



Inside Israel, Iran, and the U.S.

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Iran is much in the news these days as the West — and Israel — figure out how to address a potentially nuclear Iran, strategically and diplomatically. On what basis are Iran's policies forged — how pragmatic, or ideological, or for that matter, how foreboding are they? Is the Iranian leadership heterogeneous or monolithic, and to what extent will its ideology trump its pragmatism? This issue of *Sh'ma* features a roundtable with historian Kenneth Stein and a number of Middle East foreign policy experts in which they explore the delicate nature of Middle East geopolitics. It also includes essays on the Shi'a Islam practiced in Iran, Persian Jewish life in Los Angeles, the history and culture of Persian Jews, and some discussion of the condition of Iranian Jewish life today. While some argue that Jews continue to fare well, others insist that they enjoy at best second-class citizenship and are muzzled by a repressive regime.

This month we launch a digital edition of Sh'ma. While we will continue to print and mail the journal to subscribers, we are offering an electronic edition — formatted exactly like the print edition. In May and June we offer a free "tryout" of the digital edition, which will include expanded features: articles can be forwarded and are completely searchable. Sign up now on shma.com. We'll soon also post online our 40 year archive — a treasure trove of Jewish thinking. —SB

Moral Relativism: Questions for Iran

ARON RODRIGUE

On February 22 the *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen published an astonishingly naïve piece about the Jews of Iran that has received much hostile commentary. He conveyed a benign and somewhat rosy picture of the condition of the Jews and stressed the warmth and hospitality of the people of Iran.

But the article omitted a highly significant point about the Jews of Iran that raises very important questions about human rights and the question of their universal applicability. Iranian Jews are currently, by the standards of Western democracies, second-class citizens. While they can vote, they cannot occupy governmental or bureaucratic positions of authority. One seat is allocated to them in the Iranian parliament, as part of a quota system of representation for recognized non-Muslim minorities. And they do not have equality with Muslims in the sphere of justice. For all intents and purposes, they live under an updated version of the old Islamic juridical system of *dhimma*, a sort of covenant that in Islamic law recognizes Jews and Christians as tolerated minorities, but keeps them in a position of political and social inferiority.

For most Western observers this represents an intolerable infraction of human rights. Warm and harmonious relations have frequently existed between members of dominant populations and subjugated minority groups throughout history. But these days, formal civic inequality should never be passed over in silence.

Is there a double standard at work here? Are non-Western societies to be held to looser or lesser standards when it comes to matters of equality? The question arises with the greatest frequency in issues related to women's rights and Islam. While many in the West recoil in the face of the veiling of women and their inferior position in many areas of life in some non-Western societies, others accept such practices as part and parcel of distinctive cultural norms that one should not attempt to change. According to this line of thought, one should tolerate,


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understand, or indeed respect such practices as part of the larger project of accepting cultural difference. Anything less than that would be to impose alien values on local cultures, representing yet another iteration of western imperialism.

At first glance, the Jewish position in the face of this question appears to be unequivocally on the universalist side that posits the applicability of modern human rights norms across different societies and cultures throughout the world. Much of modern Jewish history has been defined by emancipation, the formal acquisition of equality by Jews beginning with the French Revolution. This represented a decisive rupture with the past when Jews were barely tolerated pariahs. Many Jews have been at the forefront of the struggle for political human rights in the 19th and 20th centuries — best represented by René Cassin, who took the lead in crafting the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man issued by the United Nations in 1948. Cassin, who was Jewish, was also the president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the first modern international Jewish organization created in 1860 to fight antisemitism and to promote the cause of emancipation throughout the world. Equality as full-fledged citizens is now a non-negotiable position for Jews, one that is not subject to relativism.

But matters are considerably more complex in other areas of life. Jews, who were for cen-

turies the ultimate representatives of difference and particularism, were emancipated as a result, after many twists and turns, of universalism — which itself can be problematic in the spheres of cultural and societal norms and practice. For example, if female genital cutting is universally unacceptable, why, as many have argued and continue to argue, should one tolerate circumcision, which for some is considered to be another form of infant mutilation? And indeed, if veiling women is to be banned in public schools in some countries like France, could the practice of wearing a *kippa* not also be put in question, since this affirms yet another form of cultural difference seen as disruptive of a secular public sphere?

The debate over distinctive practices linked to religion and culture versus the presumed universality of modern norms predicated upon equality and human rights is enormously complicated. The Jewish experience of negotiating equality and difference has been ongoing for more than two centuries, and Jews, among the first groups to face the challenges of a modern universalism that was not so tolerant of Jewish distinctiveness, might contribute much to the current debate. However, issues related to cultural sensitivity toward distinctive social practices cannot be engaged with properly if one ignores the existence of formal political and juridical inequality as they exist, for example, in Iran today. 

Iran: A Roundtable

In a conversation with Daniel Levy, David Menashri, and Gary Sick, we explore Iran as a regional player in Middle East policy; the domestic and foreign policy objectives that the Iranian government has held over the years; and finally, the contemporary issues that pertain to U.S. foreign relations. —KS

Professor **Kenneth Stein** is the director of the Institute for the Study of Modern Israel and William E. Schatten Professor of Contemporary Middle Eastern History and Israeli Studies at Emory University. He was the founding director of the Carter Center (1983-1986). His writings include "My Problem with Jimmy Carter's Book," *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2007) and *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (Routledge, 1999).

Kenneth Stein: Describe how Iran has been ruled, who makes the key decisions, and the road traveled from the revolution to 2009.

David Menashri: Both before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (also known as the Iranian Revolution), Iran has been and remains a very important country in the Middle East because of its rich history, strategic location, and culture. The Islamic Revolution drew people from different strata of society, with different ideologies. The result of the revolution has been an Islamic republic; the aim of the people was to improve the life of the people of Iran. A major problem facing Iran, after 30 years, is the degree that it has or has not been able to ease, not solve, the basic problems facing the Iranian nation. The

Iranian people were struggling for bread and freedom and these two issues remain the major problems facing this regime today.

Gary Sick: Several characteristics about Iran need to be remembered; first, Iran is not a totalitarian dictatorship of the Saddam Hussein variety though it is a repressive regime. Decisions are made by consultations and coalitions among multiple power centers — the supreme leader, the president, the parliament, the merchants in the bazaar, the Revolutionary Guards. While all of these people play a role, they are certainly dominated by the mullahs. Iran has changed dramatically in the last 30 years; it began as a rather fanatical place dominated by almost illusory visions of the world coming to look just like Iran.