BETWEEN EQUAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION: IRANIAN JEWISH IDENTITY AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Before we delve into the 20th century and consider the questions presented in the title of this talk, let’s briefly examine what was going on in Iran during the late 19th century and the years leading to the constitutional revolution. In the 19th century Jews in Iran had mixed experiences; that is to say that we cannot speak of A JEWISH IRANIAN EXPERIENCE. European Jewish and non-Jewish travelers tell us that Jews in Tehran relatively enjoyed good relations with their neighbors, they were small business holders and shop keepers, and Tehran’s being the capital and the “window” of Iran, benefitted the Jews – as the Shah wanted to highlight the good conditions the Jews and other minorities had under his rule. In Shiraz and Isfahan, for example, the situation, at the same time, got much worse, and Jews had been targeted for harassment by Shi’i clerics and others. Many times the religious justification for the persecution stemmed from social and economic strife between the Jews and their neighbors. In 1877, following interventions from Sir Moses Montefiore and British Jewish organizations, such as the British Board of Deputies, Nasser al-Din Shah delegated the issues of minorities to his foreign affairs minister, so he could address the needs of these minorities more efficiently. For the Jews, this move constituted a significant reform since it made the government accountable for everything that happened. According to the AIU bulletin, “The minister for foreign affairs – in constant contact with the European ministries – would not be able to evade investigating and explaining these cases, which are exclusively under his authority” (Tsadik, pp. 105-106). The immediate consequences, however, were different than initially expected. Shortly after the implementation of this reform Jews were increasingly identified with foreign peoples by the Iranian public and the government apparatus, rather than linking them with their own compatriots – thereby facilitating their segregation. Thus this well-intentioned step providing yet another reason for the majority to see Jews as “non-Iranians.” Again, because their issues and grievances were handled by the ministry of foreign affairs, while Jews were rejected by the middle classes, they simultaneously came to find more common cause with the similarly-educated Iranian upper classes.

The opening of Alliance Schools in Iran and the creation of “an educated-literate Jewish class” converged with the emerging centralized bureaucracy and political tendencies of late 19th and early 20th century Iran. Overall, there was indeed a kind of social out casting of Jews, but at the same time the relatively high quality of education in the Jewish Schools, and AIU especially, brought the Jews and the non-Jewish Iranian upper classes together. Along with the creation of a new political discourse among Iranians, Jews thus realized that great opportunity awaits them with constitutional revolution.

And so, at the turn of the 20th century the 1906-1911 constitutional revolution erupted. This revolution turned Iranians, for the first time, from subjects to citizens. And for Iranian Jews – and other minorities – the promise was great: to make them an equal part of Iranian society. Jews and Christians had become adamant supporters of the constitutional movement. They participated in discussions and collaborated with many of
the activists, many of whom were attuned to the role the religious minorities wanted to have in the emerging movement. A few of the leading intellectuals of the movement, such as Ali Akbar Dekhoda and Mirza Jahangir Khan articulated objectives for the movement that were far more substantial than the constitution itself. Objectives without which true reform would not take place. A new Iranian society must be built around placing the human being at the center of the universe. As Janet Afary tells us, one of the most prominent publications of that period is Sur-e Esrafil. This publication communicated a vision that included limited place for religion, nuanced understanding of the power of the monarchy, and for the purpose of this talk today, it encouraged a national dialogue that included Jews and Christians as part of the great Iranian society (Afary, 38).

The process towards social acceptance or integration was not painless. In the first Majlis Jews (and other minorities – with the exception only of the Zoroastrians – Arbab Jamshid represented the Zoroastrians in the first Majlis) were not allowed to represent themselves, and were pretty much pushed to “elect” Muslims to represent them. Sayyed Abdullah Bibbahani would represent the Jews and Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai would represent the Armenians. The support of minorities in the constitutional movement at times was used against them. The governor (royalist Anti-constitutionalist) of Isfahan openly started a campaign against the Jews, which included confiscation of their shops and property. In Tehran, Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri, one of the leaders of the Anti-constitutionalist movement wanted to forcefully “recruit” the minorities to his side, so he encouraged his followers to harass and do whatever it would take to get the Jews to march with them against the constitution. There were raids in the Jewish Mahallah and Jews were told that if they would not publicly support the royalists they would be targeted, beaten, and would experience vandalism like never before. The leadership of the Tehran community consulted with their allies in the social-democratic party, with whom their sympathies genuinely lay, and the latter instructed them, somewhat paradoxically, to protect the community by pretending to support the anti-constitutionalist movement. The compromise was that Jews joined and chanted a slogan that was more than ambiguous. Their slogan was: “Speaking for the Muslims, we want no constitutionalism” (از قولی مسلمان، ما مشروطه نمی خوایم). As a result of this wave of persecution about 1,500 Jewish families emigrated from Iran, many of them to Jerusalem.

The alliance between the minorities and the democratic camp in the majlis was not coincidental. With every constitutional article written, the implications for Iranian religious minorities were tremendous. Every proposal, be it compulsory public education or equal status, meant for the opposing Ulama severe damage to their status and power, and diminishing the status of Sharia as a source for legal inspiration. Public education meant less power to the Ulama-run educational system; equal legal rights meant that, for example, the murder of a Jew by a Muslim could no longer be resolved by paying blood money. Indeed, at the end of the debate, article 8 of the constitution granted “equal treatment of all [male] citizens, regardless of their
religious identity."

In 1909 the second Majlis was elected, and this time the representation of minorities was finally properly implemented, and the democrat Dr. Loqman Nahurai became the first Jewish representative in the Majlis. Political circumstances brought unprecedented collaboration between the Jewish and Armenian communities (two communities with very little contact before). There are reports of Jews in Isfahan attending meetings and political ceremonies in Armenian churches, and Armenians participating in “Jewish events”.

In the last years of the Qajar dynasty Jews were trying to maximize the rights and promise of the constitutional period. In those years we see more and more Alliance schools open their doors, trying to train Iranian Jews and help them develop skills that would help them achieve upward mobility on the social ladder. AIU schools taught languages and writing, which gave the members of the community some advantages in trade, bureaucracy, and access to higher education, and training in Iran and abroad. In the years between the beginning of the constitutional period and the First World War, Jews came to realize that the legal barriers were not the only things standing between them and social assimilation. But with WW-I brewing and the emergence of political Zionism—things started to change for Iranian Jews in unexpected ways. As often happens with major political developments, lofty expectations turned quickly for Jews and others into a spectacular disappointment. The war, the never ending meddling of the Russian and British governments, the weakness or incompetence of the centralized government in Tehran, all marked an end of an era for the Jews of Iran.

Between 1915-1916 two intellectual Jewish brothers started publishing the first major Jewish newspaper. Mordechai and Asher Ben Abraham Murad Shalom produced “Shalom”: a newspaper published predominantly in Judeo-Persian and that dealt with Iranian Jewish progress, updates from the Jewish world, and some political discussion from the Iranian political sphere. A propos Benedict Anderson and imagined communities, it connected for the first time, in a systematic way, the Jews of the major urban centers like Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Hamedan to rural communities that had very little awareness, if at all, to what was going on with other Jewish communities. The introduction and diffusion of political concepts over the pages of “Shalom” would soon become of great importance.

The message of political Zionism first struck a chord with Jewish Iranians in 1917, following the Balfour Declaration. Disillusioned with the outcome of the constitutional revolution, all of a sudden the promise of relocating to a place of their own sounded rather tempting. Iranian Jews thus established Zionist associations to teach Hebrew and handle the preparations for a mass exodus. Habib Levy, one of the prominent figures in the Iranian-Jewish Community, described the Balfour Declaration in his memoir and magnum opus “Comprehensive history of the Jews of Iran: the Outset of the Diaspora” as “a sweet water spring which quenched the thirst of a people wandering in the arid desert” (Levy, 510). Reading the responses as described
among the Jewish leadership clarifies two things: 1. The disappointment from the lack of major transformation following the constitutional revolution was real. 2. The understanding of the Jewish community of what could be delivered to them politically by the Balfour Declaration came from being part of the constitutional discourse in the past decade. That is, they acquired the nationalist jargon from their immediate environment. By that I mean: giving “Zion” the meaning of a political homeland, talking about rights, and national redemption. These were not concepts associated with anything other than their own Iran before 1917. In other words, in Iranian Jewish imagery and history, the place of Jerusalem and Zion, and the holy land was very different from its context in Europe, the birthplace of modern political Zionism.

As mentioned, there was great excitement about the new possibilities presented by the British government. Iranian Jewish communities quickly established organizations and associations to handle the logistics of a mass exodus. Among other things, leaders established an umbrella organization to coordinate activities country-wide. In December 1917 Jewish dignitaries led by Soleyman Kohan Sedegh established the “Association for the Strengthening of the Hebrew Language” (Hebra l’chizuq Sefat Eber). Between 1918-1921 they established “Hebrat Yisrael” to handle the property of the families who had left Iran, purchasing land in Mandatory Palestine, maintaining contact with distant communities in Iran and talk them into leaving the country. Yet, all in all, despite the continuous efforts and a couple of “peaks,” the vast majority of Jews remained in their place (which is a recurring theme in Iranian-Jewish history. We can get back to it later).

It can be interesting to note that the AIU schools in Iran that enjoyed a phenomenal reputation among Jews and non-Jews, were considered a failure by the Jewish leadership. This is another struggle that continued well into the 1970s. The Jewish-becoming-Zionist leadership did not appreciate the fact the AIU schools overwhelmingly refused to include Hebrew classes as part of the regular core-curriculum. For the Jewish leadership it meant that one of the communities’ major assets was not sympathetic enough to their cause. In 1920 Azizullah Naim wrote to the Zionist Organization in London that he asked them to establish Zionist schools in Iran to replace the AIU schools, as teaching Hebrew was necessary to revitalize the national sentiment of the Jews in Iran. From 1920-1921 we see that the rise of Zionist activities in Iran had slowed down significantly.

In 1921 we see another turning point in this story. On the national level we see the fast ascendance of Reza Khan. In 1921 he is appointed Minister of War and immediately appeared as the strong man in Iran. His eventual ascent to Shah hardly came as surprise. At the same time a 30-year old journalist and activist from Kermanshah came to Tehran and instantaneously drew much attention. The young man, Shmuel Yehezqel Haim, was born in 1891 and had studied at the Protestant Missionary School, and then once the AIU school was opened in Kermanshah he moved to AIU. He was fluent in a number of languages besides Persian. French was his second language of choice and the impressive young man became known as Monsieur Haim. After
finishing high school he engaged in writing and political activism. (In 1914 ahead of the trend he wrote a letter to the Zionist Organization in Paris that he was intending to establish a Zionist association in Kermanshah)

He wrote for the nationalist (constitutionalist) newspaper Ettehad, under the leadership of Kazem Sarkeshikzadeh (who later served as a member of the Majlis), and befriended many of the leaders of the constitutionalist movement including Sarkeshikzadeh and the famed leader Sayyed Hassan Modarres (both Modarres and Sarkeshikzaseh were identified with the radical faction of the social democratic party). A side note worth mentioning is that in 1920-1921 there were a couple of Soviet-Communist adventures in Azerbaijan and Gilan that were eventually suppressed by Reza Khan; however Shmuel Haim’s name was mentioned in this context by his rivals. It is not entirely clear how involved he was with the movements or their membership. But having his name connected with it came back to haunt him. Shortly after arriving in Tehran, and perhaps before even coming, Shmuel Haim decided to run as the Jewish representative in the Majlis and to unseat Loqman Nahurai who served since 1909 (since the second majlis). Haim started publishing his own newspaper called Ha’haim (life) in 1922. In his newspaper he covered every political issue, Jewish or non-Jewish, that could and should be of interest to his audience. Over the pages of Ha’haim he confronted the “establishment” of the Jewish community on the one hand, and the Iranian government on the other. He blamed Jewish leaders for neglecting crucial parts of Jewish life, and blamed the government for not following through with their constitutional obligations towards minorities. He dealt with a plethora of topics, including a fascinating campaign against the concession of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. A topic that was not typically part of the Jewish-Iranian conversation. He wrote a letter to the League of Nations complaining about the oppression of minorities in Iran and the inaction of the Iranian government. Needless to say, he had no friends in high places.

In the elections to the fifth majlis (1923) Haim ran against Nahurai and won in a landslide, thus becoming the Jewish deputy (with his friend Sarkeshikzadeh, also elected for the first time in the 5th majlis). In many ways, his spirit reinvigorated the Jewish political arena. Haim was a self-defined Zionist, as was Nahurai. But Haim’s approach and analysis was radically different from the “old guards” understanding. Haim sought to strengthen the relationship with Jewish communities and organizations abroad, but his main concern was improving the lives of Jews in Iran and making sure that no opportunity is withheld from them because of their religion.

While Nahurai espoused the interpretation, and perhaps practice, that Jews should join the Zionist international organizations in full force, Haim believed that Zionism was overall a positive development but Iranian Jews should fight for their rights and status in Iran and not to forfeit it for any messianic dream. In his newspaper, which he continued to publish as a member of the majlis, he preached for integration efforts for
the Jews, participation in political life, joining the army, the ranks of bureaucracy, and the development of a
national consciousness. He worked with the representatives of the other minorities to grant all rights to them,
as well with his progressive comrades in the parliament on various issues that were not explicitly limited to
Jewish or minority issues. Haim's position became a cornerstone for many political ventures of Jews in Iran
since then. His position viewed the obsessive dealing of Jewish leaders with Hebrew teaching, Zionist
organizations, clubs, opening schools or sending representatives to the Zionist congress as very convenient to
THEM personally, but also to the Iranian government that as a result experienced less pressure to attend to
needs of Jewish communities. In a way, Zionism, by encouraging the hanging on to messianic dreams – that
may or may not be realized – made the Jews less involved in mundane problems. Haim, on the other hand,
contended that nothing, not even the Messiah, could compensate for the loss of time and rights on the road
towards the implementation of reforms. Haim's message resonated with the Jewish community. With the
gradual decline of the Qajar monarchy and the post WWI world order, it looked like Iran was on the verge of
the breakout of modern, better, more democratic and free society. The new middle classes were willing to put
up with a lot of the undemocratic policies of Reza Khan, just so they would be able to proceed with reforms
and modernization. The same kind of excitement caught on among Jewish communities as well.

The volume of the nationalist-Iranian conversation outdid the Zionist one. That means that Political
Zionism was placed on hold for the most part.

In 1925 when Reza Pahlavi became the new shah of Iran, Haim was planning his campaign for re-election.
His popularity was at an all-time high. He was respected and dedicated, and unlike his predecessor, he found
time to meet with his constituents and listen to their grievances and needs. But for Reza Shah, Haim was an
undesired outcome of the democratic process. Haim's criticism made him some enemies, Reza Shah among
them. Now, in the clash of titans (sort of...) between Reza Shah and Shmuel Haim, the Jewish community was
divided.

In 1925 with the ascendance of Reza Pahlavi as the new shah, who overthrew the Qajar dynasty
establishing a new national project and envisioning a new Iranian society where religion and religious
identity were secondary, Jews shelved their plans for relocation. They, just like Reza himself, looked at
Republican Turkey for a model and had many reasons for optimism. Reza Shah repealed all laws that barred
Jews (and other minorities) from living in certain areas, from engaging in some occupations, and from joining
the army, for example. In many ways, he was implementing Haim's vision for the minorities. Jews had now
become an equal part of the Iranian society. At least nominally.

A few days before the elections for the 6th majlis, elections that Haim was projected to win, he was
arrested and could not compete. He was released 17 days later as the votes were being counted. Under these
circumstances Loqman Nahurai was elected again and served for many more sessions. A few months later,
Haim was arrested again. Eventually, in December 1931, Haim was executed by Reza Shah on account of the mostly false accusation of being complicit in an attempt to assassinate him. In any case, following this incident any non-Iranian organizing movement was banned from operating in Iran. And Zionism fell under this category. From this point forward, Zionism remained a more clandestine, underground operation. Zionist organizations could operate openly in some fields, and were banned in others altogether. Throughout his trial and leading up to his eventual execution, Haim believed (and probably with a good reason), that Nahurai and his friends in the Jewish community were behind the accusations and the nightmare he endured.

In this political-ideological eco-system Iranian Jews developed their understanding of nationalism and perceptions of national redemption. Zion for them was a much less mystified phenomenon than perhaps it was for European Jews or even other Middle Eastern communities. “Zion” was part of their religious and spiritual world for ages. When they thought that it could be a vehicle for national redemption, they transformed the concept to project (or to contain) the revised values. When Zionism became a state-sponsored movement after 1948, we see that between 17 and 25 thousand Jews chose to immigrate, however, they did so because they were at the bottom of the social-economic status among Jews and the alternative of staying in Iran did not seem all that promising at the time. (And the reactions of Iranian Jews to Israel after their immigration is a topic for another talk).

Let us ponder a moment the memoir of Elias Eshaqian, a teacher and principal of Alliance schools in Iran for over 25 years: “Iran has been my homeland [vatan] and Jerusalem has been the source of my belief in God and the direction of my prayers [qiblah].”1 Here Eshaqian suggests yet again that many Iranian Jews differed from the Jewish Agency in their interpretation of Zionism. For Eshaqian, national Iranian identity did not interfere with his religious identity as a Jew. He proudly projected this combined identity throughout his career, which may have inspired and encouraged his students.

To conclude:

With the outbreak of the constitutional revolution Jews felt that they must seize the opportunity to leave behind their existence in the shadows of the Iranian society, and become committed equal citizens. Along with their compatriots they were politicized to understand and use a whole new language of civil rights, democracy, constitution, representation, and more. They learned the hard way that political victories don’t come easily. Having been denied the opportunity for self-representation in the first majlis, they started – all too early – to reconsider the entire project of the 1906-1911 revolution. Between 1909 and 1917 Iran experienced a period of instability and a certain extent of chaos. WWI which had a great impact on Iran, along

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with the endless process of interpretation for the constitution and creating ad-hoc alliances for changing causes, challenged Jewish communities in ways that perhaps were too much for them to swallow. Hence, the great excitement with which they received the news of the Balfour Declaration. The same politicization process that they had undergone a short time earlier, helped them articulate the relevance of the Balfour Declaration, and Zionism broadly, to them. They worked hard to make the adjustments necessary for a full acceptance of Zionism; however, when it appeared that yet another political revolution was coming, and that that one, would possibly diminish the “otherness” of Jews, as part of the new nation-building project, they opted to invest their energies in the Iranian project over the Zionist.

For Iranian Jews, Zionism allowed more than one meaning and interpretation, definitely not as intended by the leadership of the movement. Iranian Jews, for centuries, visited Jerusalem, went on pilgrimages, and maintained relationship with Iranian Jews who had emigrated, so from the outset, the concept of Zionist redemption had different connotations. Paraphrasing the words of Roya Hakakian, “Iranian Jews dreamed of the land of milk and honey at night, but wanted to wake up in Tehran in the morning.” And this shaped the Jewish Iranian attitude to Zionism for years to come. Not antagonism so much as a multi-layered and nuanced approach.

Reza Shah remained in power until 1941, and during his tenure, and maybe as an outcome of his policies, Jews, who already had a very strong attachment to Iran, embraced the role designated for them in the grand vision of the shah. Among other things, they assumed, together with the Zoroastrians, the role of the indigenous minority. In the 1930s with a series of decrees for unification, AIU schools had to operate differently and had to change their teaching language from French to Persian, something that caused damage, but overall, in the period of 1925-1941 Zionism became insignificant, not just because it was banned, but because Iranian Jews were invested in becoming an integrated Iranian community. In 1941, as Iran came under occupation of the Allied Armies, and Mohammad Reza Shah came to power, Zionism was once again allowed to operate freely, however the tension between different versions of Zionism remained very present.
**AVERROËS LECTURES ON JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN MUSLIM LANDS**

**Averroës** is the Latin name of ibn Rushd, the 12th century Andalusian polymath whose philosophical works integrated Islamic traditions with Ancient Greek thought. Over subsequent centuries, his commentaries on Plato and Aristotle came to influence Jewish and Christian thinkers throughout Europe, among them Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and Baruch Spinoza. The choice of Averroës as the name for the Lecture Series is significant because it points to a history of Cordoba’s Jewish-Muslim relations and the connections between Averroës and Maimonides, both of whom were committed to intellectual exchange and communal life across religious boundaries.

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The series builds on UCLA’s strength in having a large number of faculty across disciplines whose research touches on this topic, as well as a number of research centers interested in a series exploring the experiences and legacies of Jewish communities in the Muslim world.

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