

DOI: 10.31857/S086919080009133-3

THE JEWS OF IRAN: PAST AND PRESENT

© 2020

Marina S. KAMENEVA^a

^a – Institute of Oriental Studies, Peoples' Friendship University, Moscow, Russia
ORCID: 0000-0003-3680-0301; Researcher ID A-7604-2017
kamenevamarina@mail.ru

Abstract: The article analyzes the position of Iranian Jews in modern Iran, primarily the cultural aspects of this problem. It is being noted that in spite of the fact that the Jewish community is a small percentage of the total population – 25–30 thousand people, however, its study is of special interest on the background of the prevailing between Iran and Israel uneasy bilateral relations. The author focuses on problems that are important both for existence and survival of Iranian Jews and for the study of ethnic and cultural features of the Jewish community: the system of traditional and modern education, their colloquial language, Jewish-Persian literature. Currently, the Jews of Iran use the Persian language as a first language or as a second one in areas dominated by their own dialects. Literature in the Judeo-Persian community is mainly represented by poetry. The relatively famous works on it belong to the 1920s. Since the late 1920's – early 1930-ies the Iranian Jews in their literary work used the modern literary Persian. Special attention in the paper is paid to different social problems of the modern Jews that are mainly employment, education, possibility of mixed marriages and communication with relatives who live in Israel and others. The questions of cultural life of the Jewish community in Iran are closely related with the social side of it. In everyday life its members are allowed to comply with Jewish tradition in the families, including the use of wine. Outside the Jewish community its members obey the laws which rule the entire Iranian society.

Keywords: Iran, Jewish community, Islamic revolution, language, literature, cultural tradition, Iranian society.

For citation: Kameneva M.S. The Jews of Iran: Past and Present. *Vostok (Oriens)*. 2020. No. 2. Pp. 131–137. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080009133-3

Резюме: В статье анализируется положение еврейской общины в современном Иране, и прежде всего, этнокультурные аспекты этой проблемы. Отмечается, что, несмотря на незначительный процент от общей численности населения страны – всего 20–30 тыс., ее изучение приобретает особый смысл на фоне сложившихся между Ираном и Израилем непростых межгосударственных отношений. Затрагиваются такие важные для существования и выживания иранских евреев в ИРИ проблемы, как, например, особенности традиционной и современной системы образования, используемый в повседневном общении язык, а также литература, которая в первой трети XX в. с еврейско-персидского языка почти полностью перешла на фарси. Особое внимание уделено отдельным аспектам социальной жизни современных иранских евреев, среди которых важное место занимают такие, как трудоустройство, возможность получения образования, заключения смешанных браков, общения с родственниками, проживающими в Израиле, и некоторые другие. Вопросы культурной жизни еврейской общины тесно связаны с социальными аспектами ее существования. В повседневной жизни иранские евреи внутри общины следуют своим национальным традициям вплоть до употребления вина, в то время как за ее пределами подчиняются законам, по которым живет все иранское общество.

Ключевые слова: Иран, еврейская община, исламская революция, язык, литература, культурная традиция, иранское общество.

Now the Jewish community in Iran numbers only around 25–30 thousand people, but its study is of particular interest in the context of the uneasy relations prevailing between Iran and Israel. Moreover, the Iranian Jewish diaspora is the most significant in the Middle East; only

the Jewish community of Turkey can be compared to it in size. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Jews of Iran faced the same difficulties as other ethno-religious minorities there, such as Armenians, Assyrians and Zoroastrians: these hardships included persecution, trampling of their civil rights and curtailing of their freedoms.

It should be noted that at this time about 50–55 thousand Iranian Jews left Iran. Yet despite this, Iranian Jews today are proud of belonging to the Iranian civilization as well as of their Jewish roots [The Jewish Community..., 2006]. Indeed, their ancestors settled on the territory of modern Iran nearly three thousand years ago after being liberated from the Babylonian captivity by Cyrus the Great (Kurosh), the founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty. In Jerusalem, the street was named in honor of this Persian king, and the street sign gives his name in three languages: Hebrew, Persian and English [*BBC Television*, 2012].

The Jewish community of Iran has deep historical and cultural roots, and their traditions are closely intertwined with the Iranian ones. One of examples is the Iranian holiday of “Sizdah Bedar”, which comes on the thirteenth day after Nouruz (the Iranian New Year). On this day, Iranians leave their houses and head out to the countryside because they see a potential omen in the number thirteen. The Jews also have a holiday called “The Day of Nature”, which is celebrated in a similar way: they leave their homes in the city and go into the country to commemorate dead relatives. In addition to such living cultural traditions, ancient monuments of material culture associated with the history of Iranian Jews are preserved throughout Iran and revered by all Iranians.

The most significant of these – also for the world’s cultural heritage – are the Mausoleum of Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) and the Tomb of the prophet Daniel in Shushi (ancient Susa), who may have first brought monotheism into these lands, and whom Iranians consider partly their own saint. As about the Mausoleum of Esther (the Biblical Esfire) and Mordechai, an entire book of the Old Testament (called “the Book of Esther”), is devoted to this woman, who, according to legend, was of extraordinary beauty. By means of palace intrigue she became the wife of Ahasuerus, one of the kings of the Achaemenid Dynasty. She used her status to greatly improve the position of the Jews on Iran’s conquered lands.

Thanks to Esther’s powerful influence on her husband and her heeding the advice of her uncle Mordechai, the Jews of Ecbatana received unprecedented benefits. In honor of this victory, they proclaimed the holiday of Purim [*Iran: Historical Guidebook*, 2010, p. 253, 266–268]. Another religious and historical monument sacred to the Jews is located in the vicinity of Isfahan and called Esterahatun. There is the stone slab mounted on its wall, with an inscription in Hebrew, which, according to the opinion of German famous Orientalist and archaeologist Ernst Hertsfeld, refers to the queen Shushandokht, wife of one of the Sassanian kings – Yazdgerd [Kolbasi, 1995, p. 15].

All of the important historical monuments of Jewish culture are revered in Iran and are inseparable from the shared values of Iranian civilization. This is why one can hear from Iranian Jews that first they feel themselves Iranians, and then Jews. I should note that modern Persian has two words for the word “Jew”: these are “yahudi” and “kalimi,” with the latter more often used specifically to designate Iranian Jews, thus differentiating between Iranian Jews and their compatriots living in Israel.

Iranian Jews live mostly in major cities, with almost half of them living in Tehran. Jewish communities also exist in Shiraz, Isfahan, Yazd, Hamadan, Kermanshah and some other cities. There is no exact information on the number of synagogues in Iran, but the Association of Jews in Tehran estimates them at about a hundred, with 26 in the capital. However, estimates of sources differ: some refer to the fact that there are 7 synagogues in Tehran, others – 21, and so on. But it should be noted that two synagogues in Tehran and one in Shiraz are the largest in country, with a capacity of 500–600 people, and all of the main religious ceremonies are held in them, even though they are rather new – not over 40 years.

One of the most famous synagogues in Tehran is called “Yusef Abad” [*Association...*, 2005, p. 8]. With regard to Isfahan, according to official data, there are 21 synagogues, and religious rites are held freely in the operating synagogues [Kolbasi, 1995, p. 15]. It should also be noted that in today’s Iran, new synagogues are not being opened because of the decreasing number of Jews due to emigration. Old synagogues, however, in cities with large communities, are undergoing restoration thanks to their cultural and historical value. Several synagogues in Tehran, Isfahan and Yazd with unique architecture are protected by the Iranian Organization for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments. According to information provided by the Association of Jews of Tehran and another information sources, the Jewish community in Iran also has at its disposal special schools, cultural centers, student and women's centers, libraries, computer training and music centers, halls (rooms) for meetings and gatherings, and special spaces for slaughtering cattle in accordance with the requirements of Judaism [*Association...*, 2005, p. 5–7; *Iran: The Cradle*, 2016, p. 166–170, 174, 178, 184–189].

Jewish children and young people are not deprived of the opportunity to receive religious learning, and formal religious training continues through higher levels of education using textbooks proposed by the Ministry of Education. It takes place in the hours reserved for Muslims for studying the Koran and the principles of Islam. In addition, it is possible to attend supplementary classes at synagogues in order to study the Torah and Talmud.

When we talk about the structure and content of the educational system for Iranian Jews, we must make a distinction between traditional and modern education. The traditional educational system was formed in Iran in the first half of the 19th century, when the educational process took place in special schools called *maktabhane* or *hanee molla*, which were located in a synagogue or a rabbi’s house. These schools trained both boys and girls aged from 3 or 4 to 17 years. At that time in Iran, there were no special pedagogical institutions for the training of teachers.

The language of instruction was Hebrew. All of pupils studied Jewish law and history of the Bible period, as well as the Hebrew language, mainly through the study of sacred texts that did not give most of students deep knowledge of this subject, based on the knowledge of writing and speaking skills. The study of the Persian language as a separate subject and Judeo-Persian literature was missing [Padyavand, 1997, vol. 2, p. 20–21].

The process of the modernization of education for Iranian Jews also began in the 19th century; it was based on Western models and took place with the active participation of Christian missionaries, who from the second half of the 19th century began to open schools for Jewish children as well. These schools were very popular among the students of Isfahan, Tehran and Hamadan, first and foremost those from low-income families as children there were fed and even clothed for free.

They were taught various subjects, including Persian and English language, and even Hebrew. Despite all of this, most Jewish families still wanted to give their children a traditional education at the Jewish *maktab* before sending them to one of the new brand of Jewish schools, the first of which appeared in Iran in 1898. That time with the assistance of the Alliance Israelite Universelle¹ *maktabs* of the old model where the training process had a strong religious connotation were closed and primary schools of the new type were opened in Tehran, Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, Sanandaj and a little later in Yazd (from the late 19th century to the 1920s). Studies in a *maktab* often took place on weekends and holidays and were considered supplementary, as they were focused on learning the basics of religion.

¹ The Alliance Israelite Universelle is a Paris-based International Jewish organization founded in 1860 to safeguard the human rights of Jews around the world and to promote the deals of Jewish self-defense and self-sufficiency through education and professional development. It is known for establishing French- language schools for Jewish children throughout the Mediterranean, Iran and Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th century.

However, the teaching methodology at the updated schools was similar to *maktab*, but at the same time religious Jewish theme was not in the center of the educational process, and its scope was reduced. The programs of these schools included more secular subjects and the French language, which gradually became the language of teaching. The Persian language was taught as a second language and in rather small extent, while in *maktab* training process was in Hebrew with the use of Persian as an auxiliary language. It should be noted that *maktab* prepared the Jewish children to become the members of the Jewish community and school of new type – the pupils who could compete with their French contemporaries and the goals of learning in them were not clear both to the pupils and their parents. However, parents continue to cooperate with the Alliance Israelite Universelle in this area, probably in the hope of a better future for their children [Padyavand, 1997, vol. 2, p. 23–26].

When the Pahlavi dynasty came to power in Iran, its policy of unification and standardization in education towards the iranization also affected the schools of the Alliance. They became part of the system of Iranian educational institutions with a minimal Jewish element and, as before, without Zionist orientation. At this time, the change of the nature of school education became a powerful instrument in strengthening of the Iranian nation and its culture, and the iranization of schools met the present and future interests of Jewish children as Iranian citizens [Padyavand, 1997, vol. 2, p. 28–31]. During this period, at the second time in Iran's history, the Jews were given wide-ranging rights equal to the rights of Muslims.

The last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his associates believed that the Jewish community had an extremely important role in the country's economy on its way to progress [Mesamed, 2017]. At the same time, the second part of the 20th century is characterized by the appearance of a strict opposition to the system of Jewish education in connection with the appearance of Zionist elements in it. It also forced a number of representatives of the Jewish community mostly close to the power elite in Iran to turn away from this education system.

As for the educational institutions for Iranian Jews at present time, the figures are different. For example, there are five special schools in Tehran where the language of instruction is Judo-Persian [*Association...*, p. 3; *Iran: The Cradle*, 2016, p. 166]. The number of such schools has declined significantly due to the dwindling of the Jewish community and the growing tendency for children from Jewish families to enroll in other schools, mainly standard schools where the majority of Iran's population receives its education. Jewish parents are guided by a number of objective and subjective factors: to assimilate their children with other members of the Iranian society and not emphasize their particular ethnic roots and cultural traditions.

According to the available information there were about 2500–3000 students from Jewish families in Tehran, half of whom attended special Jewish schools, while the others attended standard educational institutions [*Association...*, p. 5–6; *Iran: The Cradle*, p. 166]. Apparently, this situation is typical for other cities in the country. For example, there is only one special Jewish school in Isfahan called “Alliance” [Kolbasi, p. 16]. It should be taken into account that the religious education of Jewish children in many secondary schools takes place during special lessons when Muslims study Islam and the Koran, as well as on Fridays (day off for Muslims) in synagogues, where the Jewish children become acquainted with the Talmud and the Torah. One of the well-known special Jewish schools in Tehran is the “Ettefag school” for girls [*Association...*, p. 5; *Iran: The Cradle*, 2016, p. 166].

The Cultural Committee plays an important role in the cultural life of the Jewish community and its main task is to tell the Muslim population about Judaism and Jewish culture, to promote the publication of books and scientific papers on Judaism, provide lecturers of universities in Tehran with corresponding materials. The Committee's Department of Press and Publication annually participates in the International Book Fair in Tehran, where has its own pavilion. Among the cultural achievements of the Jewish community in Tehran is also the

publication of a monthly magazine “Ofegh-BINA” or “Who Has Seen the Horizon” [*Iran: The Cradle*, 2016, p. 165].

It has been published since 1999 and contains news of social and cultural events, a variety of information for members of the Jewish community, as well as information for Muslims who would like to become better acquainted with Jewish culture. One of the main tasks of the journal is to establish relations between these two communities within Iranian society, and it is published in Persian most likely to reach a wide audience. It’s worth remembering that the first newspaper for Iranian Jews was “Shalom”, published in March of 1915 in the Judeo-Persian language. The Association of Jews in Tehran has a library with over 8,000 titles and 14,000 books that is very popular not only among the Jewish community but also among Tehranis in general [*Association...*, p. 3–4; Padyavand, 1997, vol. 2, p. 119].

The language and literature of the Jews in Iran are of great interest for the analysis of the ethnic and cultural features of the Jewish community in the country. It is universally recognized that the Judeo-Persian language is the written language of the Jews within linguocultural historical region known as the “Big Iran” (Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and South-Eastern Transcaucasia).

It was used during the Middle Ages and was presented by the two main groups of the monuments of Jewish-Persian literary tradition. Those are: a) translations of the Bible and post-biblical religious texts and exegetical texts which language was much more archaic than the classical Persian language and in terms of a number of morphological parameters was close to the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) language and contained much more borrowings from Hebrew than the language of Judeo-Persian poetry and b) poetic texts which language was almost always identical to the classical Persian language and differed from the latter only by rather a small number of loan words from Hebrew and words constructed from a Hebrew root word with Persian affixation.

Today, all Iranian Jews use Persian language either as a first or second language in areas where their own dialects predominate. These dialects should be regarded as a distinct from Judeo-Persian and as a spoken language of the Jews of some areas of Iran. They are genetically related to the Iranian languages but mostly are not the dialects of Persian. Only one of them – the language of the Jews of Shiraz, as well as Persian – belongs to the southwestern subgroup of Iranian languages [Judeo-Persian Language]. As for other dialects, according to the Iranian linguist Dr. Iran Kolbasi, they refer to the central dialects of the north-western subgroup of the Iranian languages.

Now they are used in Isfahan, Hamadan, Kashan, Yazd, Boroujerd and some other cities and towns of Iran. Dr. Kolbasi notes that, for example, now the language of the Isfahan Jews is the language used by the population of the city in those days, and that the Jews of Isfahan have preserved it within their community. It is possible that Jewish dialects in other areas possess a similar history of formation. Kurdish Jews living on the territory of modern Iran are known to have preserved Jewish dialect features connected with Neo-Aramaic and Jewish speech characteristics common in Azerbaijan language. Nonetheless, all members of these Jewish communities are also speakers of modern Persian [Padyavand, 1997, vol. 2, p. 34–35; Kolbasi, p. 13; Kameneva, 2017, p. 115–116].

Literature in the Judeo-Persian community is mainly represented by poetry. Its founder and the primary representative is Shaheen, the author of several heroic epic poems based on biblical stories, who lived in the 14th century. Another most important poet is Imrani, whose work refers to the second half of the 15th – first half of the 16th cc. in Isfahan and Kashan.

The majority of his works are based on the Jewish post-biblical tradition. Judeo-Persian literature of the 16th and 17th centuries is represented by the respectably nicknamed poet Hajje-yi Bukhari (his real name is unknown) from Bukhara, who employs biblical themes in his poetry as well as Babaya ben Lutfu Kashani who left for the descendants the poetic

chronicle of brutal ordeals of Persian Jews in the first half of the 16th century. One of the outstanding figures of the Judeo-Persian literature of the 18th century is the poet Benjamin ben Mishael Amin who created several big poems such as “Sarguzashti Amina ba hamsarash” which describes the hardships of married life and a number of lyrical and mystical gazelles.

The second half of the 18th century is connected with the name of rabbi Siman-Tov Mellamed, the leading religious authority of Jews of Meshhed and the author of the epic didactic work in prose and verses “The Life of Spirit” showing the fine knowledge of Iranian sufi theory. In the 19th century the literature in the Jewish-Persian language gradually weakened. The most important figure of that time was Haim Elazar – one of spiritual leaders of Jews of Tehran, the translator of Descartes in Persian and the author of “Days of Life” published in 1907 in Jewish-Persian language with inserts from the verses of some classical Persian poets. The relatively famous works belong to the 1920s. Since the late 1920's – early 1930s, the Iranian Jews in their literary work have almost completely use the modern literary Persian. [Judeo-Persian literature].

The cultural life of the Jewish community in Iran is closely connected with the social environment, and I would like to highlight some of its aspects. Despite the law granting members of the Jewish community the same rights as all other citizens of the country, and guaranteeing representation of Jews in Parliament by one deputy, the real situation is less than ideal. There are certain difficulties for Jews at the recruitment stage, when the priority is given to the execution of the contract. And in the army, for example, Jews cannot rise to the highest ranks.

The heads of the Jewish schools in Tehran primarily are Muslims, although the law does not require it. Previously, a Jewish family received significantly less compensation than a Muslim family if any of their relatives died as result of some accident. However, these and many other questions are being discussed, and some of them are on the verge of a positive resolution for the Jewish community. The possibility of mixed marriages for Iranian Jews is also very interesting. There are no legal obstacles to this, other than religious ones, which are so strong that in modern Iran such marriages are not possible at all or make up less than one percent [Interview..., 2006; Sanasarian, 2004, p. 47–48]. One of the most important social problems of Iranian Jews is the issue of communicating with their relatives living in Israel, because a relationship with Israel is a great risk for any Iranian citizen. The best period regarding this issue was during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, when it was allowed to travel from Iran to Israel without any negative effects after returning. Jews who left Iran 20–30 years ago were also allowed to visit Iran to see their relatives [The Jewish Community..., 2006].

As for the daily life of the Jewish community in Iran, they are allowed in their families to follow the Jewish traditions, including drinking wine. Outside their community, however, Jews must obey the laws of Iranian society, including those relating to clothing. Thus, Jews in Iran today, living among Muslims who comprise the overwhelming majority of the population, both strive and are forced to assimilate with this majority on the one hand, while on the other, they try to maintain their national, cultural and religious traditions within their community.

REFERENCES

Association of Tehran Jews. Information Bulletin. Tehran, Tehran Jewish Committee, 2005.

BBC Television (in Persian). 03.11.2012.

Interview of Elgham Abai, head of Iranian delegation at children's Festival of Jewish Art in Russia for Russian radio station “Voice of Russia”. 03.04.2006 (in Persian) [Mat-e konferans-e matbuati-ye sarkar-e khanum Elham Abai mas'ul-e hey'at-e e'zami-ye Anjoman-e kalimiyan-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran be Moskou ba resaneha-ye dakheli va khareji].

Iran. Historical Guidebook. Moscow, Veche Publishing House, 2010 (in Russian) [Иран. Исторический путеводитель. М.: Веч, 2010].

Iran: The Cradle of Peaceful Coexistence. Christians. Jews. Zoroastrians. Moscow, Fair Publishing House, 2016 (in Russian) [*Иран: Колыбель мирного сосуществования религий. Христиане. Иудеи. Зороастрийцы.* М.: Издательство Файр, 2016].

Judeo-Persian Language. *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia* (in Russian) [Еврейско-персидский язык литература. *Электронная еврейская энциклопедия*] <https://eleven.co.il/jewish-languages/other-jewish/11530/> (accessed: 06.04.2020).

Judeo-Persian literature. *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia* (in Russian) [Еврейско-персидская литература. *Электронная еврейская энциклопедия*] <https://eleven.co.il/jewish-literature/in-other-jewish-languages/11529/> (accessed: 06.04.2020).

Kameneva M.S. *Language Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran in: Language Policy and Globalization.* Moscow: RUDN, 2017 (in Russian) [Каменева М.С. *Языковая политика в Исламской Республике Иран в: Языковая политика в условиях глобализации.* М.: РУДН, 2017].

Kolbasi Iran. *Language of Isfahan Jews.* Tehran, The Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, 1995 (in Persian) [Kolbasi Iran. *Guyeshha-ye kalimiyan-e Esfahan.* Tehran, Vezarat-e farhang va amuzesh-e ali, 1995].

Mesamed V.I. Jewish Community in Islamic Iran. 2017 (in Russian) [Месамед В.И. Еврейская община в Иране в условиях исламского режима] <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=32475> (accessed: 10.02.2019).

Padyavand: Judeo-Iranian and Jewish Studies. Costa Mesa (California): Mazda Publishers, 1997. Vol. 2.

Sanasarian Eliz. *Religious Minorities in Iran.* UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

The Jewish Community in Iran. 2006 [Negah-i be jamee-ye yahudiyān dar Iran (in Persian)] http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/09/printable/060905_nh-iran-jews.shtml (accessed: 10.09.2013).

INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR / ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

КАМЕНЕВА Марина Самуиловна – кандидат филологических наук, старший научный сотрудник Центра изучения стран Ближнего и Среднего Востока, Институт востоковедения РАН, доцент факультета гуманитарных и социальных наук Российского университета дружбы народов (РУДН), Москва, Россия.

Marina S. KAMENEVA, PhD (Philology), Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russia.