgroups such as Iranian Jews. Because of their historical minority status, these groups are more likely to retain cultural attributes in their new country (Bozorgmehr, 1997). In the case of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles, these attributes include speaking Persian, socializing with and marrying members of their group, holding traditional views on gender roles and sexuality, and participating in religious and communal life.

In analyzing acculturation and assimilation in this community, Golshan (2005) found that Iranian Jewish immigrants and their children have progressed to an intermediate stage of acculturation. They have started the process of acculturating, but have not yet begun fully integrating practices and traditions from the surrounding community. Evidence for this intermediate stage is that many Iranian Jews (including the immigrant generation and their children) maintain Farsi as their primary language and associate highly with other Iranian Jews in terms of social affiliations. One interesting aspect of this immigrant population is its low level of assimilation into mainstream society relative to other Jewish immigrant groups. Iranian Jews have strongly maintained various aspects of their culture such as language, values, and traditions. For instance, “Of Iranian immigrants, 84 percent speak their mother tongue at home” (Bozorgmehr & Waldinger, 1996, p. 370). This statistic reveals a high level of attachment to ethnic culture rather than a tendency to assimilate. Furthermore, Iranian Jews have created certain enclaves in the Los Angeles area with grocery stores, synagogues, and stores that are geared specifically to the Iranian Jewish community. As noted by Phillips and Khalili, “Almost every block of Pico Boulevard in Beverlywood, just south of Beverly Hills, has a grocery store or other store with large signs in Farsi” (1995, p. 193). Other visible enclaves of Iranian Jews in

Los Angeles are present in Beverly Hills, the Valley, Brentwood, Encino, and Westwood. For the greater Jewish community, there is an important effect of this low assimilation that must be addressed.

While traditional aspects of Iranian culture are being preserved, Jewish traditions are being maintained as well. Since there is widespread concern in the Persian Jewish community over losing Jewish traditions and rituals, many members of the immigrant generation in Los Angeles have increased their levels of Jewish observance. A Los Angeles Times article explains, “Having maintained their distinctive culture for millennia, Iranian Jews here deeply fear that they may become the end of the line of a storied branch of Judaism” (McDonnell, 1998). This fear has been translated into a more active and visible practice of Judaism than was present in Iran.

The most prominent example of this greater level of observance is synagogue attendance. Many members of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles are affiliated with a synagogue and regularly attend services. While the concept of synagogue membership did not exist in Iran, Persian Jewish synagogues in Los Angeles have begun to adopt the membership model (Melamed, 2004). In addition to establishing their own synagogues, such as Nessah Synagogue in Beverly Hills, Iranian Jews have joined various established congregations in Los Angeles, especially Conservative and Orthodox ones. In fact, several Los Angeles synagogues have been experiencing rapid growth over the last several decades due to the increased numbers of Iranian members (Melamed, 2008a). Most notably, Sinai Temple in Westwood has a significant proportion of Iranian Jewish members (Phillips & Khalili, 1995).

Several researchers have studied intermarriage rates in the Jewish community and the effects of this trend. Interestingly, rates of intermarriage among Iranian Jews are much lower

when compared to several other Jewish groups. In the article, *Middle Easterners: A new kind of immigrant*, the authors explain, “Iranian Jewish households are not only very endogamous, but prefer their sons and daughters to marry Iranian Jews” (Bozorgmehr, Der-Martirosian & Waldinger, 1996, p. 368). This tendency to marry within the group makes it more likely that Jewish traditions will be passed down to the next generation. Even though rates of intermarriage are considered low when compared to the wider Jewish community, concerns about intermarriage are still a significant issue in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. Many older Iranians fear intermarriage because they view it as a threat to the continuity of community traditions (Hanassab, 1998).

Several researchers have investigated the values surrounding dating, marriage, and sexuality within the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles (Philips & Khalili, 1995; Hanassab, 1998). In Iran, differing rules guiding the behavior of men and women were prevalent. For instance, females were socialized to be compliant, dutiful, and subordinate to male members of society and to fulfill domestic roles such as caring for their children and maintaining their household. On the other hand, males were encouraged to be assertive and independent and pursue professional careers (Jalali, 2005). Some researchers claim that the different standards for men and women that existed in Iran have been maintained or have become even more exaggerated in the Los Angeles community of Iranian Jews (Philips & Khalili, 1995; Hanassab, 1998). This is yet another example of how Iranian Jewish families have strongly maintained traditional values and have tended to create insulated social networks where they interact mostly with other Iranian Jews. Kelley (1993) explains that Iranian Jews in America have preferred to mainly socialize with other Iranian Jews due to the familiarity and their fears that their children might abandon their traditions and cultural values.

Some of the unique characteristics of this immigrant group have greatly contributed to the positive impact they have had on the general Jewish community. Data suggests that Iranian immigrants arrived in the United States with high levels of education (Bozorgmehr & Sabagh, 1986). These high levels of education are likely related to high entrepreneurship in the community and have contributed to the noticeable success of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles. This immigrant community has achieved success in multiple arenas and they are beginning to receive greater recognition in the political world. In 2007, the city of Beverly Hills elected its first Iranian-Jewish mayor, Jimmy Delshad, who was re-elected to this position in 2010. By obtaining positions of power in various domains, Iranian Jews have been able to bring attention to issues that concern the greater Jewish community.

In terms of social class and affluence, many have written about Iranian Jews in Los Angeles and the open displays of wealth in the community. However, it is important to understand why these displays may occur. Dr. Nahid Pirnazar, a historian who studies Iranian Jews, has explained that, “The historic limitations to publicly celebrate their Jewish identity combined with their affluence in Los Angeles has created a tendency towards extravagance” (Pirnazar, 2005). While many in the community have achieved great economic success and often display this success, it is also important to highlight the unrecognized poverty that exists. Journalist Karmel Melamed has noted, “With a substantial number of affluent and financially successful Persian Jews living in Southern California, it might be hard to believe there are some who live below the poverty line” (2007a). Recognizing that there are community members who are not affluent and wealthy is crucial because this is one significant issue that is rarely discussed in public and greater acknowledgement could mean that something can be done to address this need.

Iranian and American Jews

In Los Angeles and other large cities that are considered hubs of Jewish life, there appears to be a divide between the general Jewish community and various groups of immigrant Jewish communities. In the case of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles, this division can be attributed to a variety of factors, including differing understandings of Jewish denominations. Bozorgmehr explains, “Jews only practiced one type of Judaism (i.e., traditional) in Iran. As such, Iranian Jews were a monolithic community religiously” (1997, p. 397). One young leader who was interviewed for this project also commented on the denominational differences. He clarifies,

In America, there are a lot more options for Jews, for example, just the religious community, all the religious organizations that exist here, whether it's Aish (Aish HaTorah) or JUN (Jewish Unity Network) or Chabad or Sephardic Education Center. In Iran, they didn't exist because there was one strain of Judaism- there was traditional Judaism and folks could pick and choose whether they wanted to keep Shabbat or keep kosher or go to synagogue; there was one denomination, one leading rabbi in Iran. Here, there are 3, 4, 5 different denominations, within that there are dozens of different synagogues and rabbis, and even within the Orthodox or the Conservative, there's different value systems and different priorities that you can pick and choose from, and that has led to more creativity.

This fundamental difference in the way American Jews and Iranian Jews religiously organize themselves may be one reason that these groups have not become more intermingled in the last several decades while living side by side in Los Angeles. The lack of understanding of Jewish denominations may also help to explain why some Iranian Jews in Los Angeles are reluctant to participate in mainstream synagogues and prefer Iranian synagogues, such as Nessah.

Other Jewish immigrant groups have also experienced a similar difficulty in understanding American Jewish society. For example, in a study focusing on Israelis who have immigrated to Los Angeles, Schwarz (2009) suggests that a lack of understanding of the nuances of American Jewish society, such as religious denominations, may prevent Israelis from participating in organizations that are developed and led by American Jews (see also Shokeid,

1988).

There is also an observed division between Soviet Jews in Los Angeles and the greater Jewish community. Jayanti (1995) explains that this division can be attributed to differences in each group's conception of Jewish identity. While the majority of American Jews tend to view their "Jewishness" as a cultural identifier, many Jews who have migrated from other countries, specifically the former Soviet Union, view their "Jewishness" as a racial or ethnic distinction (Markowitz, 2001). Similarly, Iranian Jews view their Jewishness as an ethnic distinction. These vastly different conceptions of what it means to be Jewish has led to divisiveness and misunderstandings between communities.

Transition from Organizational Life in Iran to Los Angeles

Government, politics, social norms, and organizational life in the United States were vastly different than in Iran, and the immigrants who arrived in Los Angeles had to adjust to these dramatic differences. In Iran, participation in organizational life was not extremely common. According to Bozorgmehr, "Formal organizations did not flourish in pre-revolutionary Iran, partly because of the Shah's fears that they might lead to oppositional activity against his regime. Nevertheless, religious minorities were allowed to be active in their own voluntary organizations" (1997, p. 396). This was a dramatic contrast with Jewish organizational life in Los Angeles. According to Jayanti (1995), Jews in the Soviet Union and Iran were labeled as ethnically Jewish through legal categorization or rigid social categories. Without this type of categorization, American Jews show their Jewishness through some external means. For this reason, Jayanti states, "American Judaism is thus characterized by being 'organizational'" (p. 91). This understanding may partly explain the abundance of long-established organizations by American Jews in the United States.

After their migration to Los Angeles, older Iranian Jews began forming organizations to serve the general needs of the community. These included the Iranian American Jewish Federation (IAJF) and SIAMAK, both founded in 1980. According to its website, the IAJF was established to protect the interests of Jews throughout the world. Since its inception, the IAJF has worked to assist individuals applying for refugee status in the United States, ease the transition for new community members who have migrated, and provide emergency funding for critical needs. SIAMAK has also made significant contributions to the Iranian Jewish community. In its 30 years of existence, the organization has focused on community outreach and has provided financial assistance for newly re-settled immigrants.

Starting in 2004, Iranian Jewish youth have begun to rapidly develop and establish several active and successful organizations within the community. The fast growth of these young organizations and their apparent success in attracting participants suggest that young Iranian Jews have perhaps adopted some of the organizational patterns of American Jewish society. This development can be seen as occurring in parallel to the gradually increasing participation of the immigrant generation in politics and community issues. For instance, Soomekh (2010) explains that while Iranian Jews have been highly interested in international issues such as supporting the State of Israel for over decade, only in the last several years has the community started to pay more attention to local civic issues. According to Soomekh, the 2005 election of mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is one example of increasing participation in local politics by Iranian Jews in Los Angeles (2010). Soomekh asserts that a large number of Persian Jews in Los Angeles voted for Villaraigosa and contributed funds to his campaign. Soomekh explains that the support from the community was most likely due to Iranian Jews' concerns with business issues as well as a sense that Villaraigosa's win would be most positive for their

business dealings. Although this instance of political interest may have been due to financial concerns, it still reflects a significant increase and greater interest in political activism by community members.

Bozorgmehr's (1997) concept of internal ethnicity also provides one theory that can explain why children of the immigrant generation, rather than the immigrants themselves, have initiated vastly greater participation in organizational life. The idea of internal ethnicity refers to the existence of various ethnic groups within an immigrant group. Bozorgmehr argues that groups who were minorities in their country of origin display less assimilation than groups who were part of the majority in their country of origin. In his research, he has shown that this theory of less assimilation applies to groups such as Iranian Jews in the United States. When applied to the recent trend of new organizations developed by young people, the concept might explain why children of immigrants and those born in the United States have been a pivotal force. In other words, the children who were born in the United States or left Iran when they were very young did not personally experience the feeling of growing up as a minority in a country with a homogenous majority. In Los Angeles, the children of immigrants have been taught that there is no single accepted majority culture, but rather a melting pot of various minorities and that there is room for each culture to be preserved while also having a shared American identity. Therefore, the effects of internal ethnicity, namely feelings of voicelessness and alienation from mainstream civic and political life, do not burden the children of the immigrants. This is one possible reason why the young members of the community have been instrumental in developing new organizations in the Los Angeles community that celebrate their Persian Jewish heritage.

Organizations

Nonprofit Organizations

Society of Young Philanthropists

The Society of Young Philanthropists is a nonprofit organization created in 2004 with chapters in Los Angeles and Dallas. It was one of the first completely volunteer based organizations established by young adults in the community and aims to raise money and raise awareness for a wide range of charities. The leaders of the organization hope to inspire community members to start their philanthropic efforts earlier in life, and they strongly emphasize that donating money is not the only way to help. Participants are encouraged to donate their time, skills, and other resources. Past events have included annual galas, a Gulf Coast Relief Benefit, and Poker Nights. Funds raised at various events have been donated to organizations such as Beit T'Shuvah, Save a Child's Heart, Million Trees LA, The Aviva Center, American Jewish World Service, as well as direct assistance for the crisis in Darfur.

While SYP does not only target Persian Jewish individuals for fundraising and philanthropy, the majority of the leaders and board members of the Los Angeles chapter are Persian Jews; thus they have a large influence in the Persian Jewish community and it is appropriate to include them here.

30 Years After

30 Years After is a nonprofit organization that was started in 2007. It is based in Los Angeles with additional chapters in New York and Israel. Taking its name from the date of the Iranian Revolution, this organization focuses on increasing political engagement in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. The group was established by several Iranian Jews in their 20s who wanted to harness the untapped power of the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles

and raise awareness about political issues. The idea for the organization was spurred by the feeling of helplessness that some of the founding members felt during the Israel-Lebanon conflict of 2006.

Every 2 years, 30 Years After organizes a large Civic Action Conference, which features discussion panels, presentations by politicians, appearances by prominent community leaders, seminars, and workshops. Past conferences have been held in September 2008 and October 2010. At these conferences, speakers have included the Mayor of Los Angeles Antonio Villaraigosa, Former Mayor of Beverly Hills Jimmy Delshad, Rabbi David Wolpe, Senatorial Candidate Carly Fiorina, Professor David Menashri, Rabbi Shmuly Boteach, and Congressman Henry Waxman.

30 Years After is the primary and possibly the sole organization in the Persian Jewish community of Los Angeles that is focused on increasing political involvement. On their website, they state that they want “to educate and unite the Iranian American Jewish community on important political issues” and “promote the participation of Iranian Jews in American civic life.” In describing the numbers of people that participate, a young leader from the organization explained, “We have about 7000 people on our email list. About 5000 different people have come to our events. About 500 people are paying members of the organization. We have registered about 1000 new voters. Our biggest event was 1,300 people at our 2nd Biennial Civic Action Conference on Oct 10, 2010.”

Lev Foundation

The Lev Foundation is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 2008 in honor of Daniel Levian, a young Iranian American Jew who died in a drunk driving accident in Los Angeles. Close friends and family decided to channel their grieving into something positive for the community. First, the organization leaders set out to find data about social behaviors in the

community. By administering a quantitative survey, leaders found statistics that they felt were shocking. For instance, one young leader said,

One of the statistics was something staggering ... of individuals in our community who took the survey who were 21 or older, 62% of men reported that they drank and drove or were a passenger in a car with someone who drank and drove as opposed to 55% of women in the same situation; what scares me the most is that 33% of high school students reported doing the same thing. The other one that we found most shocking was the percent of members of our community 21 years or older that reported driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol in the past 6 months was 42%, the national average is 16%.

The Lev Foundation works to inspire young people to lead productive and balanced lives and to educate them to stay away from dangerous and reckless activities. Using educational programs, special events, and community service, the foundation aims to encourage awareness and community involvement. The Lev Foundation is led by high school students and graduate students, as well as other young adults. One of their prominent projects is a taxi voucher program that provides safe transportation for young people at large events in the hopes of minimizing drunk driving accidents while also raising awareness about the issue. Their past events have included a gala dinner, a Hanukkah mixer and toy drive, a Haiti Relief Fundraising Mixer, a Blood Drive for the City of Hope, a Winter Ball in 2010, and a series of seminars focused on improving communication between parents and children in the Iranian Jewish community.

Groups Housed at Nessah Synagogue

Ledor Vador

Ledor Vador is one of many groups housed at Nessah Synagogue in Beverly Hills. Translated from Hebrew as “from generation to generation,” the group’s mission revolves around educating and connecting its youth to the rich heritage of their community, upholding tradition while making it accessible in a modern context. Led by a team of young individuals, the group tries to use their own knowledge of what is missing in the realm of education and

entertainment aimed towards their demographic to come up with topical yet engaging events. For example, “Sushi, Saki, Shabbat!” is one Ledor Vador event that invites guests to come mingle, be entertained and observe the spirit of the Sabbath with other young Jewish community members. They hold annual Holocaust Remembrance Day brunches, Chanukah toy drives for Cedar Sinai’s Children’s Hospital, Purim parties and blood drives. Also, the organization recently celebrated its third event honoring IDF soldiers. An interactive luncheon is followed by a night of dancing which allows one to party with the soldiers while hopefully learning about their experiences in the army. Most recently, Ledor Vador has teamed up with the Jewish Scholars Program, another group at Nessah Synagogue. Together, they created Jewlosophy, a lecture series that encourages community members to choose the Judaism-related topics that will be discussed in order to promote greater enthusiasm and participation. In essence, the group seeks to bring matters concerning Israel and Judaism into a social, relevant, thought provoking yet comfortable environment while providing a creative educational experience.

Reach-U-All

The Reach-U-All Group is another Nessah Synagogue group and was established in 2008. The group is led by students and young Iranian Jewish professionals in Los Angeles. Their website explains that,

Reach-U-All Group is vested in promoting, inspiring and teaching the inner beauties of Jewish values, heritage and culture. We are dedicated to bring forth unity and growth within our community regardless of the observance standards. Our commitment is to strive beyond what is expected, and our mission is to bring light, awakening and momentum to the great potential of Iranian American Jewish community, specifically our youth.

This particular group focuses on Jewish education, heritage, culture, and providing lectures and events for the young Iranian American Jewish community. Past events have included lectures titled “Sex and Relationships,” “The Kabbalistic View on Shabbat,” “Sex, Drugs, and Bar-

Mitzvahs,” as well as a Purim lunch, and a New Year’s event. Recently, the organization hosted a lecture titled “Happiness and Success: How much does your happiness cost?” with guest, Sam Nazarian. In conjunction with Rabbi Menachem Weiss, Mr. Nazarian spoke about the role of money during his journey toward finding happiness, and explained that the local Persian Jewish community may sometimes place unnecessary focus on the financial aspect of success. Overall, Reach-U-All appears to encourage some open discussion of social problems in the Iranian Jewish community. The group also encourages young Iranian Jews to be more religious by urging them to attend synagogue more frequently and following Jewish dietary laws.

Nessah Israel Young Professionals

Nessah Israel Young Professionals is yet another group that is part of Nessah Synagogue in Beverly Hills. NIYP’s leadership and participants are composed of college students and young professionals in Los Angeles. The group fosters leadership skills in young adults and aspires to inspire passion about Judaism through educational seminars and social events. The overall goal of the group is to unite the young Persian Jewish community and to allow people to reconnect to their Jewish roots.

NIYP also has an annual gala to raise money for a particular cause or charity. In the past, they have donated proceeds from their galas to Friends of the Israel Defense Forces (FIDF) and various projects related to FIDF, such as the LEGACY program. This program provides Israeli children who have had a family member killed in action with funded trips to the United States for summer camp. In addition to their annual galas, other past events include an event with Holocaust survivor Edith Flagg, a Passover party, a presentation titled, “How to Defend Israel on College Campuses” with Colonel Bentzi Gruber, and, in conjunction with Lador Vador, “Sushi, Saki, Shabbat.”

Development of New Organizations

These groups and nonprofit organizations address an array of specific needs in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. As a response to feeling powerless in the face of war, 30 Years After was developed to tackle the issue of political activism. In response to a tragedy, the Lev Foundation was established to begin addressing taboo subjects in the community. As a reaction to the wealth and social networking power of the community, Society of Young Philanthropists was founded to channel these resources towards charity and encourage higher levels of philanthropy. Finally, as a response to the rapidly growing young adult sector of the community, various groups at Nessah Synagogue were founded to educate young people about Judaism, create social events, and preserve the continuity of Persian Jews.

There are several reasons that may explain why young Iranian Jews have felt it necessary to develop their own organizations rather than joining already existing American Jewish organizations. One simple explanation may be that Iranian Jews want to be around other Iranian Jews due to the level of comfort. A common family language and similarities in upbringing are likely to provide a sense of familiarity and contribute to the desire to congregare with other Iranian Jews. Related to this idea is the possibility that Iranian Jews do not feel comfortable in mainstream American Jewish organizations. The goals of the organizations and topics of programming may not be aligned with the specific interests and needs of the Iranian Jewish community.

In addition to these reasons, entrepreneurial trends in the Iranian community might also explain the development of these organizations. Iranians, and especially Iranian Jews, are known for their tendency to develop their own businesses and be self-employed rather than work for others. Data has shown that, in Los Angeles, Iranians are one of the most entrepreneurial

immigrant groups (Min & Bozorgmehr, 2000). In fact, in several of my interviews with young leaders, they mentioned the “entrepreneurial spirit” of young adults in the community when explaining the rise in new Iranian Jewish groups. It seems that this tendency in the business sector has translated into the social entrepreneurship that is currently displayed by so many young adults in the organizational world. Combined with the tight-knit social networks and resources of the community, the entrepreneurial experience and skills of the young adults have lent themselves well to the development of these new groups and organizations.

Moreover, certain values in American society have possibly spurred the establishment of these various groups. In some ways, it is characteristically American to believe that even though you are part of mainstream American culture, there is a value in preserving your distinctive cultural traits. Young Iranians are acting on this belief that has been instilled in them as a result of living and being educated in America. Many people in the community feel comfortable simultaneously embracing their American identity and their Persian identity. Thus, the establishment of these new Persian organizations is a reflection of the comfort that young adults are feeling in proudly asserting the Persian side of their identity, while also using American models of community organizing to form their groups. In talking about 30 Years After in contrast to the more long-standing organizations, one young leader explained,

There were a few established Persian Jewish organizations where the leaders were in their 60’s or 70’s or 80’s, and for them, young leaders meant throwing parties, but not anything meaningful. We want to do meaningful activism, political action, community organizing, fundraising, and be like any other American organization.

In further examining this trend in the community, it appears that Iranian Jews are establishing more organizations than young adults in other immigrant groups. Several people who were interviewed shared their understanding of this notable and unique trend among young Iranian Jews. One young person said,

Compared to other immigrant groups we have so many resources, we have so many connections, we're really well connected, and we have so much opportunity. We're in a much better economic boat than immigrants from most other countries. And I think that some bright individuals within our community, the younger ones, I think that they have wanted to make a difference and use those resources and connections that they have.

Various aspects of the community, such as close social networks and economic prosperity, are interrelated with this burgeoning organizational trend. A comprehensive understanding of some of the current organizations is necessary to better understand their achievements, how their reach can be expanded, and whether new types of organizations are needed.

Methodology

Methods for this study included interviews, observation of events, and analysis of documents, such as organization pamphlets and websites. Interviews were conducted with members of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles, with a focus on individuals in their 20's and early 30's. Interviewees included community members considered to be participants in Iranian Jewish nonprofit organizations, as well as those considered to be non-participants. For the purpose of this research, participants were defined as people who had attended 2 or more Persian Jewish organizational events in the last year. Non-participants were defined as people who had attended 1 or 0 Persian Jewish organizational events in the last year. Those who had attended 1 event were included in non-participant category because some interviewees had attended 1 event to find out more about a particular organization and did not feel connected to or did not want to return to that organization's events. Interviews with several leaders of these organizations were also an important part of this research project.

Overall, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent letter prior to the interview that explained the confidentiality of all the

information obtained through the interviews. All interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded, and transcribed. The interview pool consisted of 11 females and 9 males, ranging in age from 21 to 31. The interviewees included 4 leaders, 6 participants, and 10 non-participants. Of these 10 non-participants, 6 had attended 0 events and 4 had attended 1 event in the last year. Three sets of interview questions were created to cater to participants, non-participants, and leaders of organizations. Interviewees included people who were born in Iran as well as people born in the United States, and all are currently members of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles. Interviewees were recruited through a non-random, snowballing process. They were chosen through my personal networks, and in addition, several interviewees made referrals and recommendations for others to be interviewed. To try to achieve a diverse and representative sample, I spoke to numerous attendees at the organizational events I observed. In speaking to these potential interviewees, I sought out individuals from different parts of Los Angeles with varied educational and professional backgrounds. The final sample included people who grew up in La Canada, the Valley, Pacific Palisades, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and the South Bay. In terms of occupation, the interviewee pool included college students, graduate students, lawyers, doctors, individuals working in the film industry, individuals working in the fashion industry, internet technology consultants, and researchers. While I also sought a politically diverse sample, it was difficult to assess this area due to the reluctance of interviewees to categorize themselves as belonging to any one political party.

The decision to use qualitative rather than quantitative data was purposeful. One benefit of using qualitative methods is that they allow participants to give more elaborate and detailed information. For instance, in the interviews for this project, people were able to describe events that they had attended and describe their feelings about each event in great detail. Furthermore,

meeting with interviewees in person allowed the me to interpret body language and respondents' tone and also get a better understanding of people's willingness to participate in the project and answer particular questions.

A limitation of this methodology is that, in the short time frame of the Master's Thesis, I was only able to interview 20 individuals. A larger random sample would have yielded more information about the overall population of young Iranian Jewish adults in Los Angeles. Even so, using a non-random sample was, in fact, beneficial because a small random sample would not have provided as much diversity in the demographics of interviewees or in the opinions expressed.

In addition to interviews, I attended and observed several events sponsored by Persian Jewish nonprofit organizations and groups targeting young adults in Los Angeles, including the 30 Years After Civic Action Conference on October 10, 2010, a Reach-U-All event titled "Happiness and Success" with Sam Nazarian and Rabbi Menachem Weiss at Nessah Synagogue, a 30 Years After Pre-Conference Mixer in Beverly Hills, and a Lev Foundation event, in conjunction with Reach-U-All on Mar 29, 2011, titled, "Communicating in a New Era: A Discussion between Parents and Young Adults." Attending these events allowed for a more detailed understanding of the programming and better insight into the goals of these organizations and groups.

Findings

Positive Contributions of Organizations

During their initial years, these young organizations have been visibly successful, and there are numerous examples of the positive contributions they have made to the Persian Jewish community of Los Angeles.

Numbers and Networking

One significant contribution is that most of these organizations are able to attract large crowds for their events. Large numbers mean that these events provide extensive networking opportunities for participants who are seeking social and professional contacts. According to leaders at 30 Years After, the organization has had about 5,000 different people attend their events with 500 people being paying members. Large numbers also mean that these organizations are able to relay their messages to significant numbers of people. As one leader stated, “We can turn out 300 people at an event fairly easily with emails and Facebook.” Since these groups can attract large numbers without expending much manpower or financial resources on marketing, leaders and other members have been able to concentrate their efforts on other aspects of developing the organization, such as program development and fundraising. Another result of their ability to attract large crowds is that these organizations are strengthening the community by increasing bonds and networks between community members.

Furthermore, these organizations are so successful in attracting attendees and members, that it was extremely difficult to locate young Iranian Jews in Los Angeles who had never attended an event held by one of these organizations. It was also difficult to locate people who had not attended any events in the last year for the purposes of being included in this study as a non-participant. In other words, even people who were highly critical of the organizations and

their programming had usually attended at least one and often more than one event or conference sponsored by these organizations. It remains unclear whether this difficulty arose from the fact that there are few non-participants in the Persian Jewish community of Los Angeles or that the true non-participants are more difficult to locate because of their different social networks. This area deserves further study as the percentages of people in the community who participate and those who do not participate still remain unclear.

Over the course of the interviewing process, I found that people who I had predicted would be non-participants were actually participants. My prediction of their status as non-participants was based on previous informal conversations with them and my impression that they had been critical or disconnected from Persian Jewish organizational life. Yet, as I spoke to more young community members, I found that many of those who had strong criticisms of these organizations still attended many of their events and programming.

One reason for this finding is that many of the interviewees had friends involved in the leadership of the organizations. When questioned further, some young adults stated that their reasoning for attending these events was to provide support for friends and family who are involved at the leadership level. A 22-year-old female recounted, “During my junior year of college, I lived with two girls who help run Ledor Vador, and if I didn’t go to one of their events, it would cause a lot of tension in the apartment. So, obviously I would go but it was more to show support for my friends than the foundation.” Another reason that these individuals attended events was that many were curious to get more information about the organizations. While it was not discussed in the interviews, another possible reason that the predicted non-participants actually attend events is that even though they might be critical or not attracted to the programming, they may still want to socialize within the Persian Jewish community. Although

these individuals also socialize elsewhere in the community, the high numbers of attendees at many of these organizational events is a likely to be enticing for individuals looking for additional networking and socializing opportunities.

Creating Opportunities and Training Future Leaders

Several interviewees spoke at length about the positive opportunities for community involvement that new organizations are creating for young adults. For example, 30 Years After has created opportunities for young adults to become involved through several different avenues including their mentorship program, voter registration drives, Our Legacy Project video archives, and civic action conferences. Also, the Lev Foundation has developed a mentorship program, a basketball team, and numerous fundraisers that encourage young adults to become more engaged with each other and the community. While not all who were interviewed for this project were aware of the abundance of opportunities that currently exist, some had detailed knowledge of all the different programs and volunteer opportunities. A young lawyer who was interviewed said, “Even if you just look on the websites, just in general, the amount of opportunities there are for people to not only get involved with these types of organizations, but also get funding to put on similar types of programs, it’s just astounding.” Another interviewee said,

I think most young people really want to be involved, they do want to be more involved in public affairs, and in the public sector, and in social action, and a lot of times they don’t know how. So I think with organizations like the ones in our community, it’s important that they are creating those opportunities and making them public and trying to make them known to as many people as possible.

In speaking to several young leaders, I found that another underlying goal of their work is to motivate and train new young leaders in the community. In speaking about the goals for his organization, one leader explained, “We are very youth-centric and we do want to keep our base young... and we are definitely focused on developing leaders and developing individuals who

want to be involved with the organization in the future.” Not only do these current leaders want to train other leaders for the future of their own organizations, but many encourage members of their organizations to take leadership positions in other organizations as well. Interestingly, one leader said that he measured the success of his organization by the human capital that has been developed because so many of his organization’s leaders have continued on to serve on the boards of other organizations in the community. Overall, these new organizations and groups are creating many different opportunities for young adults to become involved in organizational life and they are also training young people to become leaders for the community.

Political Involvement

Another positive finding about these new organizations can be linked to their role in increasing political awareness and involvement. Lack of political involvement has been a noted issue in the Persian Jewish community in the United States (Melamed, 2005; Daftari, 2008). Observers of the community have described low rates of voting as well as low levels of participation in local campaigns and issues. In a 2005 survey of the Iranian Jewish community, Golshan found that “a significant number of participants in the 20-35 age cohort are not voting” (p. 66). This lack of political involvement has been a major focal point for 30 Years After, and they have focused their efforts on registering voters and raising awareness about local and national issues.

There are several factors that have contributed to Persian Jews’ past reluctance to become active in the political sphere. The Persian Jewish community has experienced a long history of being alienated from political life. In Iran, the Jewish community was not given a representative voice in the political system, although they were given one token seat on the Iranian Parliament (Spence, 2008). Also, government corruption was an ever-present concern in Iran. This rampant

corruption in their country of origin has led to the fear that “to engage with government is to tread in unsafe waters” (Spence, 2008). This fear, which has been instilled by the experience of living under repressive and tyrannical regimes, has prevented many members of the immigrant generation from registering to vote or participating in politics in the United States. Several journalists have also documented this fear and mistrust of the government. A recent article explains,

The issue of government is not a comfortable one for Iranian Jews. Historically, though they felt more secure under the rule of the Shah, they were a religious minority living side-by-side a Muslim majority. They felt slighted and at the mercy of Muslim leaders who they say robbed them of their political and social rights. Often times, they would have to pay off Iranian government officials to receive fair legal treatment. They carried this mistrust of government and politics with them to the United States (Daftari, 2008).

Another reason for the initial reluctance to participate in civic life is related to the circumstances under which this community migrated to Los Angeles. For the group that migrated to the United States around the time of the 1979 Revolution, there was an uncertainty about whether they would be staying in the United States. Due to this feeling of uncertainty, members of the community did not feel settled in America and, logically, did not feel that there was a reason to become involved in civic life.

Unlike some other immigrant groups, the Persian Jewish community first became active on the international level of politics and is now gradually becoming more involved in local civic issues (Soomekh, 2010). Many Persian Jews are passionate and invested in Israel-related issues, and some community members’ perceptions of presidential candidates often rest on this particular foreign policy issue. Many have noted this tendency in the Iranian Jewish community to vote for Republican presidential candidates because of policies related to Israel (Golshan, 2005). Soomekh (2010) suggests that this heightened interest in the state of Israel is a result of

the Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the high levels of violence and numerous bombings that occurred in Israel around this time.

In the last several years, there has been a noticeable increase in the level of civic involvement by the Persian Jewish community (Spence, 2008; Soomekh, 2010). While these recently established organizations, especially 30 Years After, are not solely responsible for this gradual change, they are an important part of the movement to create more involvement and awareness.

Philanthropy

Another major contribution of these Persian Jewish organizations is that they are bringing the concept of philanthropy into greater consciousness within the community. One group in particular, Society of Young Philanthropists, has been very successful in this arena. One reason there is a need for an organization such as SYP is that there is a great amount of success and wealth in the Persian Jewish community. While philanthropy has been a tradition in the Persian Jewish community, it is important that younger Iranian Jews continue to act in accordance with this value. SYP provides a way for young community members to channel their resources towards helping others. Resources are not limited to finances, as participants are encouraged by the organization to contribute their talents and career related skills as well.

By focusing on philanthropy, SYP also helps to counter stereotypes of Persian Jews as materialistic and insular. These stereotypes about the community are prevalent in various forms of media, including popular films and magazine articles. In terms of materialism, many will be familiar with a short scene parodying Persian students at Beverly Hills High School in the popular movie *Clueless*. In the scene, the main character Cher points to a group of students speaking loudly on their cell phones and states, “And that’s the Persian mafia. You can’t hang

with them unless you own a BMW.” This short scene reflects the perception of Iranians in Los Angeles as shallow and status-obsessed.

In a July 2009 article from W magazine titled, “The Persian Conquest,” the accompanying photographs depict young Iranian Jews dressed in designer clothing and show images of multi-million dollar homes in Beverly Hills labeled “Persian Palaces.” The article describes the lifestyles of several wealthy Iranian Jews living in Los Angeles including entrepreneur, Sam Nazarian. With so many pop culture images depicting Iranian Jews as extremely wealthy, the community seems to need an organization that can emphasize the positive dimensions of this great wealth.

Discussing Taboo Issues

Others have mentioned the discomfort surrounding public acknowledgement of problems or social issues within the community. Today, there are numerous issues that remain taboo or are still stigmatized in the Iranian Jewish community. In an August 2007 article titled “Local Iranian Jews Keeping Social Issues Off the Record,” the author acknowledges the fear of publicly addressing social issues in the Persian Jewish community of Southern California. Journalist Karmel Melamed explains that many individuals have approached him to write about social issues that are causing problems for members of the Los Angeles Iranian Jewish community. However, Melamed also noted that when he asked these people to go on the record and speak about their concerns, they refused to do so. He explains, “Even though Iranian Jews have been living in the U.S. now for nearly 30 years, community members still fear being ostracized or looked down upon by others for admitting that their family member has been grappling with serious personal issues. Some of these issues involve drug abuse, spousal abuse, religious inter-marriage, gambling, shady business dealings, embezzlement, alcoholism, divorce, sexual

behavior for young men and women, and excessive spending on parties.” One young adult who was interviewed explained, “There is such a competition to succeed that you don’t necessarily want to talk about your faults.”

Some organizations have begun making efforts towards publicly addressing previously taboo topics in the community. For example, The Lev Foundation has held several events called Youth to Parent. In these events, parents and children are separated into two groups with rabbis and psychologists serving as moderators for each group. After each group has a separate discussion, the two groups are brought together to address the issues that were raised. The main focus of the Youth to Parent events is to increase communication between parents and children as well as address the high levels of drug and alcohol use by the young members in the community. However, a leader explained that many other important issues have been publicly raised in these sessions including issues surrounding dating, sex, and the high pressure to succeed. As one interviewee explained, “We come from a community that is first generation American and part of our culture is not to talk about these things because our parents weren’t educated about them growing up so they have no knowledge base to talk about them, through no fault of their own.”

Programs, such as Youth to Parent by the Lev Foundation, are helping to address these significant issues of problematic communication in the community. At a recent Youth to Parent event at Nessah Synagogue that I attended, it seemed that the format used was very conducive to uncovering discussion topics that would not otherwise be revealed. By separating parents and young people for the first half of the event, psychologists who were moderating the event were able to encourage attendees to speak about uncomfortable issues such as sex, dating, and

marriage. In the second half, the two groups came together and openly discussed the topics that were raised.

Engagement in Social Justice

New organizations in the Persian Jewish community have also raised awareness about significant social justice issues outside of the immediate community. For instance, the current website for Society of Young Philanthropists highlights causes such as disaster relief for the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, along with the oil leak in the gulf of Mexico. In their past events, they have raised money for a wide variety of causes, such as the crisis in Darfur, victims of Hurricane Katrina, and children diagnosed with Autism.

By engaging with social justice causes that extend beyond the Iranian Jewish population, SYP is addressing issues of insularity that have been raised as a concern by people both inside and outside of the community. One leader from SYP stated, “There is financial need in the Jewish community, but every dollar does not need to go to Jewish causes.” This desire to reach beyond the Jewish community might be reflective of philanthropy trends among young adults in the general Jewish community as well as the Iranian Jewish community.

Critiques of Organizations

Cultural Programming

In terms of criticisms of organizational programming, there were several common themes that emerged over the course of the interviews. In general, many interviewees expressed a desire for a greater range in the topics of programming, specifically asking for more cultural programming. One 22-year-old female explained, “It’s not about do I keep kosher, or do I speak Hebrew, or do I love Israel, I just don’t think that has anything to do with my personal Judaism.”

Comments such as this reflect some respondents' desire to connect to their Persian-Jewish heritage through non-observance based activities and events.

In general, many young adults I spoke to wanted more events related to Jewish culture and arts. Specifically, people want to attend events such as film screenings, book readings, art exhibitions, and music events. One female who works in the film industry commented, "Being that I have this more artistic side, I would love to go to a film screening, I would love to go to a music show, I would love to go a concert." Another interviewee stated, "If they [Iranian Jewish organizations] had events that were less formal, that would be great. Like going out to different events around the city like book readings, hikes, different things like that where you just get out of the atmosphere of a club or temple, and film screenings." Many of these responses reinforced the idea that young people in the Persian Jewish community of Los Angeles are seeking more culturally focused events to attend.

This finding coincides with a study by Cohen & Kelman (2005) that found that many American Jews in their 20's and 30's are more inclined to connect to their Judaism through cultural or art-based events than through religious events or synagogue membership. One inference from this finding is that as second generation Iranian Jews in Los Angeles become more assimilated, they are connecting to Judaism in more individualistic and creative ways. This trend might be a reflection of the fact that in Iran, there was not as much acceptance of individualistic expression of Judaism. Judaism in Iran was highly based in ritual and tradition and the community did not accept any deviance from this standard practice of Judaism.

With the mass migration of Iranian Jews to the United States, children of the immigrant generation have been exposed to alternative ways of connecting to Judaism and Persian culture. This influence can clearly be seen in many of the interviewees' responses. This distance from life

in Iran has led to a craving for organizations and programming that reflect a desire to connect to Jewish identity and Persian identity in creative and unique ways. One way to address this missing element of Jewish cultural programming in Persian organizations is by encouraging young adults in the community to attend Jewish cultural programs sponsored by American Jewish organizations. Specifically, organizations such as JDub and the Skirball Center provide many cultural events geared toward young Jewish adults. Also, various lecture series at local universities such as the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC) provide programming in this area. While attending such events will not address the desire for specifically Persian Jewish cultural programming, the need for more exposure to Jewish cultural programming can be addressed.

According to interviews, another element of cultural programming that is missing are events specifically focused on Persian Jewish history and culture. Many people felt that there was a major gap in this area of programming. Based on the responses, it appears that some young people in the community feel that the Iranian side of their identity is not being appropriately reflected in Iranian Jewish organizational programming. A female interviewee explained that,

A lot of our generation, we have sacrificed our loyalty to Iran, most people don't have a loyalty to Iran, our families left Iran, and our loyalty is now to Israel, our homeland for our community is now Israel, which is great, which is beautiful; I love Israel, I work on Israeli issues, I went to Jewish day school, it's a given. That having been said, I think our Jewish experience is entirely colored by our being Iranian, just like our Iranian experience, for our families, was very much colored by their being Jewish. You can't really separate the two. So to run an organization and not really address the actual Iranian side and only be talking about Israel and the nuclear issue related to Iran, it's a little bit problematic.

Several interviewees expressed a yearning to learn about Persian Jewish cooking, Persian language, and Persian Jewish history. One male interviewee excitedly described his ideal Persian Jewish nonprofit organization. He said, "Imagine an organization like 30 Years After that has

events, but it offers very discounted, if not free, Farsi lessons or poetry lessons taught by people in the community who are very happy to continue the traditions that are Persian, and they could offer cooking classes. I would love to learn how to cook a lot of these Persian Jewish dishes, like Ghondi.” His conception of an ideal organization clearly emphasizes cultural elements from both the Iranian side as well as the Jewish side.

The Iranian American Jewish Federation of Los Angeles has addressed one aspect of this gap in Persian Jewish cultural education and has created a program called The Graduate Society Foundation. The website states “members of the community noticed the lack of written history and documentation on twenty seven centuries of their life in Iran. They also became cognizant of the lack of knowledge and awareness of the society toward their historic and cultural heritage. At this transitional point in history, this group felt a need to shed light on and preserve this rich heritage for the generations to come.” This statement reflects an acknowledgment of the pressing need to inform community members about Persian Jewish history. Currently, the focus of the program is to create publications that educate the community about their history. Some example titles include, *Esther’s Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews* and *The Trial of the Chosen*, a collection of poems about Jewish life in Iran, as well as other countries. Based on the website, the organization does not appear to have events or public lectures related to their publications. Adding events and lectures based on these publications could be an effective way to reach out to younger community members and address a need that has not yet been addressed.

Another organization that is addressing this gap in cultural and educational programming is 30 Years After. They have established Our Legacy Project to begin filling the void in historical documentation about the Iranian Jewish community. The aim of this project is to video record statements by Persian Jews in the diaspora to create a digital archive of the community’s

experiences. The website currently has 109 videos that are categorized by topics such as “Exodus from Iran,” “Jewish Life in Iran,” and “Life During the Revolution.” For instance, one video features Rabbi David Shofet, the current head Rabbi of Nessah Synagogue and the son of the former Chief Rabbi of Iran, Yedidia Shofet. The video testimonial by Rabbi David Shofet includes an explanation of why Chanukah was not publicly celebrated in Iran. In another video, Dr. Morgan Hakimi describes the psychological consequences of leaving Iran. Dr. Hakimi, former president of Nessah Synagogue, discusses the issues of depression and anxiety in adult immigrants who left Iran during the time of the revolution. The videos are accessible to the public through the project’s website (www.ourlegacyproject.org), and the organizers are planning to release a DVD of selected video clips.

Venues

Many people who were interviewed stated that events held by Persian Jewish organizations in Los Angeles tend to be held in the same few venues or within a small radius of the Beverly Hills area. A majority of Persian Jewish organizations plan their events at Nessah Synagogue in Beverly Hills. Although this can be attributed to the direct relationship many of the organizations have with this synagogue, other organizations without a direct relationship, such as Lev Foundation, have also held several events there. When these organizations have events outside of the synagogue setting, locations tend to include nightclubs, bars, or lavish homes of various community members.

Many interviewees expressed a desire to expand events outside of the Beverly Hills area, so that other parts of Los Angeles could be explored. For example, one interviewee who lives in Beverly Hills said,

If we want to expand people’s horizons on a political level, I think first, you have to expand their brains geographically. We live in LA, let’s see what LA is: it’s downtown,

it's Echo Park, it's Koreatown, it's Venice Beach, it's Pacific Palisades. We exist so close to these places, let's learn to be comfortable in those contexts.

This desire to expand outside of Beverly Hills could be reflective of a desire to encourage the Persian Jewish community of LA to be more open toward other communities and cultures in the immediate area. A similar sentiment was expressed by another young female who said, "For a lot of these organizational events, they taking place every time in the same location, in the same facility. Because of this, there is no diversity in the people who are attending." Overall, there were many comments that reflected a hope that events would expand to other venues and areas of Los Angeles. This request to expand outside of Beverly Hills is reflective of a desire for more diversity in the people who are attending events and connecting Persian Jews with other communities.

It is important to note that venues in one specific area have been chosen in the past likely due to issues of practicality. In other words, picking a location closer to where a majority of the community members live means that more people are likely to attend the event. Thus, picking event locations within the immediate vicinity of Beverly Hills may actually be a factor that contributes to the success of these organizations and the high numbers of attendees.

Additional critiques mentioned by interviewees were that many of the venues chosen by organizations for their events were off-putting because of their formality. Some interviewees explained that the synagogue setting that is often chosen for events was sometimes intimidating and did not create a relaxing environment for a social or educational event. For example, one female described several past events she had attended that were organized by various young adult groups in the community. She explained, "Usually the events are at Nessah. It's a beautiful temple, but it feels a little bit oppressive to be in the eyes of God while trying to be in a social situation as well. You don't really feel socially free when you have the Torah sitting right there."

Bridging the Gap with Other Jews

Another prominent theme in the interviews was that many people expressed a desire for programming focused on building connections between the Persian Jewish community and other Jewish communities. Many felt that current organizations are not making enough efforts toward this goal. Some interviewees stated that although they wanted to meet new people in the Persian Jewish community, many also wanted to see greater diversity in the spectrum of people who attended events in the community. Many young adults acknowledged the invisible wall that exists between the larger community of Persian Jews and Jews in Los Angeles and described their hopes that this issue could be addressed more directly.

Several interviewees expressed concerns over the tensions between various Jewish communities in Los Angeles. One young female interviewee reflected,

I know that there is a lot of misunderstanding between Jews. It's very strange, but the only time I've ever felt racism in America was really from American Jews, which is a very strange and sad state of affairs, and I feel like it is because we've tried to keep ourselves isolated or we have felt isolated and that's why we're isolating ourselves even further, so I think it's really important to bridge that gap. My sister goes to Sinai Akiba Academy and it's half Persian and half American and there are so many problems that it needs to be addressed.

Others who have written about the Los Angeles Persian Jewish community have also described these tensions, which are evident at Sinai Temple and elsewhere. Hoffman (2011) explains that the large influx of Iranian Jews to Sinai Temple immediately after the Revolution resulted in many culture clashes between the American and Persian congregants. Although these types of tensions have relaxed over the last few decades, direct observation of the present communities and discussions with interviewees reveal that misunderstandings between Jewish communities in Los Angeles are still a visible problem.

When interviewees were asked about community tensions in the interviews, many expressed hopes that one of the many current organizations led by young adults would be able to address these concerns. However, an important paradox was highlighted by an interviewee who said,

There's a language barrier, there's cultural differences, there's a different emphasis on money and wealth, and there's a lot of mistrust. I think it's something that the Persian Jewish organizations should focus on, however, it's exactly what they were set up not to do. They were set up to preserve Persian Jewry, not to have it dispersed among other Jews, but I think they are alienating so many people.

This inherent conflict creates a difficult situation for these new Iranian Jewish organizations. The missions of these organizations focus on social issues, education, and community building. Yet, the fact that many of these young leaders decided to start their own organizations in the Persian community, rather than joining already existing organizations in the American Jewish community, suggests that it is important to them to preserve the uniqueness of the Persian Jewish community. This strong emphasis on maintaining the community tends to also be a deterrent to participation for some individuals, as explained by several interviewees in this project. However, preserving Iranian Jewish traditions does not necessarily mean that the community must remain exclusive and insular. There are ways to maintain cultural aspects without remaining completely separate from outside communities. Furthermore, some level of assimilation is an inevitable part of the process of migration to a new country, and community members would be well served to acknowledge this inescapable fact.

Several young leaders in the community who were interviewed were aware of this division between communities and acknowledged their desire to help. For example, one male leader explained, "It's a major gap and in founding our organization and pitching it to our American Jewish colleagues they said, 'The biggest thing you can possibly do is bridge that gap

between the 35 or 40,000 Iranian Jews, by our estimates, and the 600,000 American Jews.” This leader went on to explain that the divisions also exist upon closer examination of various Jewish agencies in Los Angeles. He explained,

You look at leading American Jewish organizations, whether it’s a broad one like ADL [Anti-Defamation League] or American Jewish Committee or Federation or something more narrow like Jewish World Watch or Limmud, or a social service organization like Jewish Vocational Services, you don’t see Persians working on their staff, you don’t see Persians generally on the board, major donors tend not to be Persian, and yet some of the recipients could be Persian. For example, Jewish Family Service, many of the families that they serve are Iranian Jews.

My experience and interaction with American Jewish organizations in Los Angeles has confirmed this view that Iranian Jews are underrepresented in the staff, board members, and donors. Since the Iranian Jewish community is still a relatively new immigrant community, there may be feelings of apprehension and discomfort about participating in mainstream American organizations, especially among adults and older adults. Among the young adults, it appears that there is an acknowledgement and awareness of the issue with some initial steps being taken to start bridging this divide. Specifically, leaders of 30 Years After have intentionally partnered with numerous American Jewish organizations, including American Jewish Committee, Jewish World Watch, Anti-Defamation League, and Progressive Jewish Alliance. At their bi-annual civic conference in 2010, 30 Years After included booths from many of these partner organizations. Between the presentations, breakout sessions, and various workshops, attendees were able to browse these booths and gain exposure to these partner organizations. While partnering with American Jewish groups is a start towards bridging the divide, additional efforts are needed to more deeply address this problematic issue in the Jewish community of Los Angeles.

Fear-Based Programming and Focus on Israel

Another significant trend that emerged in the interviews was that many interviewees mentioned the fear-based nature of some programming and lectures in the Persian Jewish community. Interviewees stated that when the focus of programs and lectures is to scare people away from intermarriage or to frighten them into becoming advocates for Israel, they often become disengaged and turned off. For instance, a 28-year-old female explained, “Judaism loses its appeal when all it’s about is not losing Judaism, because then you forget what Judaism is actually about. All it becomes is fighting against something and not for something.” Comments such as this reflected many community members’ desire for programming that is framed in a positive manner.

According to interviews with participants and non-participants, one significant focus of the fear-based programming was Israel. Many interviewees affirmed their support for the State of Israel and their interest in discussing issues related to Israel. However, one concern was that the percentage of programming that is devoted to the topic is excessive. One interviewee explained, “Loyalty to Israel is hugely important. I know that we have to stand up for Israel because most other people, most other countries will not. I’m very cognizant of this and of the massive threats to Israeli security, but you really wonder sometimes, are we going a little bit overboard?”

Some interviewees explained that while they feel a connection to Israel, their connections to America or Iran are just as strong, if not stronger. One interviewee said,

We [Iranian Jews] feel a sense of duty and loyalty to Israel, but it’s not our country. We’re not paying taxes there. I didn’t serve in the Israeli military. I love Israel, but it’s a different thing. America is my country, this is where I live, this is where I will live and die, this is where I pay my taxes and this is the country that I feel a sense of loyalty to. I think with our community, I don’t know when the switch was flipped, but we’re almost over the top about the Israel issue. In particular, if you look at which issues we actually do support, domestic Israeli issues are severe, I mean there are kids in Israel who are starving, who are

not eating, again that's another issue that we don't really talk about. All we talk about is the military issue.

This comment was reflective of many who said that when Israel is discussed in a lecture or other educational event, the typical areas of focus have been international security and military issues and many said that they were not receiving a complex and three-dimensional understanding of the issues. A graduate student in her mid 20's stated,

Not that I don't care about the soldiers, because when I was in Israel, I felt a very deep connection. I had an immense amount of gratitude for what they do for their own country, but I don't live there and I don't identify Israel as my homeland. A lot of people who go to birthright come back and say 'that's my homeland'. Well, that's not my homeland. I have just as much passion for Iran, but if you talk to most Persian Jews here [in Los Angeles] and ask them if they have a desire to go to Iran, they'll say "no."

I have also personally observed this disinterest in Iranian culture and disconnect from Iranian current events among many Iranian Jewish young adults in Los Angeles. In 2009, there was widespread protest and unrest in Iran over the contested election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and, as a result, the Green Movement emerged. Few, if any, local Iranian Jewish groups or organizations have publicly addressed or educated the community about these dramatic and historic events. Interestingly, a local nonprofit organization, the Levantine Cultural Center, has hosted several events about current events in Iran, including a recent event titled, "The People Reloaded explores Iran's Green Movement." The Levantine Cultural Center is neither a Jewish organization, nor is it specifically Iranian. In its organizational materials, the group describes itself as a community center that "champions a greater understanding of the Middle East and North Africa by presenting artistic and educational programs that bridge political and religious divides. In a search for common ground, the Center fosters discussions among artists and thinkers and offers classes and workshops that serve diverse ethnic communities." Perhaps incorporating programs and lectures about current events in Iran, such as those at Levantine

Cultural Center, could help to foster a sense of interest and pride in Iran that has been missing for many Iranian Jewish young adults in the Los Angeles community.

A young lawyer in his early 30s stated, “Israel dominates the agenda in a lot of these groups, maybe out of balance with the other issues that we might be dealing with that really need to be addressed.” This comment is reflective of a general sentiment in several of the interviews about the need to address various social problems in the community that are currently being ignored or insufficiently addressed. Many who were interviewed highlighted social issues that they were concerned with and thought should be addressed in the community. These included: drug use, pressure to be financially successful, pressure to get married, conflicts and communication issues between children and parents, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. It is important to acknowledge that the Lev Foundation is beginning to address some of these issues in their programming. Yet, my interviews with young adults in the community reveal that there is a substantial need for more programming in this area.

Personal observations at various organizational events within the community forced me to better understand the perspective about fear-based programming that many interviewees discussed. At the recent 30 Years After Conference in Los Angeles, one of the breakout sessions focused on motivating college students to become campus advocates for Israel. During the program, there was a slideshow of photographs that played on a screen behind the speakers for the duration of the session. The slideshow depicted images from various campus protests that have occurred on the University of California at Irvine campus. This particular campus is notorious for having hostile and aggressive demonstrations about Middle East issues. Images in the slideshow included protest signs with swastikas, a sign that read, “Israel, the 4th Reich,” and another sign depicting blood-spattered Israeli flags. Even though it is important to acknowledge

that this anti-Semitism still exists, the repetitive use of these extreme images seemed inappropriate and misleading. By playing these images in a continuous loop, the workshop created an impression that these types of protests are ubiquitous and common to all university campuses, when in fact, they are rare.

Prior to a recent Reach-U-All event at Nessah synagogue, Rabbi Menachem Weiss gave a fire and brimstone-style sermon focused on intermarriage and how it is destroying the Jewish community. He yelled at the congregation about the need to preserve Jewish traditions and claimed that bringing a microphone into the synagogue for Shabbat services would result in the extinction of Judaism in the Iranian Jewish community. His extreme statements and loud style of lecturing added to the impression that he was trying to scare people into adhering to rigid tradition. While some Persian Jews can relate to this conservative and traditional perspective, others, including many young adults, may become alienated and distanced from the community if their perspective differs.

When discussing the immense focus on Israel issues in event programming, one male interviewee explained, “I think that a lot of it arises from the scars that are left from the immigrant experience, and so we have our allegiances to being Jewish and pro-Israel rather than anything that might even slightly imply that we support an Islamic government.” Here, the interviewee suggests that many Iranian Jews might be emotionally wounded or traumatized by their relationship to Iran and the circumstances under which they left the country. His comment highlights the possibility that underlying trauma in the community has led to a prevalent fear that any outward display of connection to present-day Iran might be misinterpreted by people outside of their community as an alignment with the current oppressive and tyrannical regime.

Along with the issue of underlying trauma in this particular immigrant group, the concept of transgenerational transfer of trauma must be understood and addressed. In the field of psychology, trauma is defined as “direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity” (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The full definition also includes witnessing such an event or learning about such an event occurring to a family member or friend. Studies have indicated that children of individuals who have directly experienced psychological trauma tend to display symptoms as if they had experienced the trauma themselves (Kellerman, 2001). The phenomenon of transgenerational transmission of trauma has been studied most extensively in children of Holocaust survivors, and there are over 400 published papers focused on this topic (Kellerman, 2001). Additionally, children of Cambodian refugees have also been studied in regards to transmission of trauma.

While the Persian Jewish community of Iran did not experience a trauma on the scale of the Holocaust or the Cambodian Genocide, the experience of fleeing Iran under threat of violence and persecution has undoubtedly had some effect on the children of these exiles. Several people that I interviewed mentioned the issue of trauma in the community and the possible transfer of the trauma to the children who did not directly experience the trauma. One 28-year-old female said,

Persian Jews are so traumatized by the Islamic revolution and what happened to them that ... they can only think about the Islamic threat to the universe, and to Israel, and to themselves. It’s not even about Israel; we [Persian Jews] don’t know anything about the political structure, the social structure, nothing culturally. We just know that there is a military that we have to support because there are Muslim people who want to murder us, that’s all that we know. I think it’s a trauma response.... but it’s amazing that the trauma has been transferred to the children.

Up to this point, there have not been any studies of transmission of trauma within the Persian Jewish diaspora community, however this psychological concept may explain some of the fear-based and reactionary programming in many of these organizations, specifically in regards to Middle East politics and intermarriage issues.

However, as the direct connection to Iran and living under oppression becomes more of a distant memory for young Iranian Jews, then it appears that their connection to Judaism has the space to be formulated in a positive manner, rather than being reactionary or based on fear of persecution. This may explain why many interviewees noted their dislike of programs that emphasized fear or that had a threatening tone. If their conception of their personal Jewish identity did not align with this perspective, these types of fear-based programs prevented them from connecting to the organization. This observation may be related to a broader trend that has been noted in the American Jewish community. Other studies have also found that many Jewish young adults are openly rejecting of the narrative of fear that is prevalent in many American Jewish organizations (Abramson, Bennett, Levin, & Potts, 2006; Benor, forthcoming). Clearly, these changes in how young people are connecting to Judaism should be a major area of focus for Jewish organizations hoping to increase engagement of young adults.

Range of Opinions and a Safe Space

Another important trend that emerged from the interviews was the desire to attend events and programming that reflect a greater range of opinions. One interviewee clearly expressed this sentiment when she said, “If I’m going to go to a synagogue and someone is going to speak about Judaism, they need to bring in someone who is Orthodox, someone who is Reform, someone who is Conservative. When you have more opinions represented, you’re more likely to connect to one of them, and want to hear more, want to return, want to be part of this

organization.” In another interview, a young community member asserted her interest in learning more about the subjects that are presented in organizational events, however, she also conveyed her frustration about what she perceives as the one-sided approach to issues. She commented,

It’s not necessarily the subject matter that doesn’t interest me, because it does interest me, it’s just that by far, most of the programs are from a specific point of view and have a particular message. Namely, it’s always very conservative, rabidly pro-Israel, which I’m not necessarily against, but I’ve been exposed to that for my entire life, I know all about it, I know that side, I can argue that side, I don’t feel like it expands my breadth of knowledge or my understanding of the situation any more to hear that repeated over and over again, it’s preaching to the converted, it’s like rallying to your own side, it just doesn’t do anything for me except reinforce the sense of, ‘we are the only ones, we have to be together, and everyone is against us’. I have no interest in that because it does nothing for us, and it does nothing for me.

Comments became more impassioned when some interviewees were asked if they felt there was a safe or comfortable space created in the community for different opinions to be expressed.

Respondents became very animated and replied with statements such as,

My status as a Jew is questioned when I want to have a Democratic president. If you go into a forum like a 30 Years After event, or a Ledor Vador event, or a Sinai event as a Persian Jew and you say something like that, everybody is going to look at you like you’re a Nazi and you don’t care about Israel and you don’t know the facts and you haven’t studied anything. Even if what I’m saying is that there are other things to consider, the response would be that Israel is the most important thing to consider.

In a discussion of Middle East issues with one interviewee, she loudly stated, “You cannot say, in this community, that you are against [Israeli] settlements without at least one person maybe biting your face off. You can’t do it. And without attracting a couple of weird looks and someone saying, *‘Mahsahlan een Arab eh. Een kiyeh? Een Mosalmoon eh?’* [It’s as if this person is an Arab. Who is this person? Is she a Muslim?] You can’t do it. It’s not accepted.” In general, many young adults felt that there was no public forum in the community that allows them to present their opinions without harsh judgment or criticism from other community members. One interviewee explained, “I think if you brought in speakers with different perspectives, then

people would feel like it's more safe to voice their own opinion. If there wasn't just one uniform opinion and other opinions were allowed then people would be able to speak out."

Related to this idea of the Persian Jewish community being in need of a safe public forum for open conversation is the finding that many interviewees felt that they were the only, or one of very few people in the community who had an opinion that differed from the majority. In discussing her liberal-leaning opinions on various social and political issues, one interviewee expressed, "Sometimes I'm made to feel like there's something wrong with me, simply because I'm the only one I know who feels this way in our community, however, I know that my opinions are just as valid as anyone else and I wish there was a forum where I could be heard without judgment." One explanation for this common misconception is that there is not a safe environment created for voicing differing opinions. Therefore, liberal or progressive viewpoints regarding politics or social issues are rarely discussed in public or in large groups. Thus, many members in the community are left feeling alienated because they are under the false impression that they are the only one who holds a certain belief or opinion.

Additionally, many of the research participants were highly concerned about the confidentiality parameters of the project. Several interviewees spent an unexpected amount of time reviewing the informed consent document and asked numerous questions about how the information would be used. One participant added an extra confidentiality clause to the informed consent document. Also, some interviewees seemed to be uncomfortable being audiotaped. In fact, many people who were interviewed began revealing a large amount of information about the subject matter as soon as the audio recorder was turned off. In these cases, I also took handwritten notes so that this information would be included in the project as well.

This unexpected focus on confidentiality and privacy may be related to certain values and

expectations within the Persian Jewish community. For instance, researchers have noted that members of this community tend to be more monolithic in their religious and political beliefs. Furthermore, the collectivist nature of the community tends to favor those who align themselves with the mainstream, rather than those who stand out in their beliefs and practices. Conformity is socially rewarded and rebelliousness is not often accepted. The people in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles originate from a highly collectivist society. In collectivist cultures, people are expected to be obedient, comply with group norms, and display respect to parents and other elders. However, in Western societies, there is a greater emphasis on individualism and people are encouraged to be autonomous, assertive, and seek self-fulfillment. Often, children of immigrants from Iran to the United States find themselves conflicted between the traditions of their parents and the traditions of Western culture. Of course, there are individual differences and some children of immigrants are able to find a comfortable balance between their family traditions and the individualistic tendencies of Western culture. This understanding may help to explain why many interviewees did not want to be identified as standing out from the mainstream community or having a dissenting opinion.

Overall, the qualitative data collected through this project indicates the need for a specifically Persian Jewish organization, or section of another organization, that allows progressive Persian Jews to come together and discuss their views and experiences. Such an organization is important and necessary because it would foster engagement of community members who have felt alienated and disconnected from current organizations. While the parameters of this project did not include quantitative data regarding the numbers of excluded or marginalized community members, I propose that the numbers are much larger than anyone has

previously acknowledged. As one young Iranian Jewish leader simply stated, “There are a lot of undercover progressives in the community.”

Engaging these disconnected community members is important because this is a potentially large group of people that might have great power and influence if they could be part of an organized group. A progressive organization within the community might also help to show the nuances of the Persian Jewish community and counteract impressions of the Iranian Jews as a homogeneous group. Also, people in the Iranian Jewish community who might become participants in a new progressive organization might already be seeking progressive programming outside of the Persian community. For instance, one young woman I interviewed said she feels more comfortable and accepted when she attends progressive events and lectures through American Jewish organizations. If there are others in the community who have sought programming elsewhere, these individuals might be able to serve as people who bridge various Jewish communities.

Inclusivity

When non-participants were directly asked about changes that current organizations could make in order to engage them personally, many said that current organizations are not inclusive of diversity in terms of welcoming people of non-Persian or non-Jewish backgrounds. Many young adults clearly stated that they did not feel comfortable inviting friends, significant others, or acquaintances from different backgrounds to any organizational events within the community. For example, one male interviewee said, “I have friends of color who are gay, and I consider them the same as me. If I were to bring them [to an event], would they be involved and actually accepted? Or would they be considered weird and outsiders?” Another young woman who was ambivalent about her participation in organizational events said, “On a basic level,

bringing outside friends to an event, doesn't really fly in the Persian world...and a non-Jewish friend, forget it."

Based on some of my informal observations, one new Iranian Jewish organization is already beginning to address this issue. 30 Years After events that I attended seemed to have the highest percentage of non-Persian attendance relative to the other organizations and groups in the community. On the other hand, groups housed at Nessah Synagogue seemed to have the least diversity of attendees at their events.

Current American Jewish organizations might also address this lack of inclusivity by developing Persian divisions. This strategy would help counteract impressions of the Persian Jewish community being insular and would also help to bridge Jewish communities in Los Angeles while still offering Persian Jews a chance to participate together.

Singles Atmosphere

Another common theme in the interviews was that many people disliked events and programming that are solely aimed at networking for singles. One female interviewee stated, "It's nice to dress up and then it's also nice to go to an event because you want to learn something and not because you want to meet somebody and I don't think that space is ever created for us." Some interviewees also described experiences when they were expecting one type of event based on the name of the event and the way it was marketed or advertised, usually focused on education about a certain topic, and they were disappointed when the event turned out to be a singles mixer.

In speaking to the leaders of organizations, it seems that several of them are aware of this criticism from the community and many leaders explained that they had heard this criticism directly from participants. Overall, the leaders felt that this "singles vibe" was an inevitable

outcome of putting on events for young professionals or students, many of whom are single. For example, one young leader said, “People complain about it but people still go to the events. People want to meet other people. It’s just natural and any fun event requires young single people.” One leader explained that her organization had attempted to minimize the “singles vibe” by placing strict age limits on their events. By limiting the events to individuals in their late teens and early twenties, she and other leaders in her organization had hoped to lessen the feeling that the event was created for people to meet potential spouses. She explained that this tactic had been somewhat successful in altering the atmosphere of events, however she openly acknowledged that the “singles vibe” would most likely remain.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Over the last several years, new nonprofit organizations and groups created by young adults in the Iranian Jewish community have rapidly developed and have been extremely successful. Their success in community outreach has been so prominent that everyone who was interviewed for this project, including the non-participants who had not attended any events in the last year, knew about these organizations and their goals.

In interviews with young leaders, participants, and non-participants, a wide range of positive elements and critiques were discussed. These organizations and groups have achieved much success in attracting large audiences, increasing political involvement, expanding opportunities for philanthropy, beginning to address taboo topics, and engaging young adults in social causes both inside and outside of the Jewish community. In many of these areas, leaders had observed specific needs and areas being overlooked within the community and developed

organizations to help address the gaps. Interviews and observations also revealed areas for improvement among current organizations and groups. These included a need for more cultural programming, a desire for non-traditional venues, a way to bridge communities, less fear-based programming, an atmosphere that is accepting of diversity and non-mainstream opinions, as well as less of a singles atmosphere.

Recommendations

For Existing Organizations

The findings suggest that these organizations should continue their efforts because they are making positive impacts in several areas. Analysis of the interviews with young adults also revealed several changes that existing organizations can make to better address the needs that were expressed. One suggested change is that panels and lectures include speakers that represent a more diverse range of opinions and ideas. Many people who were interviewed discussed the lack of diversity and admitted to feeling disengaged when only one side of an issue was presented. Including a greater range of perspectives will encourage more people to feel connected to an event and possibly more connected to an organization. The presentation of more diverse opinions can also contribute to a more open environment in the community for discussing differing or dissenting opinions.

Another suggested change is that existing organizations try to incorporate Jewish cultural programming and Persian Jewish cultural programming. In interviews, community members indicated that they would like to attend book signings, film screenings, cooking classes, poetry classes, and language classes. Young leaders may want to look towards other organizations that have incorporated this type of cultural programming. Other organizations, such as JDub Records

and Jewish Artists Initiative might serve as appropriate models. Some past events by these groups include concerts featuring Jewishly influenced bands such as Balkan Beat Box as well as art exhibitions featuring the work of Jewish artists.

An additional change that current groups may incorporate is the use of non-traditional venues. While many local nonprofits and groups have a close relationship with Nessah Synagogue and tend to hold many events in the synagogue's facilities, previously disconnected community members may be drawn in by more diverse event locations. Existing organizations might incorporate ideas used by East Side Jews, a recently established group that has made efforts to develop Jewish events held in less traditional venues. Some past East Side Jews events include a Hanukkah dinner in a garden in Silverlake and a High Holidays event at a park adjacent to the Los Angeles River. Using these types of venues can help Iranian Jewish organization to attract attendees who might feel disconnected from formal or traditional event settings.

Iranian Jewish organizations should also consider collaborating with various non-Persian Jewish organizations as well as non-Jewish organizations. The collaborations might include creating co-sponsored events such as mixers for people from different organizations and developing seminars and lecture series that might attract varied audiences. These types of collaborations could address many of the concerns that were raised in my discussions with young adults, including the need for bridging between communities, having new areas of programming, and using novel and non-traditional venues. Local Jewish organizations for future collaborations could include IKAR, Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA), Yiddishkayt LA, and JDub. In regards to non-Jewish organizations, Persian Jewish groups may want to collaborate with young professionals groups from other communities and charities that have young professionals divisions, such as March of Dimes Los Angeles.

Another consideration for current organizations is to make adjustments to the content of current programming. Based on comments from interviewees, there is a strong desire for less fear-based programming related to issues such as the State of Israel and intermarriage in the Jewish community. Clearly, these issues are still highly relevant to our community, but organizations might attempt to address these issues with a different and more positive tone. For example, organizations that want to create an event about Israel may try to educate the community about Israeli society and politics, rather than solely focusing on security threats to Israel. In this way, community members will gain a better understanding of the underlying issues without fear being used as a way to get people to pay attention.

One more suggestion for current organizations is to improve the ways in which they market their lesser-known programs, such as mentoring, social service projects, historical video archives, and sports teams. These low-profile programs were not as widely known among the interviewees. As one leader explained,

Sometimes it comes down to what it is that people see and what it is that people don't see. If you throw a party or a fundraiser, people see that, people attend that, but if you're putting on a mentorship program, people don't necessarily see that and obviously it's the responsibility of the organization to make sure that those who are interested in being involved or donating are familiar with everything.

Due to the high attendance that many existing organizations have at their events, more publicizing of their smaller programs during their larger events is one suggestion for better outreach. Another suggestion is for organizational leaders to focus on training more new leaders to take on responsibilities within the smaller programs.

For Participants and Community Members

Based on the interviews that were conducted for this study, it also appears appropriate to make recommendations to participants within the community. One recommendation to

participants is to be more assertive and direct in expressing needs to organizational leaders. Leaders interviewed in this study were aware of some, but not all of the concerns highlighted by interviewees. Several of the organizations in the community conduct regular self-evaluations through surveys and questionnaires. Yet, it appears that these surveys are not fully uncovering the issues that were revealed in these one-on-one interviews. This places a responsibility on community members to express their needs to organizational leaders so that the issues are known and can be addressed.

Another recommendation for participants as well as non-participants is to do research to find out more about the programs that existing organizations currently offer. By signing up for email newsletters and spending time on the organizations' website as well as directly communicating with the leaders who are present at each event, community members can have a better idea of the opportunities that are available.

For Organizations that Do Not Yet Exist

While the sample used in this project was small, interviews with participants and non-participants revealed that there is an expressed need for a progressive organization in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. Some might argue that progressive Iranian Jews could join organizations outside of the Iranian community to get the programming they want. However, as previously mentioned, Iranian Jews might feel more comfortable in an organizational setting that allows them to assert their Persian identity, along with their American identity.

A new organization may take the form of a political organization or one that focuses on progressive social issues or perhaps both. Many interviewees clearly recognized the need and one young leader said that he felt that a progressive organization in the community could be quite successful. On the other hand, some young adults questioned whether such an organization

could succeed. These people expressed concern about the community's reaction to a liberal organization and included the caution that such a new organization should not attempt to address Israel-related issues. One interviewee said, "I think there is a lack of liberal organizations, because none of us think that we can do anything about it because nobody takes being a liberal seriously. A lot of times, it comes down to Zionism and politics and if you are a Democrat, than you are perceived as anti-Israel." Many agreed that the community is not yet prepared to hear varying viewpoints about issues related to Israel and if a new organization were to try to address this, there would be too much criticism and backlash.

The most important aspect of such a new organization would be to create a public space where differing opinions can be voiced without the threat of social repercussions. Some goals for such an organization might also include educating the community about the importance of dialogue, respectful debate, and allowing the space for contrasting viewpoints. According to some interviews, these are elements that seem to be mostly absent from the programming currently offered by Iranian Jewish organizations in Los Angeles.

As previously mentioned, there is also a need for Iranian Jewish organizations to build bridges with the wider American Jewish community and other communities. If this is too large of a goal for current organizations to take on, it may be more efficient and practical to form a new organization to target this goal. A new organization with this goal could include programs such as combined trips with young adults from various Jewish and non-Jewish communities. In order to gauge interest, organizations might start with day trips to various parts of Los Angeles. One example might be a walking tour of historic sites and ethnic food tasting in downtown Los Angeles. Later, these trips might expand to weekend retreats in nearby cities such as Santa Barbara or San Diego. Eventually, these trips can develop into educational programs that take

young adults abroad. Creating community service projects and inviting young adults from different Jewish backgrounds to participate may also be an effective way to bring various communities together.

Implications for the Greater Jewish Community

Based on this growing trend among young adults in the Iranian Jewish community, combined with other trends such as lower assimilation and lower rates of intermarriage, it is clear that Iranian Jews will continue to be exceedingly involved in Jewish community issues and will also assist in the continuity of Jewish tradition and values. As noted by Phillips & Khalili (1995), Iranian Jews highly value the community and will most likely play a large role in maintaining Jewish communities. The development of these young organizations means that resources in the community, both financial and social, will be channeled in meaningful ways and possibly shared by the greater Jewish community if successful partnerships continue to be developed. Also, more young people will continue to have opportunities for community involvement and encouraging social change.

In addition, the models of community organizing that have been utilized by young Iranian Jews might serve as motivation or inspiration for young members of other minority or immigrant Jewish groups in America. Most importantly, young Iranian Jewish leaders have effectively used the strengths of the community to their advantage. For instance, using the tight social networks of the Los Angeles Iranian Jewish community, young leaders have consistently drawn large crowds to their events, fundraisers, lectures, and conferences. Young leaders in other Jewish communities might also look to the strengths of their particular culture when developing ideas and strategies for their new organizations.

Furthermore, the rapid development of these new Iranian Jewish organizations reveals that larger numbers of young adults in the community are interested in serving as leaders. The broader Jewish community must recognize these individuals as important resources in continuing to build bridges between Jewish communities. Mainstream Jewish organizations in Los Angeles and other cities with large immigrant Jewish populations should focus on developing their relationships with young leaders in the immigrant communities. In reaching out to these innovative young adults for collaboration and partnership, the greater Jewish community can help to cultivate and nurture a new generation of forward-thinking and effective Jewish leaders.

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