Jews in Persia, Then and Now

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The Persia of the book of Esther was the product of an age long passed. The Persia of today is the product of a very different age. Nevertheless, there are remarkable similarities between the two, and Purim is the appropriate time to discuss the most striking of them.

There is in Iran today an institution known as tariqya or kitman, which we translate into English as "dissimulation." The term refers to the peculiarly Persian practice of concealing one’s religious identity to protect one’s self. Throughout history the deception has been practiced, but in Iran it is so widespread it has become institutionalized as perfectly acceptable conduct. Indeed, Persian has two names for the custom, where English has none. ("Dissimulation" is simply a convenient translation, with no overtones of its own.)

Examples of tariqya in contemporary Iranian society are legion. Iranian Muslims are in the difficult position of being among the Shiite minority within the world of Islam, as opposed to their Arab coreligionists who are of the majority Sunni branch. Since it is often dangerous for Shiites to be seen on pilgrimages to Mecca, the heart of Sunni Arabia, they often pose as Sunnis until they return home to friendlier turf.

If the Muslims of Iran can practice tariqya when traveling in Sunni countries, they certainly can understand why religious minorities in Iran would do the same. The largest minority is the Bahais, a large percentage of whom have found jobs in the Iranian government or civil service. But to keep these positions, the Bahais must frequently resort to tariqya and pass themselves off as Muslims. This is particularly true when Muslim clerics complain that the Bahais have taken all the good jobs and left the less desirable ones for the Muslims. The Bahais will even go so far as to frequent the mosques, while secretly remaining faithful to their own religion.

Other minorities, much smaller than the Bahais, also practice tariqya. A book by Bishop H.B. Dehqani-Tafti of the Episcopal Church of Iran, The Hard Awakening, gives an account of the conflict between the current Islamic revolutionaries and the Iranian Christians. The revolutionaries seized a hospital, two schools, and two institutions for the blind, all run by the Episcopal Diocese. The reaction of the Iranian Christians was not one of protest, according to Dehqani-Tafti, but of dissimulation.

Even where Persian culture has spread beyond the borders of Iran tariqya is practiced. There is a sizable community of Parsis (Zoroastrians) living in India (especially Bombay), whose roots may be traced to pre-Islamic Persia of the 600s CE. They are 1000 miles from Iran, but in time of need they, too, resort to dissimulation. The most famous instance was during the reign of the fanatic Muslim ruler Aurangzeb (d. 1707),...
when the entire Parsi community in India had to conceal its religion to avoid persecution.

The Jews of Iran are also a sizable minority, and so can be expected to disseminate on occasion. During the violently anti-Jewish persecutions under Shah Abbas II in the mid-1600s, virtually the entire Jewish community became outwardly Muslim, going through official conversions and attending mosques regularly. When the king died the pogroms ended, and the whole community openly returned to Jewish life.

The Jews of today may not practice taqiyya to this same extent, nor to the same extent as their Bahai neighbors, but it is quite clear that some dissimulation exists. From scattered news reports we gather that the Iranian Jews have not been totally happy with Israel's efforts on their behalf, such as promotion of aliyah to escape Khomeini. The Jews probably wish to conceal their Judaism now and hope that future years will bring conditions more favorable to open Jewish life. If relatively so few have made any attempt to leave Iran, it is because this would only attract attention to their Jewishness, something unnecessary in a country where taqiyya is so widely accepted. We can contrast this with the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union where no dissimulation is possible. American and Israeli Jews, most of whom are descended from Jews of European and Arab lands, are taught not to hide their Jewishness; Iranian Jews are taught the opposite.

But to find taqiyya among Persian Jews, the best place to look is in the book of Esther. In 2:10 and 2:20, the text explicitly states that Esther, under Mordecai's orders, did not reveal her Jewish identity even to her husband, King Ahasuerus. Mordecai's Jewishness is also not known, even though he was very visible in his coming and going (2:11, 2:19, 2:21), until he apparently confided in some of the Persian guards (3:4). When Haman seeks to destroy the Jews because of Mordecai's affrontery, Mordecai advises Esther to finally reveal her true religion (4:13-14). She does so (7:3-4 and 8:1), and it is interesting that King Ahasuerus never does berate her for her dissimulation. We are left with the impression that in ancient Iran, as in modern Iran, taqiyya was expected from minorities.

Even the majority practiced taqiyya in Megillat Esther, as the Iranian Muslims do today when visiting Mecca. The political situation changed; the Jews were no longer in great danger, but by royal decree the Persians were threatened by an officially sanctioned Jewish pogrom against them (8:11). The result is that the Persians dissimulated, as evidenced by the Hebrew word miyyahadim (8:17). The word is usually mistranslated as "became Jews," but both history and the context tell us otherwise. First, we know of no great mass conversion to Judaism at the time (not even in Josephus). Then 8:17 states that the people were afraid. From this, we can discern that far from becoming Jews, the Persians pretended to be Jews, i.e., they dissimulated. This is borne out by the grammar. In Hebrew, the hitpael conjugation often signifies pretense. In biblical Hebrew we may point to Prov. 13:7, where mitasher means "pretend to be rich" and miroshesh means "pretend to be poor." In modern Hebrew, mithalleh means "pretend to be sick" and even midati has been used, meaning "pretend to be religious." Accordingly, miyyahadim means "pretend to be Jewish."

The Persians of the book of Esther are not the only Iranians who have pretended to be Jewish. At the height of the anti-Iranian fervor in the U.S., during the first few months after the taking of the Embassy hostages, Iranian Muslims living in California and elsewhere were fearful of personal attacks and reprisals and tried to pass themselves off as Jews. The story received little notice, but it is obviously another example of taqiyya — a modern reflex of what is depicted in Megillat Esther.

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