

What is Jewish Life Like in Iran Today?

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Jewish Life in Iran

By Daniel Maccabee and the Jmag Staff

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Daniel Maccabee (not his real name) grew up as a child and teenager in Iran. Some thirty years ago he left with his parents to come to the U.S.A. After finishing high school and getting a college degree, he left America to study Torah in a Yeshiva in Israel. Today, he is a mature teacher who uses his Torah and Iranian language skills to teach Torah to Iranian Jews who recently left Iran and settled in Israel. He spoke with the Jewish Magazine to tell us of the situation of Jews in Iran today. The following is his comments:

Today life in Iran is very good for the remaining 20,000 Jews who live there. During the time of the Shah there were approximately one hundred thousand Jews, but they were subject to persecution and experienced anti-Semitism. Although you might think that the Jewish life would get worse after Khomeini and the Islamic revolution, it actually improved. The Iranian Muslims are friendly with the Jews and relations between them are good.

Many young Jews have left Iran to learn in Yeshivot, mostly in Baltimore. Jews are free to leave Iran to go anywhere, with the exception of Israel.

The Iranians recognize and respect three religions other than Islam; they recognize Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrian. The government protects the followers of these religions and allows them to have services and run religious institutions. Other religions like the Baha'i which came after Muhammad are not recognized; therefore this religion and others that Muhammad did not know do not have government sanctions to have religious freedom. When the Shah left Iran, the religious fanatics massacred many Bahai religionists.

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The Jews even have a member in the Iranian Parliament, Maurice Motamed. When Ahmadinejad said that the holocaust did not happen, he stood up and publicly protested. Although the Jewish community is small he is reputed to have much influence in Iran.

The Jews in Iran have become more observant than they were even ten years ago. This is due to a several Rabbis who have begun to give public lessons in Torah. A Talmud Torah for children has been opened in Teheran and in other cities as well. There are lessons in Jewish law every night given over by knowledgeable Rabbis and these lessons are well attended. Many men and women come to hear these lessons after work.

Kashrut is now observed by a very large majority of Iranian Jews. They have no difficulty in obtaining kosher meat or Passover products locally. On Shavuot night and Hoshana Rabba night many people congregate in the synagogues and stay up the entire night learning.

The only prohibition that the government enforces on the Iranian Jewish community is that they not speak publicly in favor of Israel. Even though wine and alcohol are prohibited by the Islam religion, since wine is necessary for the Jewish religion, such as making *kiddush*, the Iranian government permits it to them.

In general the Iranian Jewish community lives a good life. There are poor people, but the community helps them. The Jews are generally found in the merchant class, and many have successful businesses. In addition there are quite a few Jewish doctors and engineers in the community. Although in general college admission is difficult in Iran for all, this is because the colleges only accept the top students, but if a Jew can pass the necessary tests, he can get into college. There is no discrimination against the Jews in college.

The Jews are required to serve in the Iranian army and they fulfill their military obligation as required of all Iranians. At this point Daniel digressed and told us a story about a Jew who was in the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war. He had to go to the battlefield. Before he left he went to visit his uncle who was an observant Jew. The uncle asked him if he has a *talit katan* (a small garment with the traditional fringes on the four corners which is usually worn under the shirt). He said that he did not have one. The uncle removed his own *talit katan* and told him to wear it and that it would protect him from danger.

He was sent to the front and together with eleven other Iranians and while they were busy unloading ammunition they were attacked by an Iraqi artillery bombardment. There were loud explosions and all the men ran and dived for cover. The other eleven soldiers were killed from the artillery attack. This Jew was knocked unconscious and injured and taken to the hospital. The doctors who were examining him asked his relatives for the meaning of this strange fringed garment. The relatives explained that it was given by a religious uncle to be worn as a protection for him. When the Iranians heard that the other eleven men were killed and only this Jew with the special garment was spared, many began to come and

take pieces of the *talit katan* in hopes that it would protect them also.

Eventually this Jew recovered and made a special thanksgiving meal in the synagogue to thank G-d for his being spared from a certain death. Many people in the Jewish community joined in this festive meal complete with singing the praises to G-d.

In general the Iranian Muslim seems to get on well with the Iranian Jew although the Jews generally tend to keep to themselves. There is very little intermarriage even though it is considered by the Muslims a good thing to marry a Jewish woman.

Some Iranian Jews have come to Israel only to be disappointed because of the lack of religious observance and the immodesty that prevails on the street. They are bothered especially by the rude and rowdy behavior that the kids pick up in the schools. They make the mistake thinking that the Israeli secular school is similar to the schools in Iran where modesty and respect are part of the daily life. Unfortunately, they are disturbed to see the disgraceful manner in which their children begin to behave when they enter the secular Israeli school system. On the other hand they do not want to send their children to the religious schools because they want their children to have a strong secular education.

Most Iranian families are close-knit group. This means much to them and they want to continue close relationships with their children. Unfortunately they have found that by putting their young children in the secular Israeli schools, their children turn away from the parents, and this causes them immense pain. It seems that the Iranians that immigrated to America experience similar problems.

Most of the Iranians who have left Iran say that they do not take Ahmadinejad seriously. They believe that he is all talk and that he really would not do anything, much less start a nuclear war. The reason is that the real leader of Iran is not the president, but the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While Ahmadinejad is denying the holocaust, the Iranians are watching a Iranian television series about an Iranian Muslim in France during the Nazi occupation who saves a Jewish family from deportation to the concentration camps.

Although many Jews in Iran feel secure and safe at this time, this is a good time for them to leave. The reason that the Iranian government is so good to its Jews is since it is so blatantly anti-Israel, it uses these few Jews as a glowing gallery to the world to prove that it is not anti-Semitic. This is their way of saying to the world, 'We are not anti-Semitic, we are only against the Zionist warmongers in Israel – as proof, look how nicely we treat our own Iranian Jews!'

Some day the political climate will change and the Jews may feel the true hatred of the Muslims towards Jews.



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