

## A SHORT REVIEW ABOUT HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS OF JEWS IN PERSIA

By Farshid Delshad

Iranian Jews are amongst the oldest inhabitants of the country. The origin of Jewish Diaspora in Persia is closely connected with various events in Israel's ancient history. At the time of the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III (727 BC) thousands of Jews were deported from Israel and forced to settle in Media. According to the annals of another Assyrian king, Sargon II, in 721 BC, Jewish inhabitants of Ashdod and Samaria in present day Israel were resettled in Media after their failed attempt against Assyrian dominance. The records indicate that 27,290 Jews were forced to settle in Ecbatana (Hamadan) and Susa in South West Persia. These settlers are referred to as one of the 'Ten Lost Tribes of Israel' in biblical records.

The next wave of the Jewish settlers arrived to escape persecution from the Assyrian king Nabuchadnezzar II. Many were settled in Isfahan around 680BC. The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great the founder of Achaemenian Empire also brought many Jews into the country. In 539 BC, Cyrus entered Babylon with little resistance. The temple of Marduk their major deity was restored and Cyrus crowned himself in the name of Marduk. The Jewish exiles in Babylon were permitted to go home and reconstruct the temple of Jerusalem and some chose to emigrate to Persia. The restoration was confirmed by Darius the Great and commenced at the time of Artaxerxes I. Under Darius around 30,000 Jews left Babylon to start work on the temple.

The mild treatment Achaemenian accorded their conquered subjects was part of the Imperial doctrine. The policies of the central administration encouraged autonomy in internal affairs with little intervention from the Persians. For instance, the Satrap (Governor General) of Judah, which constituted the fifth Satrapy, had his own local governor in Samaria with the right of supervision over the deputy in Judah.

From 516 BC, there was no Persian deputy in Judah. At first Shabazzar from the ancient Davidic House was the regional leader in Jerusalem. He was followed by Zerubbabel another Jewish aristocrat. In the fifth to fourth century BC, the rulers of Judah were also appointed among the local residents. Seals used by the ruler of Judah in the fifth century BC identify him as Yehoazar. In 458 BC, the Jew Ezra is appointed the deputy of Judah. The same Ezra had served up to this time as a scribe in the central administration in Susa, the Capital of the Persian Empire.

Correspondence left by Ezra and his successor Nehemiah, who likewise had been in Susa prior to this, indicates a strong Jewish community, united around the local temple and headed by the high priest. This community had its own organs of self-administration, in whose affairs the Persians did not intervene. Gradually, the high priest became the governor of Judah.

Semi autonomous temple communities were not exclusive to the Jews. They existed throughout the Persian Empire. Cyprus, Cilicia, Lycia and other Phoenician cities and principalities in Asia Minor had their own local rulers. Even such remote tribes as the Arabs, Colchians, Ethiopians, Sakai, etc were governed by their own local chiefs. All kept their religion and gods with little interference from the Achaemenian administration.

Persians occupied the highest positions in the state apparatus. At the same time they extensively utilized cultural, legal and administrative traditions of the conquered nations. In the Murashu family documents (present-day Iraq, ancient Babylonia) of

the 23 high royal officers, only eight have Iranian names. Various ethnic and religious minorities followed their own legal code in personal matters such as marriage and family law. For example Jewish settlers of Elephantine (Egypt) under Persian administration remained monogamous and the husbands did not have the right to take a second wife. Monetary and property disputes were settled and decided by the special "court of the Jews".

The conquered people were also given land allotments in exchange for taxes and military service. Among these settlers were all groups such as Babylonians, Aramaeans, Jews, Indians and Sakai, etc. In Susa itself, besides the local population and the Persians, there were large number of Babylonians, Egyptians, Jews and Greeks.

There were no restrictions with respect to religious freedom and practices. Hundreds of objects regarded sacred by various ethnic and religious groups are discovered both in Susa and Persepolis. In the Fortification texts discovered at Persepolis many foreign deities are mentioned. These cults and their priests received rations and wages for maintenance.

A priest serving the Elamite god Humban receives 4 marris of beer, of which two were for the Akkadian god Adad. In 500 BC, the priest Ururu, having received 80 bar of grain from the storehouse, exchanged it for eight yearling sheep, of which two were used for sacrifices to the god Adad. The Persian religion was against offering of livestock for sacrifices and Zoroaster banned the practice, however others were not prevented from practicing such rituals.

The Elamite god Humban is mentioned more frequently in the texts than other foreign gods. As evident from the Fortification texts, both Elamite and Persian priests served this deity. Cambyses (Cyrus' son and successor) frequently expresses his respect for all things sacred. He worshiped Egyptian gods and goddess and patronized the Elephantine temple of the Jews. In a mosaic in British Museum, Darius is crowning himself in Egypt, in the name of Egyptian gods, dressed as an Egyptian Pharaoh.

Marriage contracts testify to mixed marriages amongst all groups including Jews. The practice was so common that the Jewish governors Ezra and Nehemiah objected it. They clamped down on these marriages and punished Jews who would marry outside the religion. Many documents, texts and contracts mention Jewish names engaged in trade, disputes or as property owners.

In the fifth century BC, in Nippur documents, 100 such Jewish families are identified. They are land owners, tradesmen or were in the royal service. For instance a certain Hannani, the son of Minnahhin, occupied the post of supervisor over the king's poultry". The Jew Nehemiah was a confidant of Artaxerxes I, occupying the important post of royal cupbearer in the civil service hierarchy.

Jews often appear also as contracting parties and witnesses. One Elephantine papyri mention an Iranian, Choresmian Dargamana, the son of Harshina, who served in the Elephantine garrison in the detachment of the Persian Artabana. He owned his own house and made claims to some plot of land. Daragamana complained to the judges that a certain Jew from the detachment of the Iranian Varyazata had occupied the field unlawfully. In the court the defendant sworn by the god Yahu (Yahweh) that Dargamana himself has transferred to him the lot in question, the plaintiff gave up his claim.

In another document, the Carpian Bugazusht, the son of the Persian Bazu, sold a

house to a Jew. This house was located beside the house of another Persian, Shatibar. Various documents show, Egyptian, Aramaeans, Jews and Phoenicians entered into joint business deals, contracted mixed marriages, adopted each other's customs and worshiped not only their own god, but also the gods of the aliens who lived in one city or another.

In short, freedom of religion, movement, occupation and marriage were guaranteed under the Achaemenian. Such tolerance is not strange or unusual since the ancient religions including Judaism prior to Ezra and Nehemiah were not dogmatic and intolerant to other beliefs. In the ancient Near Eastern religions there is a complete absence of the concept of false faith or any form of heresy. Nor there seems to be any notion of racial hatred or any feeling of the superiority of one people over another.

The next major change comes with the Safavids in 16th century. Shiism is introduced as the state religion. A religious hierarchy is established with unlimited power and influence in every sphere of life. The concept of "ritual pollution" (najes) of the non-Muslims is introduced. Suffering and persecution of all religious groups particularly the Sunnis becomes a norm (this period is one of the worst with respect to human rights in Iran).

Jewish chronicles are full of accounts of massacre, forced conversion into Islam and mistreatment. New institutions are created; nasi became the head of the Jewish community assisted by the rabbi, mullah (Jewish one), or dayyan. The nasi was responsible for the prompt payment of jizya to local authorities. All relations between Iranian Jews and others outside the country were completely severed. Christians and Zoroastrians were subjected to the same harsh treatments and Sunnis suffered most. Segregation became a reality again for all minorities and Jewish Ghettos were reinforced. The reports by European travelers and missionaries describe the tragic situation of the Jews and other religious minorities. Jews were forced to wear both a yellow badge and a headgear, and their oath were not accepted in courts of justice. A Jew who converted to Islam could claim to be the sole inheritor of the family property, to the exclusion of all Jewish relatives. If one Jew committed a crime or an illegal act, the whole community would be punished (other religious minorities were subjected to the same harsh treatments).

The Jewish community of Iran saw little change till 19th century. In one incident the Jewish quarters were looted in Mashad. The anti Jewish sentiment reached its peak when the whole Jewish community in the city was forced to convert into Islam in 1839 under Muhammad Shah Quajar. Europeans intervened for the first time and the decree was reversed. The first modern Jewish School, Alliance was opened after a long and frustrating debate with heavy pressure from Europeans and the International Jewish Alliance in 1891 by an order from Nasser E' din Shah. Once opened, the students and the teachers would have to be escorted by the police to stop the mob from attacking them (All modern schools specially girls' schools were subjected to the same attacks by religious Fatwas). Jewish chronicles report Quajar period as one of the worst in their history.

The end of the 19th century is the beginning of fundamental changes in Iran and the start of the Constitutional Revolution. Jewish partisans along with other minorities participated in the movement. They were instrumental in forming the first multiethnic Secret Society of 1905, which began the debate on political change. Jews, Christians, Bahai and Zoroastrians fought hard with the constitutionalists to form a National Consultative Majlis instead of an Islamic Majlis as demanded by the religious hierarchy. Along with other religious minorities they succeeded in their efforts to

ratify laws that gave equality to Muslim and non-Muslim (male) citizens in 1907 and defined a new concept of Nationality not based on religious origins (with the exception of Bahai who were not recognized).

According to the new constitution Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians had the right to elect one delegate each to the Majlis, but they could not participate in elections of other delegates. The constitution also prohibited non-Shiite Muslims from becoming a member of the Government. This was ignored by the Pahlavi regime and there were non-Muslim high government officials even Bahai by the 1970's.

Such gains did not put an end to discriminatory practices and attitudes. Jewish quarters were still attacked and looted in Mashad, Tabriz and Tehran at the beginning of this century by religious Fatwas. Though the constitution of 1907 put an end to the segregation of religious minorities and Jewish Ghettos, it was at the time of Reza Shah that they were able to integrate in the larger Iranian society without fear from Fatwas.

Reza Shah was the first Iranian Monarch after 1400 years that paid respect to the Jews by praying to the Torah and bowing in front of it, when visiting the Jewish community of Isfahan. An act that boosted the self-esteem of the Iranian Jews and made Reza Shah the second most respected Iranian leader after Cyrus the Great. Still when in the 1970's, they showed up to support the Iranian Football team against Israel in the Asian games in Tehran, they were beaten up by the mob and the Iranian flags they were carrying were taken away.

In 1948, there was a high concentration of Jewish communities in Kurdistan. There were around 12,000 Jews scattered in approximately 15 Jewish settlements in Iranian Kurdistan. After the formation of the State of Israel many Jews in the area left for Tehran, in transit to Israel. The move angered the Muslim authorities. In March 1950, 12 Jews were murdered in Kurdistan. As a result more Jews moved to Tehran and demanded protection. The Iranian government guaranteed their safe passage. By March 1951, 8000, Iranian Jews had moved to Israel, the first major emigration in 20th century. After the formation of Israel in 1949, all the Muslim countries in the region expelled their local Jewish population except Iran. By 1966, the number of Jews immigrated to Israel had reached 22,000.

Kanoun e Javanan Yahudi formed in 1938, was the first Jewish Youth Organization in Iran. The first Iranian Jewish women's organization (Sazman Banovan Yahud i Iran) was established in 1947. Headed by Mrs. Shamsi Hekmat, the organization provided help to the needy and established branches in several towns. The first Jewish hospital opened in Tehran in 1958.

Since the conquest of Islam, Iranian Jews (and other religious minorities) have been instrumental in preserving Iranian music especially in Safavid times when music was restricted. Also many ancient rituals and traditions long forgotten by the Iranian Muslims are still practiced by the Jews as part of their festivals and celebrations. Illanout (tree festival) celebrated in February by Iranian Jews is identical to Shab e Cheleh and is a lot more elaborate, reminiscence of the pre Islamic celebrations.

In Iranian folklore, Jews are portrayed as mean, misery and polluted (Najes). Children were warned not to go to Jewish quarters because they would be kidnapped and Jews would drink their blood. They are used as stereotypes to portray evil characters by the likes of Mulana Jaledin Rumi, Nezami, Sadi and many other literary figures. They could not touch water sources and when rained stayed in doors, since rain touching them would pollute the soil. At the times of persecution their

water sources would be cut off.

The Jewish quarter of Kirman had preserved many characteristics of these segregated ghettos till recently. The lanes were extremely narrow, rarely more than five feet wide. The compound walls on either side were 10 to 12 feet high, with jagged glass and stone set in the top to discourage entry. Massive oaken doors strengthened by metal studs guarded the entrances to the houses. One had to stoop to enter the low portals since the height should be lower than the Muslim homes. These details were also designed to prevent mounted horsemen from effectively attacking its residents. All facilities necessary were inside the quarter. The synagogues bore no external symbols, so they were difficult to locate. All transaction with Jews would be through special intermediaries not to pollute Muslim tradesmen.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, made Shariat the legal code and therefore gender and religious discriminations are an integral part of the system. Bahai once again are not recognized at all, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians each have one representative in the Parliament and are not legally forbidden from employment in the government sector. But since the authorities only employ Muslims and a 'Shariat test' is required, in reality these people are once again barred from working for the government. Like Bahaies it was very difficult for them to leave Iran for a decade after the revolution and restrictions still apply. They are accepted into Universities, but are not given access to post graduate studies, though no law prohibits them. Their monetary transactions are monitored closely to make sure no money is sent out. There were 85000 Iranian Jews before 1979, almost half have emigrated mainly to USA. The largest exodus since Darius' time when 30,000 left joyfully to rebuild their temple. Their departure this time has not been a happy one!

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