

# Iran & Jews

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

[Esther's Children](#) edited by Hooman Sarshar is a collection of fascinating essays and photographs about Iranian Jewry. The title alludes to the fact that Queen Esther was frightened to reveal her people. The author suggests that most Iranians he knew were brought up to hide their true identity in public.

The one abiding impression the book left on me is the extent that Iranian Jewry has suffered, most noticeably when Shia Islam took power. Apart from a brief interlude under the last Shah, the Jewish communities of Iran, in all their magnificent variety, were continuously humiliated and victimized.

Jews lived and thrived in Iran under the Persian Empire ever since the exile of 586 BCE, although the story of Purim illustrates how precarious it was. The Talmud itself attests to the richness of Jewish life in Babylonia, and the Geonim flourished into the second millennium. But it was not all light and bright before Shia Islam. The Zoroastrians were a changeable lot. They forbade anyone, including Jews, from lighting lights at home, instead of in Zoroastrian temples. Yet Jews were so well integrated that Yazdegerd 1st had a Jewish wife in the fifth century.

Under Islam it started promisingly. The Umayyads were the most enlightened of rulers, the Abbasids too, within the constraints of Islam. The famous Harun al-Rashid had Jewish financiers, doctors, and advisors, but he instituted the yellow badge all Jews had to wear. Jews and Christians were categorized as Dhimmis, second-class citizens, which from the time of the Pact of Omar imposed social and economic restrictions upon them that left them very much at the mercy of Muslims. If they were lucky, they were tolerated. If not, they were oppressed.

It was under the Safavids (1501-1731), who turned Iran into a Shiite state, that things got appreciably worse. A Muslim who killed or raped a Jew was not punished beyond a small fine. Jews had to step aside for Muslims in the street and could not eat or drink with, or even touch, Muslims. Increasingly, Jews were forced to live in ghettos (the Mahalleh), which were intentionally kept foul, fetid, and constricted. Muslims were forbidden to sell Jews houses elsewhere.

Jews were declared unclean, untouchable. They could not leave their homes when it rained because the wet might transfer their impurity. The penalty for infringement was death. Pressure began to build on the Jews to convert, and violence was often used to achieve results. To be fair, the Armenians, Zoroastrians, and other non Muslims suffered too, but Jews were singled out.

Things got even worse under the Qajars (1795-1925). By the nineteenth century the Jews of Iran were overwhelmingly poor, uneducated, and at the bottom of the social heap. In 1839, virtually the whole of the Jewish community of

Mashad was forced to convert. For many years, they, like the Marranos in Spain, had to live double lives.

During the nineteenth century the attention of European Jews began to focus on the plight of the Iranian Jewry. French Jewry established the Alliance Israelite Universelle network of schools in Iran to give Jewish children an education, but also encouraged assimilation. Thanks to international pressure, things began to change slowly. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 sped up the process. By 1911, Jews achieved civil rights (only fifty years after Britain, let us not forget).

Under the Pahlavis (1925-1979) things continued to be a mixture of good and bad. It was in fact only after the pro-German Shah Reza was forced out during the Second World War by the British and his son Mohammad Reza came to power and was supported by the United States (oil!), that Iranian Jewry really flourished and Jews began to rise up the rungs of society.

The 1979 revolution brought Khomeini to power. All the social Shia limitations were re-imposed on Jews, including the rules of impurity, once again consigning them to inferior status. Several significant and wealthy Iranian Jews were put to death on notoriously specious grounds. And a mass (though not total) migration led to the establishment of important Iranian communities, particularly in the United States.

Why do I mention all this, apart from my admiration of those Jews who kept their faith under such awful conditions? Imagine if you lived in a country where a group of people who are despised, the inferior dregs of society, suddenly begin to rise and do better than you. If you are a simple Muslim peasant toiling under the sun, of course you will resent these nouveaux riches, as indeed did most Americans and British in their day.

The Jews after all were only apes and pigs according to the Koran. Then all of a sudden these apes and pigs are able to establish one of the most powerful, intellectually, technically, and economically advanced states in the area. They win more Nobel prizes than you do. Not only, but these apes and pigs can withstand the combined might of the Muslim states who try to drive them out. The humiliation must be intolerable. And if you yourself are of already limited spirit and intellect, it must be very humiliating—apes and pigs doing better than you. No wonder primitive men like Ahmadinejad and his fundamentalist allies hate the Jews for having turned the tables on them.

This, my friends, explains Iranian foulmouthed anger and invective and their passionate desire to eradicate those whom they perceive as having humiliated them. It is not surprising. Now you tell me, when faced with irrational, deep-seated, visceral hatred, how should you respond? Sit down to a nice cup of tea?