

# Iranian Jewish Organization: the Intergration of an Emigre Group into the American Jewish Community\*

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As the Iranian Jews in Boston thumped their feet at the mention of Haman last Purim, it seemed that Jewish history had once again come full circle. For centuries the name of Haman has been used as shorthand for the current reigning tyrant and the Purim ritual has allowed Jews to release their fears and frustrations for several brief moments. To Iranian Jews this year the parallel was too clear. Since the story is set in Persia, Purim is their festival. But recent events in Iran and those of the the past, were so similar that they tended to blur the fragile distinction that separates the experiences of one Jewish generation from another.

After Khoumeini ascended to power, the uncertain fate of the Iranian Jewish community not only prevented Jewish students from returning to Iran, but brought a considerable number of their close relatives to Boston. An Iranian Jewish Organization, was formed to deal with the unique

\* Aware that periodical misunderstandings between the Jewish Agencies and the Iranian group originate from an inability of either side to translate the cultural differences of the other, in March 1980, the Metropolitan Outreach of the Hillel Council of Greater Boston, of which the author was then director, organized a panel discussion to analyze the topic. The participants were anthropologists Michael Fisher from Harvard and William Beeman from Brown, both specialists on Iran, and an Iranian Jewish social worker, Roohi Refah, who has spent many years in the United States. Some of the background materials used in this article are derived from this discussion.

problems confronting this group of approximately 200. The initiative for establishing an Iranian Jewish Organization, its internal structure and the administration of the organization, came entirely from the Iranian Jewish students.

In existence for two years, the organization has been meeting on a weekly basis at Boston University Hillel. Taking into consideration the specific needs, character, and background of the group, Metropolitan Outreach of the Hillel Council of Greater Boston helped the group with programming. The American Jewish Congress provided legal assistance, the Jewish Vocational Service, and the Jewish Family and Children Service provided help with immigration, employment, and financial problems.

It has not been easy to integrate the Iranians into the American Jewish community. In order to understand the group better, it is important first to explore the structure and history of the Iranian Jewish community.

Two and a half millenia of uninterrupted Jewish life created a self-enclosed and distinctive Jewish culture. The community used various Judeo-Persian dialects and created a diverse and prolific Judeo-Persian literature ranging from religious writings and translations of classic Jewish texts to poetry and philosophy. The rite of the community was Sephardic with certain specifically Iranian features.

In the last forty years the Iranian Jews

were transformed from an oppressed poverty-stricken community into an affluent and relatively well integrated group. With the industrialization of the country. The restrictions imposed on minorities were removed, providing them with opportunities for economic advancement and upward mobility. Educated in Alliance Israelite Universelle schools in a predominantly illiterate country, the Jews were in an advantageous position to meet the need for a qualified cadre to implement the process of industrialization. Almost overnight many Jews became prosperous, achieving prestigious positions and becoming an increasingly integral part of the society. Yet, this integration was far from total. Despite the intensive modernization drive under the Shah, Iran remained largely a traditional Muslim society in which an individual retained very close links with and was seen as an inseparable part of a religious or ethnic group. Though they were in the forefront of the economic and social changes in the country, the synagogue was for the Jew a focal point for all communal activities, being as much a center of social life as a place of worship. Modernity had its impact and there was a wide range of religious practice among members of the community. Still, the functioning synagogues were all Orthodox, though ethnicity served as a unifying force and played a much more important role than religion. Communal business was routinely conducted in the synagogues on Friday night. The majority of the community did not adhere to strictly kosher practice, however almost all Jews purchased meat from the community kosher butcher.

Pressure from the larger society prevented Jews from showing any outward signs of Jewishness: it was impossible to wear *kippot* and inadvisable to display Jewish symbols. The Muslim calendar posed a special problem to the Shabbat observance. In the Western world the two day weekend includes Saturday, making

Shabbat observance easier. In Iran, however, where weekend is on Thursday and Friday, it is difficult for Jews not to work on Saturday in order to celebrate Shabbat. Still, according to Iranians, Shabbat had a special place in their lives and was celebrated within the limits and constraints of the system. Friday night was a family time and though all students went to public school on Saturday, lunch was festive.

Prior to the revolution, the 80,000 Iranian Jews, with major centers in the cities of Teheran, Shiraz, Isfahan and Hamadan, remained the largest Jewish community in the Muslim world. After the downfall of the Shah, from 15,000 to 20,000 Jews left the country for Israel, the United States and Western Europe. The Iranian students who were already living in the United States as students had come to this country assuming they would return to Iran. As long as they viewed themselves as living in this country only temporarily, the Iranian Jews could cope with the necessity for adjustment to a new culture by not having to adopt or confront certain values different from their own. Once the revolution made their stay permanent, however, the buffer was removed, and they were forced to start the painstaking process of integration on a much more profound level. Thus exposed, the students became extremely vulnerable.

One of the first problems encountered by the Iranians was that of creating friendships among the American Jewish community. A very extensive support system of both friends and family members plays an important role in Iranian society. With family members and close friends one shares wealth and personal belongings. Members of the tightly knit families jointly participate in decision-making. One does not make independent decisions. This is especially true of women, for whom the female relatives serve as a social network, and on whose emotional support they rely throughout their lives. For that reason, it

was painful for Iranian Jews to accept a different definition of friendship in this country. Keeping a certain distance in order to protect one's privacy does not exist in Iran, and was interpreted as an expression of insincerity or rejection. The inability to forge intimate friendships, with a deep personal commitment of a kind one expects in Iran, left the students with knowing a lot of people but feeling alone. They were puzzled and sometimes hurt to find that Americans who said to them "How are you?" didn't really care to know the answer.

Coming from affluent families, another severe blow to the group was their sudden loss of social status. From the forefront of the Iranian society they were placed on the bottom of the social ladder in the United States. They had become poor refugees and were humiliated about that. Compounded with worries about the safety of their families, and uncertain financial future, possible loss of stipends for continued education, and severance from their country, it was only natural that to deal with their anxieties they would turn for support to other Iranians. In addition, the Iranian revolution placed the Jews in a very odd situation. Although they shared a common culture, language, and values with other Iranians, the polarization that affected the Iranians in the United States precluded their seeking support from Muslims. As the course of the revolution developed, the gap between the two groups continued to increase, leaving the Jews with specific concerns that were not common to the Muslims. Their Muslim countrymen were frequently hostile to them.

Since they had been in this country a short time in Iranian enclaves, and suddenly they had to take care of an influx of parents and younger siblings, the students had redoubled difficulty integrating into the American society. The immensity and profundity of impact of a culture shock is often underestimated by those who have

not tried to live in and adjust to a culture different from their own. The norms and values regulating one's life suddenly collapse, leaving an individual totally disoriented. Because of one's inability to use language, a person is placed in a child-like dependency on others. Having often to rely on people felt to be one's social and intellectual inferiors causes not only anger, but a feeling of complete inadequacy. The company of countrymen who play by the rules one knows and who have the same set of values serves as a necessary refuge during the transitional period.

Despite their need for community, Iranians tend to be proudly independent. To be placed as adults in a dependent position was a very hard blow to their egos and an affront to their sense of self. In their relationship with various Jewish agencies, they found it profoundly humiliating to ask for the help so clearly needed. Only the lowest levels of Iranian society would ever have to ask for this kind of help. The Iranian Jewish community is hierarchical. Equality among individuals is only possible in a very close friendship. The relationship to the poor members of the community is one of patronage, in which the superior person has an obligation to provide support and financial aid to the inferior. The tight, clearly defined structure, with the position of each individual delineated, serves as a very efficient vehicle in helping the poor. Although everybody knows the other person's place in the society, the actual act of giving is conducted in a discrete way to protect the recipient's dignity. As a result, to assert their autonomy and social status, the Iranians were forceful in their demands and seldom ready to compromise. When their requests were not met or were partially met, the group responded with indignation and disbelief. The Iranians' usual explanation of the denial of their requests was the precarious position of their group and their lack of influence on the high ranking

leadership of the Jewish community. Iranians did not like to compare themselves with the Soviet Jews, whom they considered beggars, but when they did they would always conclude that the Soviet Jews were afforded a better treatment.

Upon their arrival in this country the students could not understand the need for the denominational division within the American Jewish community. They were puzzled by the very strong feelings, or sometimes even animosity that one group showed toward the others. In order to explore the different aspects of American Judaism, they frequented various synagogues, but the large majority joined the Sephardic congregation of Young Israel in Brookline. Although they were familiar with the services, in comparison to the Iranian model the synagogue was very limited in its scope. It was not an Iranian community center. To replicate the familiar community, in an unrealistic but understandable attempt, one of the first actions of the Iranian leadership was to try to obtain their own building where they could form an Iranian synagogue and center. Large sums of money required for such a project made the idea unfeasible.

The group displayed a very strong sense of Jewish identity. They were especially interested in Zionism, which could not be openly taught in Iran. Reflecting their own concerns, they wanted to learn about various aspects of anti-Semitism from historic expulsions to Holocaust. Unlike their American counterparts, the Iranian students wanted to watch a large number of films on Jewish subjects, and were ready to listen to any kind of Jewish music. It is interesting to note that several members started wearing *kippot*, while prominent display of Jewish jewelry proliferated with time. Used to a very flexible Shabbat observance, the group had difficulty accepting the more strictly enforced community standards of the American Jewish organizations.

The Iranian Jewish Organization in Boston replicated some of the former social structures in the new society. The leadership of the group was given to the families who held the leading positions in the main Jewish centers in Iran.

A dispute developed between the leadership and the Jewish Family and Children's Service. Accustomed to the idea that in Iran, community elders perform the functions that are divided among various Jewish agencies in this country, the IJO leadership could not accept the process by which JFCS would interview the needy students and distribute aid. They felt that the money should be given to the IJO board instead. They knew their own members and thus could distribute money in a much more equitable way. The leadership could not understand the arguments of JFCS which stated that the system protected the complete privacy of each student and did not put them in a dependent position on the members of their own group. For them traditional discretion in the act of giving was sufficient.

Used to a strong hierarchical social structure, the Iranian students did not know how to relate to the Jewish communal workers. Aware that the workers were not the directors of their agencies, it was hard for the Iranians to treat them as superiors. At the same time, in need of their services, it was inadvisable to treat the workers as inferiors. Their approach wavered from utmost respect to expecting the workers to perform menial tasks. The group advisor presented a special difficulty, since there was no equivalent role in their own society. Only after a friendship developed with the group did a more informal relationship evolve between key members of the group and the advisor.

The experiences of the IJO in Boston may be of use to other groups considering establishing similar organizations for Iranian Jews in other cities with large concentration of Iranian immigrants. Jewish agen-

cies should recognize the extent to which adjustment to the Jewish community are  
the problems of different emigre groups in not identical.

### **Family Cycle**

Each family tells its unique tale,  
On the trial and error growth scale.

My father of heroic stature he,  
Beset by perplexity.

My mother engenders being,  
And governs by endless conceiving!

Children promise what's eternal,  
If parents bear acts infernal!

Missiles dumping the gantry tree,  
Children leap as adults to be free!

from:

*Engagement: Quebecois Haiku*

by

**David Weiss**