

Yom Kippur in Tehran in 1942: A story about Iran, Judaism and anti-Semitism

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Tehran synagogue, island in a storm. (Salar Abdoh)

We have become accustomed to thinking of Iran as a hotbed of anti-Semitism, but Iran, not unlike the United States, is more a complicated place than that. Before and during World War II, Iran was both home to pro-Nazi Shia clerics and involved in saving the lives of Jewish refugees. Today, while Iran's leaders sometimes spew rabid anti-Semitic rhetoric, Iran's remaining Jews continue to celebrate their holiday rituals inside Tehran's synagogues, even while Shia devotees lash themselves and ululate in the street outside.

I found this complexity and these contradictions everywhere during my decade-long research and travel in the footsteps of my father and the quarter million Polish Jews who escaped Nazi extermination as deportees and refugees in the Soviet interior, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Iran.

My father, a 14-year-old Holocaust refugee, arrived in Iran in August 1942. He was evacuated with his younger sister and nearly 1,000 Polish Jewish children but without his parents, who remained in Uzbekistan. In Iran, he was greeted with candy and affection by Iran's 2,000-year-old Persian Jewish community and collected into a socialist Zionist Children's Home in the outskirts of Tehran.

A month after his arrival, he and the other young Holocaust refugees were taken to Tehran's ancient synagogues to attend Yom Kippur services. It was the first time the ancient Persian Jewish community came face to face with refugees from war-torn Europe. Accompanying the children was Rabbi Dr. Ze'ev Hirschberg, himself a Polish born refugee.

Based on his memoirs, and on photos taken by an Iranian colleague, I was able to reconstruct this moving Yom Kippur scene.

At the Haim synagogue, where a special section had been built for European worshippers, the Persian adults who had begun to assemble stood and talked quietly, their children playing amid the pomegranate trees. Above the arched front door, a sign in ornamented Hebrew and Persian letters read, “This is the gate for God through which the righteous shall pass.”

Inside was brown, gold and Persian plum, the sparkle of chandeliers and lots of the Persian blue I had seen in the tiles of Samarqand’s mosques and mausoleums. On the cerulean velvet Torah ark, the Hebrew words *beit ha-knesset ha’yehudim ha’euroyim* — “Synagogue of European Jews” — were embroidered in gold.

After the older children entered, the locals gave them little gifts and sat with them for the Kol Nidrei prayer. Then, when they noticed the younger children were absent, they sent a car to fetch them, despite the strict prohibition against driving on Yom Kippur. Everyone was already seated by the time the 5- and 6-year-olds and the toddlers walked into the synagogue.

“When the worshippers saw the children, they all began to weep,” Hirschberg wrote.

As an Israeli citizen, I could not travel to Iran as I had traveled to Central Asia and Russia, but I could reconstruct the route my father had taken to the synagogue because my Iranian colleague and friend Salar Abdoh owned a small apartment just across from the synagogue.

On the eve of Yom Kippur 2016, he sent videos of the Jewish worshippers. That day was also Tasu’a and Ashura, a Shi’a commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the

Prophet Muhammad, and so the videos featured a procession of self-flogging men, singing and flaunting their cat-o'-nine tails, while Persian Jews sang Kol Nidrei inside.

“It’s been 27 months since I have heard the reading of the Torah, and here a man walks to the synagogue dressed festively, with his head high, a *tallit* under his arm, in a bustling city, amid a crowd of people,” Hirschberg wrote in his journal, on the eve of Yom Kippur, 77 years ago.

“Tehran is still the only place in the world where there’s no security guard at the entrance to a synagogue,” Salar joked in his email to me on Yom Kippur 2016.

Perhaps it was because they did not need it; perhaps because they could not ask for it. Perhaps it was both these things.

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