

# The Jews of Mashhad

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

History is going out of fashion. It is declining as a subject taught at universities. It is seen as irrelevant to the great surge of technology and finance and out of favor with the politics of “me” and “now”. People are reluctant to talk about the past for fear of raising issues such as imperialism, slavery, religious oppression and counter oppression. There is no Biblical Hebrew word for history. But instead there is the constant refrain of memory, *Zecher*. The past may be messy – even barbaric – but it is our past. One of the reasons for the frightening assimilation of American Jewry is that they do not know their history.

The history of Ashkenazi Jews is full of memories. Memories of exile, oppression, crusades, blood Libels, pogroms and the Nazi Genocide. We remember the unbelievably brave men and women who stood up to the Romans, the Crusaders and the anti-Semites of Europe right through to our times. We remember those who died martyrs and those who remained to rebuild as they always have. But, sadly, they know all too little about the agonies of Sephardi Jews beyond the expulsions from Iberia. Yet a similar sad litany runs right through the Sephardi communities as it does for Ashkenazi communities: forced conversions, expulsions, riots, massacres and more expulsions.

There is a tendency to want to avoid talking about the bad stuff of the past. To avoid the lachrymose or “Oy Vey” version of Jewish history. And too few of the younger members of our Persian community know about their past. Which is why I want to write, before Rosh Hashanah, about the amazing community of Mashhad in Persia.

The Jews of Persia have been, and still are, the oldest surviving, continuous community of Jews in the world. They arrived from Israel during the Babylonian exile two and a half thousand years ago. Babylon became part of the ancient Persian Empire. Cyrus the Great (600 – 530 BC) had initiated a culture of tolerance which gave Jews equal status in his Empire and supported a return to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. There were occasional difficulties (think of the Purim story) and oppression by Zoroastrian fanatics. But, in general, Jews flourished under the Achaemenid (550–330 BC) and Sasanian Empires (224–651 AD). The Talmud is replete with interactions at all levels between ordinary Jews, rabbis and princes with the Persian people and their rulers.

Initially under Islam, Jews in Persia continued to do well. That is until the country adopted Shiite Islam. In 1651, the new Safavid dynasty called on its Jews to convert. Fortunately, they failed. But the pressure was maintained until the rule of Nadir Shah (also known as The Great). He ruled from 1688-1747 and was particularly supportive of the Jews of Persia.

In 1739, Nadir Shah invaded in India. He brought back large amounts of jewels and installed a small community of approximately forty Jewish craftsmen in Mashhad to manage and look after his treasure trove. Why Mashhad? Probably because it was far away from Teheran and other larger centers. It was closer to Afghanistan and India. This was the start of a community that grew from a few families into many more. They flourished there for about a hundred years.

Then, in 1839, Shiite envy and resentment of the Jews in Mashhad led to a pogrom. On the 12th of Nissan, thirty-six Jews were killed and many Jewish girls were raped and abducted. The community was given the choice of conversion to Islam or death. The leaders of the community decided to accept conversion and declared themselves the *Allahdad* – beloved of Allah. Outwardly, they were Muslim. But they maintained their Jewish identity in secret. Some Jewish families decided to flee to Afghanistan and, later, to Turkmenistan in Russia. But the remaining community of *Anusim* (forced converts), remarkably managed to preserve their Jewish way of life over the next century.

Around 1890, some Mashhadi families were given permission to go on Haj to Mecca. But instead of returning, they travelled on to Jerusalem where Haji Adonya HaCohen built the first Mashhadi Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem. This was followed by Haji Yehezkel's synagogue in 1905.

It was not until 1925 when Reza Shah Pahlavi permitted freedom of religious practice in Iran that the Mashhadis began to practice their Jewish faith openly. And, as if to compensate, they became the most religiously conservative and strict of all Persian communities. Even to the point of not wanting to marry other Persian Jews because they did not consider them strict enough!

In the provinces, the extreme Shia clerics never let up in their campaigns to either convert the Jews or drive them out – despite the tremendous improvement in the state of Persian Jewry under the Shahs. In 1946, another Blood Libel in Mashhad led to riots. The now openly Jewish Mashhadi community began a decade-long migration – first to Tehran and then to Mandatory Palestine, the United States, Britain, Germany and Italy.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 led to almost all the remaining Mashhadi Jews leaving Iran. Today, they are well established, mainly in the USA and Israel, and amount to some 30,000 altogether; a proud and successful community. The Mashhadi community has succeeded in preserving its very specific and proud religious identity far more effectively than the majority of Persian Jews today.

It is an amazing story of survival and is a result of a community having the resolve and unity to survive despite outwardly adopting another religion. If only the majority of Jews today had that same determination, persistence and capacity to withstand assimilation. When we have it too good, too easy, it often does not bring out the best in us. It would be a shame if we always needed a crisis to survive. Something to ponder as we soon come together for Rosh Hashanah.