

larization in Israel. He would have preferred to remain in Cochin had enough people stayed there to make Jewish religious life possible. Not an enthusiastic participant in the migration, he claims he had no choice.

"Don't you see the fate of this town?" he asked sadly. "There's hardly anyone left."

Nevertheless, he still harbors deep affection for his birthplace. Says Salem: "My ties with Israel are religious, but I am first and foremost and Indian. I shall love my India always."

Those who seek economic prosperity in Israel, as Salem suggests, are not always rewarded. Elias Elson is a tailor who lives in Alwaye, a village 20 miles east of Cochin. He and his family emigrated to Israel, only to return a few years later.

"It's too hard to live there," he explains. While observing that most Indian Jews are "mighty happy" to be

in Israel, Elson says he couldn't bear the political and economic turmoil. Even with only a handful of Jews left in his village, he says he is glad to be back.

But there is no trend to be found in Elson's return. Those who stay on face insurmountable difficulties. It is no longer possible to get a minyan on weekdays, so the synagogue holds prayer services only on the Sabbath and holidays. Plans are already underway to convert the Cochin Synagogue into a museum when the remaining few are gone. Perhaps more significant in the eyes of the community is the absence of marriage partners for the young people left. As Fiona Hallegua, in her twenties, acknowledges, "I don't want to leave Cochin, but I suppose I have no choice."

A thoroughly communal religion, there is no longer a critical mass to observe the myriad of ancient cus-

toms. The most poignant loss, says Sarah Cohen, is the community's celebration of Simchat Torah, a time when Jews rejoice in the Holy Book. One of the most elaborate of Cochin's holidays, during which the community leads a joyous procession outside the synagogue with their Torahs, the tradition has nearly come to a standstill for want of enough participants.

"When you come back," she implores her visitors, "please come for Simchat Torah. And bring Jews, many Jews, so we can celebrate the way we used to. It was such a beautiful holiday in the old days." ■

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Jews in Persia, Then and Now

GARY A. RENDSBURG

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 *taqiyya* 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 *taqiyya* in contemporary Iranian society are legion. Iranian Muslims are in the difficult position of being among the Shiite mi-

nority 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 *taqiyya* 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 *taqiyya* 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 *taqiyya*. A book by Bishop H.B. Dehaqani-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 Dehaqani-Tafti, but of dissimulation.

Even where Persian culture has spread beyond the borders of Iran *taqiyya* 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 Aurangzēb (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 dissimulate 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 affront, 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 *mityahadim* (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 *hitpa'el* conjugation often signifies pretense. In biblical Hebrew we may point to Prov. 13:7, where *mit'asher* means "pretend to be rich" and *mitroshesh* means "pretend to be poor." In modern Hebrew, *mithalleh* means "pretend to be sick" and even *mitdati* has been used, meaning "pretend to be religious." Accordingly, *mityahadim* 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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