

Jews of Iran and Rabbinical Literature: Preliminary Notes

Daniel Tsadik

Estimates of the number of Jews in Iran, one of the oldest Jewish diasporas and today's largest Jewish community under Islam, range from 17,000 to 30,000 souls. This community usually does not receive much scholarly attention. To be sure, compared to some other Jewish diasporas in the Middle East, there is not much data on the Jews of Iran from past centuries, making it difficult to depict certain aspects of their life. Further, Iran seems to be perceived as anomalous with Persian, not Arabic, as its major language and Shi'ite, not "mainstream" or "Orthodox" Sunni Islam, as its majority religion from the sixteenth century onward. These facts, consequently, may have caused scholars to regard the Jews of Iran as too remote, isolated, and difficult to decipher.

Be this as it may, one may contend that the so-called remoteness of Iran's Jewry poses questions, some of which have broader significance. For instance, if it was indeed segregated, how did such a Jewish community persevere and preserve its Jewish identity? Were Iran's Jews indeed so distant and isolated? Were there relations between Iranian Jewry and other major centers of Jewish life? In other words, the Jewish community in Iran may serve as an important case study of the survival of Jewish life ostensibly distant from centers of Jewish wisdom.

There are various references to Iranian Jewry's low level of knowledge of mainstream rabbinical Judaism as well as the general sciences. In modern times, Rabbi 'Ovadiyah Yosef (b. 1920) has asserted that not all the religious judges of Iran are experts. The late professor Ezra Zion Melamed (d. 1994), of Iranian-Shirazi origins, stated that in Iran, Jews did not learn the Talmud, nor did they possess copies of it. The renowned rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulay (HID"A) (d. 1806) maintained that in Iran there were several generations of Talmudic sages, *amoraim*, as well as *sevoraim* and *geonim*. Yet he added, based on truthful sources (*magidey emet*), that the Jews of Iran in his day did not even know prayer. Some non-Jewish European observers in Safavid Iran (1501–1722/36) viewed the Jews of Iran as the most ignorant of all Jews; one of them reports that the Jews of Hurmuz in southern Iran had no knowledge of Judaism. Earlier, Samuel



Hakham Hayim Moreh of Tehran, on the front page of his *Yedey Eliyahu* (Tehran: Nehuray, TaRPaZ/1927).

al-Maghribi, a famous twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam, argued in his anti-Jewish polemics that the Iranian Jews were the "most ignorant of all Jews." One should keep in mind that, after all, some of the leading figures of the early Qaraite movement, which challenged rabbinical and Talmudic authority, were from Iran: Benjamin al-Nihvandi (ninth century), Daniel al-Qumisi (ninth–tenth centuries) and the important Qaraite Tustari family (eleventh century) of merchants and politicians. Even before them, movements that challenged rabbinical authority were apparently connected to Iranian Jews, such as those that centered around Abu 'Isa al-Isfahani and his disciple, Yudghan (seventh or eighth century).

Additionally, rabbis of international renown are not known to have existed in Iran, and religious compositions of Iranian Jews were not studied or quoted outside the Persian world. This may indeed allow for Iranian Jewry's portrayal as detached from the perceived mainstream Jewish world. However,

some previously untapped evidence attests to the Jews' knowledge of and commitment to rabbinical Judaism. In this essay, I will demonstrate this knowledge based on some data from the sixteenth century onward. Certain Iranian cities were centers of Torah and learning. Kashan was a major center for religious and intellectual activity in the seventeenth century, as is evident from the fact that several Jewish thinkers and writers hailed from Kashan: the poet Sa'id Sarmad, who converted to Islam, Babai b. Lutf, author of the historical text *Kitabi-i Anusi* (Book of a Forced Convert), and probably Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar, author of *Hovot Yehudah* (Duties of Judah), a book of Jewish thought. Isfahan was another nucleus of Jewish life, as can be seen from the Armenian author, Khwajah Safar, who noted in 1643 that the Jews of Isfahan are "very studious in learning, philosophers . . . perfect in the seven wisdoms. . . they all—men, women, boys, and girls—know the entire Bible by heart. They are very learned with a proclivity to research. . . Their craft is reading and learning."

Overall, there were members of the Jewish elite who knew Jewish subjects, such as the Hebrew Bible and its commentaries, Talmud, halakhah, thought, and mysticism. They were engaged with different genres—as the relatively vast number of Judeo-Persian manuscripts testifies—including *tafsirs* (translations/commentaries) on the Hebrew Bible, didactic literature, history, and thought. The most significant Jewish composition of Safavid times was *Hovot Yehudah* (Duties of Judah) by Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar. The book was written in 1686 in Judeo-Persian and addresses various issues (*ma'sheh bereshit* and *ma'sheh merkavah*, the Torah, punishment and reward, messianic days, and resurrection), while espousing a rationalist line. He also writes about mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, medicine, music, logic, and rhetoric, among other issues. Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar is also comfortable with non-Jewish sources, such as the New Testament, Qur'an, and the writings of Aristotle, Plato, Ibn Sina (Avecinna), al-Shahristani, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), al-Ghazali, Nasir al-Din Tusi, and others. Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar had no qualms disputing some of his predecessors, including some of the greatest Jewish thinkers. Thus, for instance,

Iranian Jewry's knowledge is also reflected in incidental letters. A note by David b. Binyamin ha-Cohen of Khunsar in the year TaSaH (c. 1708) testifies to his mastery of different layers of the Hebrew language and its literature. He quotes or paraphrases from the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and the Book of Zohar. Legal questions sent from Iran to highly acclaimed rabbinical authorities abroad—mostly to Baghdad or Jerusalem—testify to the Iranian Jews' familiarity with rabbinical Judaism in the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. During the eighteenth century, inquiries were sent from Iran to Rabbi Sedaqah Husin of Baghdad, and in the nineteenth century there are some yet-untapped Iranian questions addressing rabbis in Ottoman Palestine, such as Rabbi Hayim David Hazan (d. 1869), or Rabbi Ya'aqov Shaul Elyashar (d. 1906), as well as Hakham Yosef Hayim (d. 1909) in Baghdad. These questions may indicate their Iranian senders' lack of knowledge and the fact that educated rabbis did not exist in Iran. Nevertheless, the very resort to foreign rabbis indicates that the Jews of Iran valued this type of knowledge; it reflects their desire to follow halakhah as understood outside Iran. Additionally, letters were written by Iranian Jews—indeed a narrow elite of scholars—and dispatched to their foreign coreligionists on various socioeconomic, political, educational, and personal matters. Parts of these letters consist of a very high, multilayered, and sophisticated Hebrew style. Their Hebrew is exceptionally rich, with sentences and expressions drawing on various Jewish traditional sources, such as Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and the mystical literature.

knowledge or lack of knowledge in certain Jewish fields (as illustrated by the questions to the emissary Rabbi Yehudah b. 'Amram Diwan in the early eighteenth century), but they always mirror the Jews' adherence to the pronouncements of these foreign emissary Jews. At times, these emissaries preached to their host communities. Based on the content of the emissaries' sermons, it seems that their Iranian-Jewish audiences were highly knowledgeable and sophisticated in Jewish matters.

ha-Yeled, medieval Jewish dictionary (*Sefer ha-Shorashim*), Talmud Bavli, and other texts. At times, some of the books referred to in these Shi'ite texts are known to have existed among the Jews of Iran only through this Shi'ite anti-Jewish usage of them. Even if compared to some other Jewries under Islam, not much of rabbinical/Talmudic literature has survived from Iran, this fact in itself does not necessarily mean that such literature never existed. An illustration of the knowledge of a rabbi in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is Hakham Hayim Moreh (d. 1942) of Tehran. Although rather simple in content and style, the works of Hakham Moreh nonetheless exemplify his breadth of knowledge of diverse fields of Jewish wisdom.

بدون قول خدا بشنای و نور حضرت موسی و کتاب انبیای عاشر ایل علم السلام بدین دلیل که **لید اول** نکرده بود به حضرت موسی ع و در سفر شد و فضل بحدی در این چهاردهم و یازدهم دو خصوص غنا و شادانی و پیغمبر بر بنی اسرائیل خداوند بنیاد و نفعالین پیغمبر باید

دوم	میان	میان	میان
کامون	ما چنان	میفرمایند	نای
الو	ادونای	لحا	یاقیم
تیتاغون	الایو		

یعنی بخیر و میان و یادوان و بر ما بکنایم منکر خدای خالق تو هستم قول اول و بشود موافق هر آنچه که از خداوند خطاب شد در جبل حوریب در روز حجت در خواستد هنگام گفتن که یار خداوند خدای خود را دیگر نشوم و این اثر عظیم را که بدین میباید که هر روز و هر مرد و اندک بنیکو گفتن بدین قوم و کو را بنی اسرائیل چنین کان میگردند که هر پیغمبری که می نازل شود باید نزول صاعقه و برق و زلزله باشد لهذا اسد خدای رفیع اینچنین مژده خداوند بنیاد و نفعالین پیغمبر باید

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FALL 2010 15

in the above fields as the religious elite, the *mullahs/hakhamim/rabbis*. Furthermore, it would be difficult to speak of a certain level of knowledge of all of the Jews of Iran as a whole, as there were differences within cities, towns, and villages, as well as from one city to the next. Kashan and Isfahan of the seventeenth century and Yazd of the nineteenth century were centers of Jewish knowledge, whereas in the nineteenth century, Shiraz Jews—as testified by professor E. Z. Melamed—were not truly familiar with the Talmud. In small communities, such as towns and villages, the Jews probably did not know much beyond the bare basics of the Jewish religion.

Finally, the long time span from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century cannot be seen as a bloc. Whereas in the seventeenth century one may speak of highly sophisticated

learning in some Iranian locales, by the early twentieth century, the general level of knowledge seemed to have already declined. In the seventeenth century, Rabbi Yehudah b. Ela'zar's impressive *Hovot Yehudah* addressed the principles of Jewish faith in an innovative and highly sophisticated manner, whereas the early twentieth-century Hakham Moreh's *Derekh Hayim* addressed the same topic in a popular, easy-to-comprehend, and anything-but-innovative manner, which reflects the different communities and readers in the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century. From a climax of learning and knowledge in the seventeenth century, Iran's Jews gradually underwent a decline due to various causes: times of heavy persecution and forced conversions, governmental disposal of their writings, poverty, lack of organized communal

leadership, and to a limited extent, their living in Shi'ite Iran politically detached from adjacent Sunni countries with their centers of Jewish learning. Nevertheless, even as late as the 1920s, Iran's Jewry cannot be viewed as completely detached from rabbinical and Talmudic writings and world. Indeed, their contact with this world has helped them preserve their Jewish identity in the face of challenges and changing circumstances.

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