of Islamic Sufism. While the Turkish Seljuk Dynasty (11th century) forced Jews to wear yellow patches — as in Nazi Germany — and closed Jewish-owned taverns, the Mongols who followed them appointed Jews to be their grand viziers. These fluctuations foreshadow the 20th-century conditions of the Jews in Iran.

The status of the Jews almost always depended on how much power the clergy wielded and the religious goals of the particular dynasty. To impose Zoroastrianism upon the populace, the Sassanids repressed Jewish observance; to impose Sunni Islam upon the populace, the Seljuks oppressed minority religions, including the Jews. When, in 1501, Shah Ismail imposed Shi'ism — and Sufism — upon a Sunni Iran, he and his imported Shi`ite clergy lashed out against the Jewish community, forbidding them to travel to the Jewish center of Baghdad and causing thousands of Jews to flee to Ottoman-controlled lands. On the other hand, the Mongols of the 13th and 14th centuries were not religious; they weren't even Muslim. They were interested in operating their empire free from religious constraints and, therefore, brought in many Jews to high positions. The Golden Age of Jewish participation in the highest levels of Iranian society, under Muhammad Reza Shah, from 1941–1979, arrived after his father, Reza Shah, rescinded the power of the Ulama, the clergy — in the areas of justice, education, and even land ownership — and gave it to civil servants, government officials, and the populace. When the clerics were more powerful, the Jews had fewer rights; when the clerics, and Islam, were relegated to a lesser status, the Jews could flourish. From reports dating back to the 19th century, it appears that much of the population and certainly the clergy treated the Jews as impure, not worthy to walk the streets with Muslims, capable of defiling a Muslim on touch. While Reza Shah (1926–1941) was no friend of the Jews, and even embraced Nazi antisemitic rhetoric, his anti-cleric reforms removed active discrimination against Jews. This subordination of the clergy eventually allowed Jews to prosper under Muhammad Reza Shah, becoming leading scientists, doctors, professors, government officials, and business leaders — even under a Shah who had Iran vote in the U.N. to declare that Zionism is racism (in 1975).

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, however, was unprecedented in Iranian history. For the first time, the clergy, *ulama*, took real control of the state. While Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini approved discrimination against, and persecution of, the Jews of Iran, he did not officially change the status or the rights of the Jews which they had gained at the beginning of the 20th century with the Iranian constitution and Fundamental Law: Jews maintain to this day a designated seat in the Majlis parliament and are officially granted equal status to Muslims. Khomeini preached for the protected status of the Jewish community even while declaring Israel the "little Satan." Historical precedent does not provide us with real clues for the future of Jews in a modern state ruled by a clergy devoted to Shi`a Islamic *shari'a*. Shi`a Islam, the Islam of the ayatollahs and Iranians, allows for "*ijtihad*," independent and creative understandings of Islamic law for better or for worse. What this will mean for the Jews of Iran in the future is anybody's guess.

Memories Are the Cornerstone of Stories

DORA LEVY MOSSANEN

I am an amalgam of cultural identities and influences — Israel, Iran, America — that consciously and subconsciously nourish my imagination and animate my novels. How can they not? Memories — the shrill scream of sirens that sent us for shelter to dark Tel Aviv basements, the much-anticipated sound of music from microphones in streets announcing Israel's independence, the hours spent by my mother's side on Ben Yehudah Street waiting for the family's weekly ration of two eggs — are the cornerstone of stories. Also embedded in my memory are my first impressions of Iran, which coincided with the 1953 coup d'état that ousted then Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. One day the Tehran streets brimmed with demonstrators supporting Mossadegh, dragging down statues of the Shah, who had left for Italy with his first wife, Soraya; the very next day, jeeps crossed the same street, the portrait of the Shah prominently displayed, blaring microphones announcing his return. Such was my introduction to Iran, this country of contradictions.

My grandfather, Habib Levy, was a renowned

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historian of Iranian Jews; he left me with a legacy of fascinating familial, cultural, and historical events that continue to supply fodder for my stories. He spoke of the plight of Jews in Mahaleh, the Jewish ghetto, his wedding to my grandmother, who was a mere child of nine, his experiences as the dentist of Reza Shah, the intricate politics of court, and the conspiracies and betrayals that took place in Reza Shah's harem. He recounted how he was forced to extract the Shah's rotting teeth without the help of painkillers because the Shah was an opium addict and painkillers of the time would have proven lethal. My colorful and eccentric grandmothers, who possessed an encyclopedic treasure trove of Persian-Jewish proverbs, curses, blessings, and old world beliefs of their ancestors, continue to pepper my novels.

Iran's air is dense with scents of oven-warm bread, rosewater, and cherry blossoms in spring, blessed with poets such as Sa'adi and Hafez, and the ancient Zoroastrian belief that good triumphs over evil. But also, due to her rich natural reserves and sensitive geographical position in the Middle East, Iran has known her share of foreign invasions and internal political upheavals — the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, the Nationalist Revolt of 1951–1953, the eight-year-long 1980 war with Iraq, and the most enduring uprising, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that forced the Shah and the Empress Farah to flee and my family and me to follow suit.

One's imagination depends, in part, on the "space" one occupies in a culture. In a Moslem country, an Iranian Jew is allowed a very small space indeed. Stepping into other times and lives is a way of stretching and expanding the limited space imposed upon a writer. Imagination becomes one's most cherished private wealth, a safe place to navigate without fear of persecution.

America allows a more generous space to openly observe one's faith, the freedom to write honestly without fear of censorship or imprisonment. Taking advantage of events and characters forever ingrained in my consciousness, I dig into my Persian roots and draw on the tradition of magical realism, mythology, folklore, and superstition to create a poetic style that is uniquely Persian. An ancient literary heritage enhances my stories and infuses the experiences of my characters, misunderstood outsiders, mystics, and underdogs made to feel small and inconsequential behind ghetto walls, determined souls who navigate the reality of their harsh worlds to overcome insurmountable hurdles.

If history would have unfolded differently, and I would have found myself a writer in some other place, the candor essential to my "retelling" would have been unimaginable. The Persian curse, "May you wander from place to place," has turned into a unique blessing in my writing life.

Michal and Tovah: Ties That Bind Us

GALEET DARDASHTI

Growing up in the United States, my sisters and I would ask our father to tell us stories about his childhood in Iran. He told us about his learned Aunt Tovah, who would periodically teach classes on the weekly Torah portion to women and men in her Tehran community. My father remembers that when she and her husband spent the night at my grandparents' house, she would wear *tallit* and *tefillin* during her morning prayers. So my father asked her, "Why, Aunt Tovah, do you pray like a man?" Tovah explained simply, "God did not bless me with children, so I decided to pray as I believe God would want me to."

As far as we know, her decision to take upon herself many of the *mitzvot* from which women are traditionally exempt was an independent innovation — one woman's response to being unencumbered with the responsibilities of childrearing. My father does not recall anyone objecting to her religious practice in Iran. When I share this story with my non-Iranian Jewish friends here in the U.S., they are always surprised to hear about a "modern" woman like Tovah in the Iranian context. Her story does not fit the stereotypes of the submissive and repressed Persian woman wearing a chador or of men dictating strict rules for female deportment in the Middle East.

The story of my great-aunt, though powerful, is not so surprising. The religious practice of many Mizrahi (Middle Eastern Jewish) communities was generally flexible in terms of halakhic observance. For example, the concept of *kol isha*, a talmudically derived prohibition on women's singing in the company of men, was very seldom adopted among Persian, Turkish, or Arab Jews. After immigrating to the U.S.,

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