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The Concise History of Anti-Semitism in Persia

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BOOK ONE (1300 BCE – 642 CE)

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

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The Jews of Persia boast a rich and ancient history, as high as Mount Demavend, and deep as the Caspian Sea. It is a history of glory and faith, of tragedy and disillusionment, and of tenacity and hope. In that sense the Jews of Persia are a microcosm of the entire Jewish People, much as the Jews are a microcosm of the entire world.

Much of what makes up what we call the modern Jewish experience was fashioned in the kiln of Persian exile. From the Book of Esther and the Festival of Purim, to the building of the Second temple, and to the sages of the Talmud, the Jews living in Persia or under Persian domain, were instrumental in directing Jewish history in the direction of survival and success.

The Persian Jewish community begins with the exile of the Ten Tribes by the king of Assyria, and continues with the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple by the Babylonians. Persia was a likely destination for the exiles. There they found a civilization rich in culture and opportunities.

They arrived, set up communities, and flourished. However, most of them returned to Judea when Ezra and Nehemiah returned and rebuilt the Temple. It was natural that later, when the tragic events which led to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and the final exile of the Jews from Judea transpired, the fleeing survivors should migrated on mass to the location of their previous good fortune. Now the Temple was again

destroyed, this time by Persia and Judea's archenemy, the Romans, and those Jews who had remained in Persia were met by their exiled brethren.

Babylonia and Persia again filled with refugees who quickly built new communities and flourished. The re-established community of Persia has thus been continuous, through great prosperity and hardships for these thousands of years.

The Jewish nation has much to thank to the ancient Persians, even if the situation gradually became strained and later even intolerable. This process took several thousand years. While the Persian exile was a time of tenuousness, a distinction must be made between it, and that of the Babylonian and Roman exiles. Those exiles were brought about by the painful conquest of the Jewish nation. The Persians held dominion over the Jews by virtue of their having conquered the Babylonians, not the Judeans. The Judeans came under Persian domain incidentally. In fact the Jews rejoiced at seeing their recent conquerors, the cruel Babylonians lose their power. Later it was none other than the Persian King Darius who, at the bequest of Ezra the Scribe, granted the Jews permission to return to their national homeland and rebuild their Temple, thus insuring their continuity. Darius I was the only foreign king who ever allowed the Jews to rebuild the Temple. Even today, those Jews who wish to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, the symbol of Jewish sovereignty, and physical and spiritual autonomy, are prevented by doing so by foreign powers.

There are similarities between the Jews of Persia and those of Europe, and there are differences. The differences are more apparently noticeable, but they are shadows in comparison with the depth of the similarities. In Israel a marriage between a Persian bride and, for example, an English or Eastern European groom is no longer a rarity. When the families first meet and exchange ideas for the wedding about music, food, and custom, the results are often comical and lead to blank stares and incomprehension. Both can almost be heard thinking, "Are you sure they're Jewish?" But a little scraping off of the surface gilding reveals the similarity. Not only do both have identical origins, those of the royal forefathers, the Land of Israel and the heritage of the Torah and mitzvot, but both have an almost identical yet totally separate history! A history of being first welcomed to a new country and then being persecuted and exiled. A history of desperation and hope, of disillusionment in a false messiah and betrayal by their neighbors. A history of rising up to a position of political importance and success in the medical field and merchant class. Of being cruelly persecuted and rebuilding from nothing. Of longing to return to the Holy Land. Of seeing a member of your tribe, despite his different dress and unique religion, becoming the king's most trusted advisor, and being compared to biblical Josef. Just as this, the "Jewish Experience" happened in England, Spain, Germany, Poland, and Russia, it happened in Persia as well, almost simultaneously. Change the names and faces. Change the skin color and the kitchen spices. But don't change the pattern because it's the same. The pattern of being exiled then welcomed then being persecuted and then again exiled cannot be a coincidence. It has happened not twice or thrice, but again and again. It happens because it must happen. If you drop a glass it will break. If you put oil and water in a cup, they will separate. If you put fine food before a hungry dinner guest, it will get eaten. Certain reactions are predictable if the essential conditions are identical.

"PERSIA" OR "IRAN" ?

Persia has been known as "Iran" in the west since 1935 when Shah Reza Pahalavi officially changed the name. The ancient Greeks named the country 'Persia' after the Fars region, and the name has remained "Persia" in Europe and the West ever since. But the

people of the region themselves for these thousands of years called themselves either “Persians” or “Iranian” at different times and different places. But more often than not they called themselves Iranian, from the word ‘Aryan’, that is, people speaking the Indo-European languages and distinct from Oriental or African peoples. For this work we refer to the people as Persians until 1935. The Jews in Israel who have emigrated from Iran refer to themselves as ‘Parsim’ or Persians. It is similarly incorrect to refer to Persian Jews as ‘Sephardim’ (Spanish). They never settled in Spain, just as Yemenite and Bukharian Jews were never anywhere near Spain. It is also incorrect to call non-Jewish Persians ‘Arabs’. Most of them are Moslems, but they are no more Arabian than Moslems in Indonesia are. A Persian who is inadvertently referred to as Arab is actually insulted, though Persian Jews who are mistakenly called Sephardim are usually more patient.

Chapter II

THE JEWS ARRIVE IN PERSIA

The first Jews in Persia were those of the Ten Lost Tribes.

“In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and in Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.” (Kings II 17:6)

Sargon II, was king of Assyria (reigned 722-705 BCE), after the Assyrian conquest (722 BCE) of the northern capital of Israel, under Shalmaneser V, Sargon’s predecessor.

After the death of King Solomon (reigned 961-921 BCE), the Jews of Israel split into Judea (tribes Judah and Benjamin in the south) and Israel (the remaining ten tribes in the north). The Judeans were able to thwart the Assyrian onslaught, but northern Kingdom of Israel was defeated. The cruel Assyrian king Sancherib initiated a policy of relocating all conquered peoples. This was meant to discourage insurgency. Conquered peoples far from the lands of their birth were less likely to rebel, he reasoned. Thus, the Ten Tribes began their sojourn in Assyria and Persia and have wandered far indeed since then, generally migrating further and further east.

The cities of the Medes were under Assyrian rule. They were located in western and northern regions of present day Iran bordering Mount Damavand and the Kevir-e Lut desert. The Gozan River is a tributary to the Euphrates River, and Halah and Khabur were in Kurdistan. Hebrew names written in ancient documents which corroborate this were discovered in Nimrud. It is likely that later, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the first Temple by the Babylonians, when the Jews migrated to the Persian empire, they became reunited with their lost brethren. Then, when they were permitted to return to Jerusalem by Darius, the Ten Tribes returned together with the others. Still, some must have remained isolated and distinct and never returned as can be attested by Josephus, the 1st century historian who wrote that the Ten Tribes were numerous and to be found east of the Euphrates. And Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th century Jewish traveler who visited Persia and China before Marco Polo writes extensively of his encounters with members of the Ten Tribes in Persia and Kurdistan. So, like the Jews of Persia and Babel, some of the Ten Tribes returned to Judea, and some remained behind.

Chapter III

The Achaemenids (550–330 BCE)

The first of the Achaemenid kings was Achaemenes in the 7th century BCE. He began a long line of ambitious kings which included Cyrus the Great;

Persia was split between the Medes and the Farsi. The Medes reigned in the northwest of day Iran from the beginning of the eighth to the middle of the sixth century BCE. Together with the Babylonians, the Aryan Medes managed to defeat the Assyrians and erased those biblical enemies of the Jews and their neighbors' from the map for good. The Assyrian lands were divided between Media and Babylon.

At the same time, in the southwest lay the province of Fars, from which the terms 'Farsi' (Persian) and Persia are derived. The industrious people who lived there, of Aryan descent declared themselves independent of Medes while the latter were busily engaged with the Assyrians. A number of leaders made their contributions to Persia's ascendancy until the advent of Cyrus who led his ambitious citizens to world domination. The Persian Empire at its zenith was almost as great in area as was the Roman's. It did, however, outlast the Romans.

The first ruler of what became the Achaemenid Dynasty was Achaemenes, the 7th century BCE ruler of the city of Anshan. His descendents included the historical legends Cyrus the Great, Cambyses II, and Darius I.

The glory of Persia begins with Cyrus. Cyrus the Great lived from 600 to 530 BCE and was king of Persia from 550-530 BCE. He was the son of Cambyses I. When he became ruler of the Persian district of Anshan, the area was still subject to the Medes. Five years later he waged a war against the Medes and captured King Astyages (reigned about 584 to about 550 BCE) and ended the Median Empire. Cyrus then proclaimed himself king of Persia and ruled an empire from the Halys River in Asia Minor which is the eastern border of Lydia, to the Babylonian Empire on the south. But Babylon, Egypt, Lydia, and Sparta in Greece combined against him with some initial success. Lydia in Asia Minor (now Turkey) was a major empire and the Lydians were the first peoples to coin money. It was the first time in history that so many countries on 3 different continents should all engage in a single conflict. In that sense it was the first 'world war'.

Cyrus was temporarily beaten back, but in about 546 BCE he beat Lydia and added it to his realm, and in 539 BCE the kingdom of Babylon fell to Cyrus as well, giving birth to the greatest empire that the world had ever seen. The Persian Empire was the most powerful state in the world until its conquest two centuries later by Alexander the Great. Cyrus was a beloved leader. He was considered merciful to not only his subjects (rare at the time) but merciful to those he'd conquered (rarer still). His most important decision was the granting of permission to the Jews to return from their exile in Babylon to their native Israel to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. Cyrus died in battle fighting an eastern tribe, the Massagetae, and was succeeded by his son, Cambyses II.

King Cyrus gave the Jews permission to rebuild the Temple. However, in the fourth year of his reign the building was halted. This was due to the venomous complaints and accusations to the Persian government by the Samaritans. The Samaritans were people who had been brought to Judea by the Assyrian king Sancherib in accordance with his policy of

relocating conquered peoples. The Samaritans were a constant source of trouble to the Jews from the time of their arrival until the destruction of the Second Commonwealth.

The succession of Persian leaders of the Achaemenian dynasty until their defeat at the hands of the Greeks is well documented. The question is, which of these leaders was the biblical figure Ahasuerus during whose reign the Purim story occurred. The Biblical book of Esther retells the events at that time and is neither legend nor myth. They are an intimate and historical account of one of the great events in world history. There are two main possibilities as to the chronology of the period to reveal who Ahasuerus was. One reads as follows:

- Cyrus the Great
- Cambyses II, son of Cyrus
- Gaumata the usurper (Ahasuerus)
- Darius I, (Darius the Great), son of Gaumata
- Xerxes I, son of Darius I

The second reads as follows:

- Cyrus the Great
- Cambyses II, son of Cyrus
- Gaumata the usurper
- Darius I (Darius the Great) -son of the Persian noble Hystaspes,
- Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), son of Darius I

Despite the fact that many scholars believe the second chronology to be accurate, the first is correct. This is because it was Darius I who permitted the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of the Jews to Israel which must have happened after the Purim story.

Xerxes I was murdered and there followed by a succession of kings who were also poisoned or otherwise assassinated: Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II (who only reigned for 45 days), Darius II, Artaxerxes III, and finally the last Achaemenid king Darius III. During the reigns of these kings Persia was at war with Greece. Greece was fighting its own civil war between Athens and Sparta which climaxed in the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE in which Sparta proved victorious. Shortly thereafter Philip of Macedonia united Greece. His son Alexander conquered Persia (see Chapter IV).

The Purim story is undoubtedly only one of a number of anti-Semitic incidents that happened during the Achaemenids but because it was canonized it has been preserved in great detail. An event such as that does not occur in a vacuum. Events lead up to it and it is an indication of a more universal situation.

The Purim miracle occurred in the year 355 BCE. The near annihilation of the Jews of the Persian Empire and their rescue as celebrated by Purim is the archetypical anti-Jewish occurrence. The Iranian historian, Hasan Pirniya argues that the information in the story of Esther and Mordechai is the same information given by Greek historians. He notes that the extent of the Persian Empire from India to Ethiopia is historically factual and that the seven advisors including Haman are termed by Hendotu as “the seven imperial judges”. He is amongst those scholars who equate Ahasuerus with Xerxes.

In the story of Esther, Ahasuerus, ruler of the Persian Empire, stretching from India to Ethiopia, is sitting on his throne in Shushan or Susa, the capital city. During his third year of rule he throws a huge feast for his nobles and army lasting 180 days. Following this is a seven day party in the palatial garden court for commoners. The Queen, Vashti, also makes a feast for women. The king demands that Vashti appear before him ‘wearing the royal

crown'. She outrages the king by refusing and he has her killed. Rabbinical literature explains that the king meant 'wearing the royal crown' and nothing else! Ahasuerus was a usurper who had married a queen of royal lineage, descendent of the Babylonian kings. He thus wanted to show his dominance over her and legitimize his position. The queen actually despised him and considered herself superior and he was outraged. However once she is killed he regrets his decision, not because he loved her or even misses her, but rather because he now has utterly no claim to the throne.

The King sends for a new candidate for Queen. Esther, a Jewess, is chosen from among the candidates but keeps her heritage a secret. Esther's cousin, Mordechai, a guard of the King, lets Esther know there is a plot against the king. Esther tells the King and saves his life. Later on a newly appointed Minister named Haman expresses disgust that Mordechai, because he is a Jew, will not bow down to him. He is enraged and he convinces the King to kill all of his Jewish subjects. It is decided that on the Hebrew date, Adar 13, all the Jews in the Persian empire, men, women, and children, are to be killed. The potential victims are frightened naturally, and Mordechai asks Esther to plead with the King. Eventually, after Mordechai calls on the Jews of the empire to partake in a national prayer and fasting session, Esther intercedes. Haman is executed and the Jews are saved. This is commemorated on the 14 and 15th of Adar as the Holiday of Purim.

Certain universal themes and repeating motifs of Jewish history are seen here and it is remarkable the way they turn up again and again in various locations and different times in history. The Jew rising to a position of power and using his influence to save his people. The fanatic anti-Semite wanting to destroy all the Jews, even the innocent babies. The rage by the power-hungry minister at a perceived wrongdoing by a single individual, yet demanding to exact punishment on the entire people. The hand of G-d, unseen by those who do not wish to see, yet all too obvious to those who do. A statement in the Talmud (Sotah 34a) reads, "Maaseh avoth siman l'banim" or "the deeds of the fathers foretell for the children", or more simply, "history repeats itself." Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the Book of Esther. The Jews have much to thank the ancient Persians. They allowed them to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. They fought the Babylonians and Romans. They provided a haven in which the great Rabbinic academies flourished and composed the Talmud. But as is obvious from the Book of Esther, even a golden cage is still a cage.

The Purim miracle occurred between Cyrus and Darius when the rebuilding of the Temple had been interrupted. When the Temple was finally rebuilt most of the Jews returned to Judea but many did not, remaining behind mostly in Babylonia and Persia. But the Jews of the Diaspora maintained a strong relationship with those in the Holy Land and paid a yearly tribute toward the maintenance of the Temple. Besides their common ancestry and religion, this united Jews all over the world.

In 406 BCE, when the Achaemenid reign stretched from the Indus River in the East to Libya in the West, a Jewish Temple was destroyed in Elephantine, Egypt. Other than the Book of Esther, almost all that is known about Jewry in the Persian Diaspora in this period is from papyri written in Elephantine. The papyrus letters are written in Aramaic. In the "Strasburg Papyrus" the one dealing with the destruction of the Jewish colony's temple, help is sought in reconstructing the temple which had been destroyed by troops loyal to a Persian military commander, who had himself been bribed by Egyptian priests of the god Kahnum. The ruling Persian entity, the satrap Arsames, was absent from the region and on a mission to King Darius in Persia. The letter indicates that a previous missive to the High Priest in Jerusalem, Johanan, had not been answered. This particular letter by the community is addressed to the governor of Judea, Bagohi, who has seceded Nehemiah in the post. The

writers of the letter, the Elephantine priest Jedonih and his colleagues, informed Bagohi that the sons of the Governor of Samaria were also being asked to help with the reconstruction. There is a subsequent note on papyrus stating that Judea's governor Bagohi and one of the sons of the Governor of Samaria had jointly replied to the letter and called upon the satrap to rebuild the temple in Sittu.

Chapter IV

The Seleucids (330 BCE – 226 CE)

The Seleucids were the Greeks during and after Alexander. The conquest of Persia was Alexander's greatest victory. Alexander was born in 356 BCE in Pella, the capital of Macedonia, and died in 323 BCE. He was known for crushing any opposition decisively but allowing those conquered societies to keep their organizational structures and traditions and even adopting their customs himself, as he saw fit. In 336 BCE his father King Philip II of Macedonia was assassinated and Alexander inherited enemies, foes, adversaries, rebellion, and strife. His chances of surviving to the end of the first year of his reign were slim indeed. His only advantage was the fact that he was Alexander. He was ruthless and had the element of surprise on his side. He immediately executed all rivals and claimants to the throne. He then established control of Greece by crushing an uprising in Thebes. His military genius served him well as he won one military victory after another, sometimes against overwhelming odds. Despite the sheer insanity of the ambitious project, and despite being vastly outnumbered, he began a campaign against Persia in 334 BC.

Alexander crossed the Hellespont (modern Dardanelles) with an army of 35,000 Macedonian and Greek troops. All of his generals were Macedonians and included Antigonus, Ptolemy, and Seleucus. At the river Granicus, near the ancient city of Troy, he attacked an army of Persians and Greek mercenaries totaling 40,000 men. He won a decisive victory losing only 110 men. His fame quickly spread and all of Asia Minor acknowledged him as their king. He next had to face the entire Persian army, this time led by the king himself, Darius III in the Battle at Granicus in the year 330 BCE. Darius was badly defeated and fled the scene to the chagrin of his soldiers and his wife and children who were left behind. Alexander spared them and even went on to later marry Darius' daughter.

Before returning to Persia, Alexander turned toward the west and conquered North Africa and Judea. In Judea he met and developed a close relationship with the High Priest, Shimon HaTzaddik. The sage impressed the young warrior with his profound wisdom and their discussions on philosophy are recorded in the Talmud. Alexander decided to grant the Jewish community the favor of donating a statue of himself to be placed in the Temple and worshiped as a god. Shimon HaTzadik's experience in diplomacy served him well and instead of flatly refusing (the thought of an idol in the Temple being anathema to him) he offered him instead to gain true immortality by naming all the boys born that year in Judea as "Alexander". He explained that a statue would eventually decompose but since the Jews were an eternal people and that they had the custom of naming their children after their departed relatives, he would be remembered in Jewish custom for thousands of years. Alexander agreed. The problems that Jews of Judea had under the Greek empire culminating in the wars of the Macabees and the Hanukah story, occurred years after Alexander's death.

Turning northward again, Alexander reorganized his forces at Tyre and started for Babylon with an army of 40,000 infantry and 7000 cavalry. Crossing the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, he met Darius at the head of a huge army which, according to accounts of antiquity, was said to number a million men. Alexander completely defeated this army in the Battle of Gaugamela, on October 1, 331 BCE. Darius again fled as he had done at Issus and this was seen as an act of betrayal, especially since he had done it before. He was killed by

one of his own satraps. Babylon surrendered after Gaugamela, and the city of Susa with its famous vast treasures fell next.

Alexander continued to the magnificent and heretofore impenetrable Persian capital Persepolis. The conquest of Persepolis is one of the great turning points in history, as this marked the end of Asian world dominance (Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, etc.) and began European world dominance (Greek, Roman, etc.). After plundering the royal treasuries he burned the city to the ground on one of his notorious drunken binges and thus ended the ancient Persian Empire. His conquest continued beyond the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, including modern Afghanistan and northward into Bactria and Sogdiana, the modern Western Turkistan, also known as Central Asia. Alexander took only three years to take this vast area from 330 BCE to 327 BCE.

He completed his conquest of the remnants of the Persian Empire, which had included parts of western India. He crossed the Indus River in 326 BCE, and invaded the Punjab as far as the river Hyphasis (modern Beas). There, the Macedonians revolted and refused to go farther. He then built a fleet and passed down the Indus, reaching its mouth in 325 BCE. The fleet then sailed to the Persian Gulf. He returned overland across the desert to Media. He arrived in Babylon in 323 BCE preparing to consolidate his victories and continue with fresh campaigns but in June he contracted a fever and died. In his will he left his empire “to the strongest”. For the next fifty years a bloody power struggle ensued, pitting his generals, each at the head of a huge army, one against the other.

One of Alexander’s greatest ambitions was to unite the East with the West in general, Asia and Europe in particular in what he called the “world brotherhood of men”. He realized that each thought the other was primitive, stupid, barbaric, and inferior. He also realized that nothing could have been further from the truth, but that people tend to fear what they don’t understand and to try to minimize the accomplishments of others in order to justify themselves. As a result he shocked his generals and officers by marrying Barsine (or Stateira; died about 323 BCE) the daughter of the deceased Darius III and ordering them to take Persian wives as well.

He also enlisted thousands of Persians in his army. He himself adopted Persian dress and customs and married other Eastern wives including Roxana (died about 311 BCE), daughter of Oxyartes of Sogdiana.

In order that his accomplishments last, he ordered the Greek cities to worship him as a god. His name can be still read on ruins of temples in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and many other places. He claimed to be of divine birth. But the order to worship him forever was largely nullified by his death shortly after he issued it. He also founded about 70 cities named Alexandria along his line of march, paved them and provided them with water supplies. One immediate and long lasting affect was that Greek culture was introduced and spread throughout the world and Greek became the first international language. Greece and Europe were introduced to Asian art and were influenced by foreign cultures as well. There is a debate as to which is superior, Classical Greek or Hellenistic Greek art, philosophy, architecture, and culture. Classical is before Alexander and is more ‘purely Greek’. Hellenistic is after Alexander, when Greece influenced the world and was influenced by other cultures. The Parthenon in Athens is an example of Classical architecture. The Venus de Milo is an example of Hellenistic sculpture.

Chapter V

The Parthians (250 BCE – 224 CE)

The Parthians rebelled against the Greek Seleucids. The Parthians originally came from the province of Hyrcania which encompassed portions of present-day Khorasan and Gorgan.

The Parthians were of Scythian descent, and adopted Median dress and Aryan speech. They were of the finest horsemen and archers. Mounted Parthians were known to shoot arrows backwards toward the enemy while pretending to flee; this is how the phrase “a Parthian shot” originated.

Parthia was subjected to the Assyrians, Medes, Persians, and Macedonians under Alexander the Great, and Seleucids. In 250 BCE the Parthians founded an independent kingdom that eventually extended from the Euphrates River to the Indus River and to the Indian Ocean. In the 1st century BCE Parthia was at its greatest and was Rome’s arch rival and they fought many wars. In 224 CE Parthia was finally conquered by Ardashir I, king of Persia and founder of the Sassanid dynasty.

The original revolt in which Parthia won over the Greeks and began their ascent, was led by Arsaces (or ‘Ashk’), leader of the tribe of Parni in Parthia, in 250 BCE. This began a dynasty which lasted for four hundred and seventy six years. Each successive king after Arsaces is known as Arsaces II, Arsaces III, and so on until Arsaces XXIX, the last of the Parthians. The Parthian’s victories over the Greeks are testimony to their courage, horsemanship, and military skill. The Greeks were unable to win a war on three fronts, fighting simultaneously the Persians, Judeans, and the Romans. But the Persians did not consider Parthians their friends or allies and at times fought alongside the Greeks to vanquish the Parthians. In 129 BCE the Persians fought together with the Greeks against the Parthians but the Persians and Greeks lost. Greek influence and presence in the east was greatly diminished. The Parthians were unstoppable until 30 CE when they were at the height of their power.

The Roman general Pompey crossed the Euphrates River and attacked the Parthians at Carrhae. The Parthians dealt them a crushing defeat. According to the Greek historian Plutarch, the Parthian king was watching a play of Euripides when the severed head of Crassus, the Roman general, was brought before him. The Parthians were the only army that could prevail against Rome. The Romans took their loss of prestige seriously and Caesar sent an even greater force against them to exact revenge. He sent his finest general, Mark Anthony, against them but he too was defeated and exiled to Syria. Several other Roman attempts met with defeat and finally Augustus Caesar worked out a peace treaty in 25 BCE and thousands of Roman prisoners were freed.

The Parthians then moved their capital to Ctesiphon. Near the city of Ctesiphon was the Persian city of Seleucia. The Seleucids rose up in rebellion against Ctesiphon and were defeated. The large Jewish population in Seleucia was caught in the middle and a massacre occurred.

During the reign of Arsaces XXII (aka Vologases I who reigned from 51 to 78 BCE) the Jews were persecuted. The king was a follower of Zoroaster and was intolerant of the Jewish religion or any other religion. This was the foreshadowing to the later Zoroastrian

persecutions during the Sassanian dynasty which were to follow later and cause much suffering and the death of countless Jews and would eventually bring about the end of the great academies at Sura, Pumbeditha, and Nehardea.

Other than that of Arsaces XXII, the Jews were generally well tolerated and even liked by the Parthians. The Roman destruction of Judea occurred during the Parthian empire and the Jews and Parthians had a common enemy. Jews fleeing the Roman slaughter settled in all corners of both the Roman and Parthian empires. The Jews in Judea fought hard against the Romans and Persia became a refuge after her defeat. Of the millions of Jews living in Judea, most were killed, many were made captive, an impressive number remained in the Holy Land, and the rest fled. Communities sprung up from the Nile to the Danube to the Tigris and Euphrates. The Jewish population in Persia was greatest though, and there they were granted limited autonomy and flourished. The post Exilarch or 'Resh Gelutha' – Leader of the Exiles, was set up in Persia and lasted for centuries. Seven of Rabbi Akiva's students immigrated to Persia and settled in Nisibis and Nehardea. These locals later became the centers for the great Jewish academies.

It is unfortunate that the Persian king at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE was Arsacid Vologases. His fear of Roman retribution after his predecessor's victories was shortsighted at best. His hesitancy to help the Judean nation when they needed it most led to the downfall not only of Judea but of the Parthians themselves at the hands of the Romans not long after. When the two had fought together as they had so many times in the past, they were invincible. The chance to crush Rome was lost. The Jews of Western Persia and Mesopotamia fared poorly when Rome found victory in Khuzestan, Azerbaijan, Hamadan, and Kurdistan. Jews were subject to pillage and massacre by the Romans in those places where their population was the largest. Naturally the survivors began another in a series of endless migrations, this time to Fars, Khorasan, and central Persia which grew and grew. But as the end of the Parthian dynasty drew to a close, so did hope for many of the faithful who looked forward to a short exile. The intolerant Romans and Byzantines kept the Jewish population of Judea at a minimum. Those who settled in for the long haul were proved correct.

Chapter VI

The Sassanians (226 CE – 642 CE)

The Sassanians saw the blossoming of the Jewish community under which the Talmud was written and the great methivtas (talmudic academies) were established. They also saw the rise of the Zoroastrians and the eventual destruction of those same academies.

Ardeshir Papakan was the founder of the Sassanian dynasty. He led the native Persians, the people of Fars province, to victory against the Parthians, who were in a weakened state owing to their never-ending battles with the Romans. When the Sassanian leader himself had to face the Roman legions, he did so decisively and consolidated his power. In order to unify his people, which he knew was a source of strength; he combined politics and religion and did so successfully. He declared Zoroastrianism the state religion and gave the Zoroastrian priests or 'Magi' extensive power. The Zoroastrian religion had stagnated and declined after the death of Zoroaster. The promise of the return from death of their leader sounded perfectly feasible to the king, and so he brought back the old customs. The Magi, not surprisingly, praised the king to high heaven for his piety and declared him a saint. Ardeshir,

for his part insisted that state and religion could not survive mutually exclusive of each other.

With the rise of the magi the minority communities, Jews, Christian, and Buddhist, were reduced to second-class citizens. Their status quickly deteriorated. Zoroastrian Persia was fertile ground for persecution based on the magi's teachings. The world, they explained, is split into two opposing forces, those of light and darkness. The force of light is called Ahura Mazda, and the force of darkness is called Ahriman. There is a constant conflict between light and darkness. The magi were charged with the sacred mission of keeping the forces of darkness at bay. One of their chores was keeping a fire constantly burning in the temples. However rather than making a point of strengthening the forces of light and goodness, the magi concerned themselves fighting the forces of evil, or rather that which they deemed evil.

The magi whose job it was to tend the fire in the temple was forbidden to breathe while doing so. This was in order not to pollute the fire with his exhaled breath. Similarly the earth, they taught, must not be polluted. The burial of the dead in the earth is the ultimate pollution, they explained, thus a dead body must be left on a mountain or tower to rot and be eaten by animals or vultures. All non-Zoroastrians were thus polluters of the earth and were to be diminished in all ways.

Until the magi arrived the Jewish community had been prosperous. During the reign of Shapur II, the leader of the Jewish community was Shmuel bar Abba who was the king's close confidant. Shmuel who was a Talmudic scholar, mathematician, doctor, and military strategist became the king's advisor. Shapur was victorious in battle and defeated the Roman legions in the battle for Edessa in Asia Minor (near modern day Urfa in Turkey).

Persia had been the Jew's only refuge, with the Holy Land under the oppressive Byzantines and Rome continuing its anti-Jewish policies. But when Yazdegird II (438-457) ascended the throne the situation in Persia deteriorated. The Jews were forbidden to practice their religion. They could not bury their deceased. Even the right to observe the Sabbath was rescinded. The king took orders from the magi who plainly attempted to consolidate power by weakening their rivals.

The son of Yazdegird II took over the throne of his father in 456. King Peroz (457-483) reigned during the most brutal anti-Jewish actions in the history of Persia. The local Christians began to slander their Jewish neighbors to the magi, accusing them of murdering two magi. A decree ordering the death of all the Jews of Isfahan, the city with the greatest Jewish population, was issued and a massacre ensued. More than half the Jewish population was brutally slaughtered. The killing quickly spread to all parts of Persia and Babylon. Jewish schools and synagogues were destroyed. The academy of Sura, the focal point of Jewish scholarship and the home of the Gaonim, was destroyed. All Jews in any type of position of authority were removed from office, even exclusively Jewish functionaries, such as the judges of a Beth Din (Jewish court). Jewish organizations were outlawed.

The situation became intolerable for the survivors and many took to the road. They headed toward Arabia, toward Afghanistan, India, and China in the East, and toward Europe in the west. The king of India welcomed the Jews and there has been a continuous Jewish community there ever since. They were met by Jews who had been living in India since ancient times, the Bene Yisrael community. The two communities of India, the Persians, and the Bene Yisrael, have lived in harmony these many centuries, but have rarely intermarried and thus maintained themselves as separate social groups.

The magi not only persecuted the Jews but were also very corrupt. They were clearly weakening the country and causing chaos. The Jews, who functioned as doctors, artisans, merchants, and farmers were killed or fleeing and a void was left behind. No one felt safe and no one could be trusted. There was no tolerance by the all-powerful magi and the result

was national disunity and distrust. In their weakened state the country was left vulnerable and sure enough they were attacked by the Hephthalites. The onslaught lasted for over two years. The invaders finally left after much pillaging, looting, and burning. The remaining population was left in abject poverty. The magi were finally exposed and blamed for the country's misfortune by all but the royal family who would not retract previously decreed laws or generally admit having made a mistake.

After the massacre in Isfahan by King Peroz, children who had been left as orphans were moved to the village of Harvan to serve in the Zoroastrian temple. The ruling Jewish Exilarch and two teachers were subsequently executed.

At this time of turmoil the vacuum was filled as again and again in history by a new religious fanatic with promises of change and betterment. The self-proclaimed prophet Mazdak amassed a huge following.

King Kavad addressed the issue of a frustrated and hostile population and granted official sanction to the new religion. The situation however went from bad to worse. Part of Mazdak's sugarcoated religion called for all properties to become communal. The communist-like leader's ideas appealed to the downtrodden masses as he promised distribution of wealth but delivered only lawlessness. In addition to making all properties ownerless (with the exception of his own) he also declared all female citizens public property to be shared by all.

The remaining Jewish community found this more than they could bear. It was anathema to their very beings to live in such a depraved society. The leader of the community, the great Mar Zutra II decided to act decisively and radically. He organized a Jewish army outside of the Jewish homeland. While the Jews were known as great warriors who had defeated the Greeks and almost defeated the Romans, they had only ever done so in the land of Israel. But the well-organized and brave Jewish residents of Persia were led to desperate measures. In the densely Jewish populated region of Mahoza, Mar Zutra II set up an independent Jewish state. From 513 to 520 the independent Jewish state at Mahoza existed as an oasis with Mar Zutra II as its leader. Finally the Persian government could no longer tolerate the perceived threat to their authority and after a prolonged engagement the vastly out-numbered Jewish soldiers were quashed. Mar Zutra and his grandfather the former exilarch were put to death.

More chaos naturally ensued. King Kavad's conversion to Mazdakism outraged the magis. They had not yet lost any of their previous wealth or power and they had Kavad arrested and imprisoned and sentenced him to death. Kavad's wife arranged his escape and the former King fled. The pursuer became the pursued.

Recalling the opportunistic former troublemakers, the Hephthalites, Kavad approached them and reminded them of how awful the magis were as neighbors and offered them a deal. The Hephthalites accepted and helped him return to his power base to the consternation of the magis. The magis could not entirely be stripped of their power as they possessed too much wealth and still had a broad base of supporters. No one really thought that Mazdak had been an improvement.

Khusrow I the son of Kavad was the next king and reigned from 531 to 579. Khusrow (also known as Kisra and Anushirwan) immediately upon ascension to the throne had Mazdak arrested and imprisoned and sentenced him to death. When the Mazdakite leaders gathered to protest Khusrow executed Mazdak and took the opportunity to massacre all the Mazdakites in one fell swoop.

While Khusrow was himself a Zoroastrian, he refused to pursue a policy of anti-Semitic persecution. The Jews were left in peace and the country experienced a long awaited period

of relief and quiet. The talmudic academies at Sura and Pumbeditha reopened. The Jews were afforded autonomy and lived according to the laws of the Torah and were judged in independent courts by talmudic scholars.

Khusrow's benefit for the Jews extended beyond the borders of Persia as well. The oppressive Byzantines were cruelly persecuting the last Jews who remained in Judea. Their attempt to kill or expel all Jews in the Holy Land had failed but exacted a high price. The Byzantine emperor Justinian forbade the Jews living in the Byzantine empire to recite the 'Shema Yisrael' verse in their proscribed prayers. The biblical verse declares the unity of G-d and the ignorant king insisted that it contradicted the Christian axiom of Trinity. He stationed soldiers at synagogues and anyone reciting the verse was arrested. The Holy Land fell under Byzantine domain and many Jews left for Persia.

Khusrow's campaigns against the Byzantines were successful. The economy in Persia was revitalized and the Jews prospered. Khusrow's fair policy of taxation was well known. In his taxation of the Jews he exempted children and the elderly. The taxes were used to protect the Jewish community from danger and they experienced little persecution.

Khusrow, in two wars with the Byzantine emperor Justinian, extended the borders of Persia to the Black Sea and the Caucasus, becoming the most powerful of all Sassanid kings. He restored Zoroastrianism as the state religion. His grandson Khusrow II reigned from 590 to 628. In 602 he began a new war against the Byzantine Empire and by 619 conquered southwestern Asia Minor and Egypt. Between 622 and 627 the Byzantine emperor Heraclius pushed the Persians back within their original borders. The last of the Sassanid kings was Yazdgerd III, during whose reign (632-651) the Arabs invaded Persia, destroyed all resistance, and gradually replaced Zoroastrianism with Islam.

BOOK TWO (643 CE – PRESENT)

Chapter VII

Islam and the Caliphate

During the reign of Yazdgerd III (reigned 632-651) the Arabs invaded Persia and won a decisive victory. They forcibly ended the Zoroastrianism religion. Persia was incorporated into the caliphate. The only nation that had successfully and consistently beaten the Roman legions over the centuries fell like a stone. The Persians had, like so many others, underestimated their opponent.

In 636 the Arab armies attacked and over the next five years conquered all of Persia with the exception of the Caspian coastal plain and the Elbruz mountains. By 651 the Sassanids were no more. Over the next two hundred years Persia remained part of the Arab Islamic empire. The caliphs (leaders of the Islamic empire) ruled first from Medina and then from Damascus and finally Baghdad. Independent kingdoms arose in Persia and from the 9th to 11th centuries the caliphs gradually lost control of Persia. The caliphs in Baghdad had lost their political influence over Persia but were generally accepted as the religious leaders.

By the 10th century the vast majority of Persians had converted to Islam with the exception of the Jews and Christians and a few die hard Zoroastrians. Most of the Moslems were Sunnis. The Ismailis, a Shiite sect established an independent presence in the Rudbar region of the Elburz Mountains from the 11th to the 13th centuries but Persia did not established itself as the bastion of Shiite Islam until the 16th century.

In 642 the Arabs won a decisive victory at Nehavand. The Sassanian dynasty collapsed and most Zoroastrians converted to Islam, with the exception of some mainly wealthy ones who immigrated primarily to India where their descendents continue to reside. The Arabs at this time were led by Omar the Second of Kali who ruled the Islamic faith after the death of Mohammed in 632. Omar's successor was Othman (Uthman) and his successor was Ali. Those who claim Ali to be the true heir of Mohammad became the Shiite faction. When Mohammed died there was a conflict as to who his successor would be. Ali was Mohammed's cousin and brother-in-law. Abu Bakr was Mohammed's father-in-law. He eventually became the next leader. During the 29 years from 632 to 661 four leaders succeeded each other as caliphs. These four leaders of Islam became known as the "Rightly-Guided Caliphs" of the Islam and were viewed in being instrumental in the spread of early Islam. The four were Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman, and Ali ibn Abi Taliban.

Those who see Ali as a mere successor or just another Caliph, are Sunni. Those who view him as the true heir are Shiite. Persia eventually became almost entirely Shiite. Under Omar, Islam spread to Persia, Syria, Egypt, and the Holy Land. Under Ali and his successors the conquest continued to include all of North Africa. Under Omar the policy for treating of non-Islamic monotheists such as Jews and Christians (known as Dhimmis) emerged. Zoroastrians were viewed as idolaters who worship fire. They also were viewed as a political threat being as they maintained positions of power. Thus the surviving Zoroastrians were

given the choice of Islam or death. Most choose the former and other than the refugees in India, the religion was almost entirely eradicated. As for the Jews, the caliph forbade new synagogues to be built but he did not destroy the old ones. The Koran speaks of the Jews and praises them in certain verses and disparages them in others. But one thing is certain. They are only allowed to live if they accept a subservient position.

The Jews accepted their status as second class citizens and the caliphate rewarded them with some measure of autonomy, reminiscent of the times of the great Talmudic academies. In fact they were even allowed to rebuild the ancient academies (Methivtas) at Sura and Pumbeditha and the era of the Gaonim was born. "Gaon" is a term meaning 'majesty' and Gaonim refers to the Heads of the Yeshivas at that time, and later to any of the great Rabbis at that time. Omar's rule produced the following regulations concerning Dhimmas.

The Dhimmis:

May not build new synagogues or churches.

Must show respect to Muslims and stand in their presence.

Must provide shelter to Muslim travelers for a period of three days.

May not interfere with anyone who wishes to convert to Islam.

May not dress or arrange their hair in a manner similar to the Muslims.

Jews must wear yellow clothing and a special cap.

Those worn by Jews must not be of the same color as those worn by Muslims.

They may not choose Muslim names for themselves and their children.

Upon entering the public bath the men must have a special emblem around their necks, so that they may be distinguished from the Muslims.

Non-Muslim women do not have the right to use the Moslem women's public baths.

Jews do not have the right to bear arms.

They do not have the right to hire Muslims.

They may not read the Quran.

They may not ride horses or mules and when riding donkeys may not place saddles on their backs.

They may not live in houses which are higher than those of Muslims'.

They may not bury their dead in cemeteries that are higher than Muslim cemeteries.

They may not hold public office.

When heirs of the deceased cannot establish their claim of inheritance according to Islamic law, the inheritance will become the property of the Islamic government.

In 661, after the Rightly-Guided caliphs, the rein of the Omayyid caliphs began and continued for 91 years. The first was Mu'awiyah. His grandfather was Omayyid from which their name derives. Fourteen Omayyids ruled the Islamic world including Persia. But the animosity between Shiites and Sunnis also began during the Omayyids. The son of Mu'awiyah called Yasid, murdered Hussein who was the second son of Ali. The followers of Ali never forgave them and centuries of conflict and persecution by which ever side was stronger, followed.

During some periods, the state did not strictly enforce the Dhimmi laws. The Jews seeing that the government was more tolerant would for example, built a beautiful new synagogue. A later caliph might come along and decide to enforce the laws and use them as an excuse for persecution or extortion. The synagogue would then be destroyed. This happened countless times.

During the Omayyid caliphs the Islamic empire grew. Hishamibn Abd al-Malik, the 10th

Omayyid caliph attacked the south of France. He was stopped by Charles Martel the grandfather of Charlemagne. Had the Arabs not been stopped at this point they may very well have gone on to fulfill what they consider their religious obligation, the conquest of the entire world. Or at least Europe and the known world at the time.

This Hishamibn Abd al-Malik was tolerant of the Jews in Persia and allowed them to rebuild a previously destroyed synagogue.

Toward the end of the Omayyid era a Syrian Jew called Serene insisted that the laws against the Dhimmis were enforced much more strictly against the Jews than against other minorities. He also said that the Jews were treated more harshly and unfairly and that the situation had become intolerable. However instead of merely complaining about it he decided to do something about it. He led a revolt against the Omayyids and he and his followers were crushed.

The situation was one that fomented rebellion. Firstly, there was much in-fighting amongst the Moslems. This not only led to a perceived weakening of their position, it also 'broke the ice' in terms of the general respect of the populace toward authority. Once the authorities have been challenged it becomes possible or even fashionable to do so. A number of Islamic sects rose against the Omayyids. The popular Persian thinkers, Shafi'i and Hanafi, began to preach their discontent, and they found a willing audience. The Sunni/Shiite conflict was snowballing

The Omayyid caliphate declined and the Abbasids came to power in the middle of the 8th century. At this time the Jewish revolt led by Abu 'Isa Isaac ben Jacob al-Isfahani began. Abu 'Isa was a contemporary of the last Omayyid caliph Marwan ibn Muhammad whose short rein lasted from 744 to 750 CE. The Omayyids were no more and the Abbasids came to power. The Abbasids ceased control in a bloody overthrow and remained in power until 1258. All of these caliphs were descended from Abbas, a member of the tribe of Quraysh of Mecca who was an uncle of the prophet Muhammad. The Abbasids seized the caliphate following the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs, and held it until the Mongols sacked Baghdad and murdered the last caliph of the line.

Abu 'Isa was a dynamic leader and gathered many thousands of followers. His power was great enough for him to set his sights on the recapture of Judea. At the head of a downtrodden nation to whom the thought of freedom from persecution and return to the Holy Land was intoxicating, his victories against the all-powerful Moslems were viewed as miraculous. He declared himself messiah. The Jews had really only left Judea a few hundred years before. Despite the brutal persecutions of the Romans it was their heirs, the Byzantines, who had expelled the remaining survivors of Judea. The community that remained in the Land of Israel was at an all time low. But not non-existent. Still the main Jewish population was in Babylonia and Persia and the thought of a speedy return was still fresh. A few hundred years seemed long enough indeed. Abu 'Isa's popularity grew and grew.

However he was far from universally accepted and most cool-headed Jews knew their wait was not yet over. The Rabbinical authorities and Gaonim warned against him and his teachings. His insistence on making major changes to Jewish custom aroused their suspicion and his resolve to incorporate Islamic custom in Jewish life infuriated them. Abu 'Isa demanded that his followers abstain from drinking wine which in Jewish tradition is a sacrament. He also preached that in the days before messiah, five prophets would come and he included Mohammad and himself as two of the five. Eventually he incorporated new and strange customs in his rehashing of the religion including praying not three times a day (as in Jewish custom) or even five times a day (as in Muslim custom) but seven times a day! And if

that wasn't enough to prove his piety he also insisted upon the abstention from eating any meat, and he threw in the prohibition of divorce for good measure.

Still, he was a dynamic leader and an excellent military organizer and strategist and he trained his followers in the art of war. He gathered an army of 10,000. After a number of remarkable victories his end came at the battle of Rayy, a city south of Tehran. Abu 'Isa died in battle. He died but his influence was far from over. Firstly, the "Isunians" as his followers were called were convinced that he had not died at all but had escaped to a cave. In the middle of the 10th century the author and historian Jacob al-Qirqiani wrote that he had found a number Isunians still alive and faithful to their leader living in Damascus.

The persecutions during Abu 'Isa's time were so cruel, brutal, and relentless that his death did little to quash the hopes of redemption of his followers. At least two of them formed powerful messianic movements of their own.

Messianic movements are born out of severe persecutions. The false messiahs, Bar Kochba, Shabbtai Tzvi, and Jacob Frank, to name a few, all rose to provenance during the severe persecutions that occurred at their time when the down-trodden Jews clung tenaciously to their faith and never lost hope. For what is the messiah but hope? The rare exception is the modern Lubavitch movement in which the hope of messiah was enough in and of itself. Not due to persecutions but out of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual longing. But that is the exception and the exception proves the rule. Or it wouldn't be an exception.

Abu 'Isa had a disciple named Yudghan Hamadani. Many Isunians who had been disappointed with their leader's "disappearance" looked to Yudghan for leadership. Himself a charismatic leader, Yudghan took over the movement and claimed to be a prophet and his followers declared him messiah. He preached asceticism and adhered more closely to Halacha (Jewish law). His movement eventually died out upon his death though many of his followers believed he would return after death.

Another disciple of Abu 'Isa was Mushka of Qom. He led another group of followers of his own. He had quite another outlook altogether from his friend Yudghan, but no less popular. Yet no more successful. He borrowed another concept from Islam, that of 'Holy War'. He gathered a powerful force of survivors of Abu 'Isa's rebellion and recruited many new faces. They not only wished to throw off the yoke of Islamic oppression but forcibly convert others to Judaism, an unprecedented phenomenon. Mushka originally was from the town of Hamadan and moved to Qom where he and his followers began a rebellion and met with initial success thanks to their determination, unequivocal resolve, desperation, and the element of surprise. After his initial successes he was unable to prevail against the next army he faced and he and eleven of his disciples were arrested and executed.

During the era of the Abbasids, the anti-Talmudic movement among the Jews called the Karaites began in Babylon and spread to Persia. The sect was founded by Anan ben David who was greatly influenced by Abu 'Isa. Anan was the nephew of the exilarch Solomon, the grandson of Bustanai. When Solomon died in 761 he left no heir so the position was transferred to Anan. The Gaonim opposed his appointment being as he was a follower of Abu 'Isa and because his views were radical, unorthodox, and iconoclastic. He rejected the validity of the Talmud and the authority of the rabbis. Naturally the rabbis opposed this, being as it would soon plunge the community into chaos. The appointment of exilarch instead went to Anan's brother Hanina. Anan protested vigorously and was imprisoned but later used his influence to gain his freedom. His cause gained much attention and grew and he eventually led a movement which was to challenge the authority of the largely autonomous Jewish community. The movement slowly died out and today a small handful of Karaites still exists today, largely in Israel.

During the reign of the fourth Abbasid caliph, Musa Hadi in the second half of the 8th century, the situation in Europe improved for the Jews who had until then experienced much persecution. His reign coincided with that of Charlemagne. Charlemagne had a good relationship with Jews in his empire. He hired Jewish scholars from Persia to instruct the Jews of his empire in administration in order to promote commerce. He encouraged an international Jewish union in order to promote trade and improve the economy and technology. In 797 he hired an illustrious Jew named Isaac as ambassador to the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid. Isaac returned to Charlemagne bearing lavish gifts from the Persian caliph and Isaac's mission was considered a great success. He was also instrumental in securing the right for pilgrims to visit the Holy land, a right which had hitherto been denied.

Charlemagne was aware of the fact contact between east and west was rare and inconsistent. The exception to this was the Jews who frequently wrote letters and visited their brethren overseas to consult on legal and family matters. Jewish scholars would regularly send messages to each other and conduct Talmudic dialogues despite the time involved. Messengers were often sent back and forth with news of community affairs, development in the sciences, and the latest religious publication. Considering the fact that all works were in manuscript form and all traveling was fraught with danger, a remarkable amount of dialogue took place and Charlemagne was aware of this fact. This was all the more remarkable at a time when East and West were suspicious of each other and any correspondence that did take place was usually done so in an atmosphere of mistrust. Charlemagne knew that the Jews were the exception to the rule in this matter and he used that fact to his advantage.

One famous example of this phenomenon took place in the 13th century when the scholar Maimonides became aware of the depressed conditions of the Jews of Yemen and sent them a series of letters addressing their situation and offering advice, hope, and encouragement. The Yemenite community was profoundly affected by his correspondence and to this day considers his opinion in legal and philosophical matters to be authoritative.

In 786 the king of the Abbasid dynasty was Harun and his was a time of hardship persecution for the Jews. He ascended to the Caliphate in Persia holding this post until 809 CE and after a brief interim was succeeded by his son, Abdullah Ma'mun (reigning 813-832 CE). Both father and son were fanatically anti-Jewish. Harun's treasury secretary Abuyusuf imposed an impossibly burdensome tax on both Christians and Jews. If a Jew owed back taxes at death, he could not be buried until the taxes were paid. In addition to taxes, there were a host of compulsory loans as well as unpaid labor required of the two religious minorities. Jews were forced to abandon agriculture due to high taxes. Huran also very strongly enforced dress codes for the Jews and yellow patches were required. Huran's son, Abdullah Ma'mun, in some areas such as policies with regard to mathematics, astronomy and medicine, was quite enlightened. However he continued his father's oppression of the Jews.

In 849, under the Caliph Al-Mutawakkil, many synagogues and churches in Persia were turned into mosques. At one point in his rule, in order to humiliate them, he ordered Jews to paint a depiction of Satan on the frames of their doors.

The Jews lived tenuously and there was a palpable sense of unease. They were able to weather the storm and prosper despite the feeling of impending doom. In 854 the Caliph himself spread ridiculous rumors that the impeccably modest Jewish women, were attempting to seduce and corrupt good Moslems. He ordered that the women wear bells on their feet so that Moslem men could 'hear them coming and be forewarned'.

Moreover, under his reign the exilarch had much of his powers stripped. This was a tremendous blow to the Jewish community as it severely limited their autonomy. The

exilarch's status of official recognition of office was rescinded. Under Al-Mutawakkil, the Caliph, the Jews were forced to wear a conical hat and servants and beggars who were Jewish had to wear a yellow patch both on their fronts and backs.

In 762 the Abbasids moved their caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad. This move had an enormous impact on Persian and Babylonian Jewry. A huge and wealthy Jewish merchant class emerged and the Jewish neighborhoods of key cities such as Ardabil, Rayy, and Shiraz, greatly expanded. Jews became involved with banking, finance and investment and the caliphs and viziers all employed Jewish advisers and enjoyed their services. From the 10th century onward the caliphate was entirely dependent on its Jewish citizens who financed their courts and armies. But the Jews did not always live in comfort and never had anything which could be considered 'security' as recurrently their assets were seized on some pretext and they were put to death.

In the 10th century Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols and the caliphate split in two and moved to Tunisia and Spain. Up until then the Jews prospered and expanded westward and eastward from Persia. According to Jewish travelers who documented their travels, Jews were living in virtually every city in Persia.

Chapter VIII

The Saffarids and the Samanids (868 – 1038)

The Saffarids and Samanids ruled simultaneously in different parts of Persia. But the Samanids eventually conquered the Saffarids as well.

The Saffarid dynasty lasted from 868 to the early 11th century. They were Shiite. The founder of their dynasty was Ya'qub ibn Layth Saffar (coppersmith) Sistani. He was purely Persian and the Persians were pleased to be ruled by a Persian after centuries of oppressive Arab rule. Ya'qub was a beloved leader and national hero. The residents of his birthplace, Sistan, had been conquered by the Arabs and attempted to free themselves numerous times but had always failed. Ya'qub mustered a force of frustrated Persians and Kharijites and led them to victory first conquering Sind, then later Khorasan, Kerman, Gorgan, Tabaristan, Fars, and Khuzestan. The violent overthrow was followed by a forced conversion of those peoples conquered from pagan practices to Islam. His plans to march on Baghdad never materialized as he died suddenly at the height of his power. He was succeeded by his brother 'Amr ibn Layth.

The Samanids of eastern Persia ruled from 900 to 1010. They had converted to Sunni Islam early in the 9th century. They originated in a village near Samarqand called Saman. They were originally Zoroastrian but converted to Islam. Their dynasty conquered the Tahirids in 872 and later the Saffarids. The Samanids became masters of a huge empire stretching from India to Mesopotamia, under the domain of the caliph of Baghdad. The reign of the Samanids was broken in 999 by the Ilaks-Khans of Turkistan. Montasir, a renowned warrior and the last Samanid ruler, was assassinated in 1005.

The period of the Samanids was marked by political disunity and chaos. Baghdad nominally ruled whatever regions they could while other provinces sought independence. This situation continued until the advent of the Seljuqs. The Tahirids ruled exclusively in the province of Khorasan from 827 to 879.

At the same time the Daylamites governed their own lands in Gilan and Mazandaran from 937 to 1068.

Also at that time the Ghaznavids were independent in Ghazna Afghanistan, Khorasan and Kokhara from 972 to 1203. They began as Samanid governors but won independence from the Samanids. The Samanids had made the mistake of employing Turkish governors who proved to be fiercely nationalistic once they had obtained power of their own. The greatest of the Ghaznavids was Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznī (971-1030), who attacked and conquered Punjab, looting Indian cities of enormous wealth that he used to convert Ghaznī into one of the great centers of Islamic culture.

The fate of the Jews of Persia during this time of conflict and transition is largely unknown. What is known is that the burden of financing conquering armies fell largely on the Jews. They had always paid a 'jezya' or poll tax to the state and supplied the national army. They were in all fairness afforded some measure of national protection. It was certainly in the interests of any long-sighted government to protect their own interests by protecting the creative and productive Jews and thus insuring themselves a consistent and long term source of revenue. A greedy, jealous, short sighted or just plain cruel governor or vizier might kill the goose that laid the golden egg by instigating a bogus accusation and

confiscating a wealthy merchant's property or even supporting or turning a blind eye to a pogrom or massacre. But for the most part the Jews were left to flourish. However during this period of transition after transition the poll tax changed in nature from an assurance of national protection to an exemption from military service in the Islamic army. Those who did not comply lost their properties and their lives.

The conflict between the Samanids and Saffarids was largely religious as Sunni fought against Shiite respectively. This did not bode well for the Jews of Persia who were caught in the middle. Meanwhile in not so far off Babylonia the city was captured by the Buyid dynasty in 945 who were not only Shiites but fanatically zealous, and brutally persecuted not only the Jews but also the Christians and Sunnis.

Yet at the same time as this national conflict raged, the developments in the fields of art and science were of the highest nature. The Samanids and Ghaznavids were especially gifted and the Jews at that time excelled in the arts. This was a time of scientific and literary renaissance in the Islamic world and the Jews contributed greatly. While the European continent was steeped in ignorance and learning was suppressed by the church, the academies of Babylon flourished, promoted education and produced eminent scholars such as Saadiah Gaon, Sherira Gaon, and Sherira's son Hai Gaon.

But the persecutions were more than most could bear and massive migration that had started centuries before to Spain gained momentum and the tides were turning. Persia would never again be the center of world Jewry. Spain would gradually earn that epitaph. But the greatest yeshiva in Spain, that of Cordoba, was started by the Persian scholar Moses ben Hanokh. Moses ben Hanokh was one of the famous 'Four Captives', a group of Jewish scholars who had been captured by pirates and redeemed far from home by Jewish communities around the world, spreading the tradition of Jewish scholarship to the West.

At the same time a new Islamic sect formed called the Isma'ilis who were Shiites. They became extremely powerful in Persia, Egypt, Syria, Arabia, and Tunisia. Their leader, Hasan bin Sabah was a ruthless demagogue who spread fear and terror wherever he went and who brutally disposed of any opposition. He not only assassinated political religious and military rivals, he also created fear amongst the populace and subjugated all conquered peoples. The Jews were persecuted brutally at exactly the time when the Jews of Spain were enjoying unprecedented privileges. It was only natural that a mass immigration should occur and the center of world Jewish population shifted from Persia to Spain.

It was also during this period that the exilarch was stripped of his power and privilege and the great Academies were closed, Sura in 1034 and Pumbeditha in 1038.

Chapter IX

The Seljuqs (1040 – 1216)

The return of Persia to the Persians under the Saffarids and the Samanids proved to be a short lived victory. Their own disunity weakened them and the country came under the domination of yet another foreign power, this time that of the Turks of Ghuzz, aka the Seljuqs. This dynasty was powerful in the entire Middle East during the 11th and 12th centuries. Originally from Central Asia, they were converted to Islam in the 10th century and settled in the Persian province of Khorasan in the early 11th century. In the period between 1040 and 1055, their chief, Togrul Beg, or Togrul I, conquered most of Persia and Babylonia and made himself protector of the caliph of Baghdad, spiritual leader of the Sunni Muslims. Togrul was given the title sultan by the caliph and made war on the Shiite Muslims, who rejected the caliph's authority.

Togrul's successors, Alp Arslan and Malik Shah, further extended into Syria, the Holyland, and Anatolia. Alp Arslan's victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert (1071) awakened the Christian world, and Seljuk's expansion was a major reason for launching the First Crusade (1096). The main enemy of the Seljuqs, however, was the Shiite Fatimid dynasty of Egypt.

The Seljuk's established their capital in Isfahan in Persia. It was rare for a foreign nation to move their capital to a conquered nation's city, but the Seljuqs had started with little more than a collection of semi-nomadic villages. The Seljuk sultans used the Persian language in their administration and were patrons of Persian literature. They founded madrasas (colleges) to train future administrators as per the teachings of Sunnism. After the death of Malik Shah and his vizier, Nizam-al-Mulk, the empire was divided among Malik Shah's sons, and Seljuk power gradually declined. The Mongolian conquest delivered the final death blow to their empire.

The Seljuqs were fervent Sunnis and the support the caliphate in Baghdad gave them strengthened both. It was a symbiotic relationship and the caliphate reached the height of its power. For the majority of Persians who had remained Shiite after the Saffarids, this meant trouble. Trouble in the form of anti-Shiite persecution and an atmosphere of religious persecution always means trouble for the Jews. The Seljuqs were thus entrusted by the caliphate with the sacred task of protecting Sunnism and promoting Islamic orthodoxy to the full extent of their capabilities.

During the Turkish rule the forgotten restrictions of Omar against the Dhimmis which included Jews were revived. All religious tolerance was forgotten and the Jews again were forced to wear a yellow patch whenever they left their homes. Taverns, which were a major source of income for Jews and Christians, were closed. At the same time government officials made use of the Jew's expertise at banking and finance. But since their wealth was always subject to scrutiny and seizure, many left. One Persian merchant, Banu shl al-Tustari moved with his family to Egypt. There he was promoted to a high government office in the court of the Fatimid caliph. He became one of the most influential men in Egypt.

In 1099 the Crusades broke out spelling disaster for the Jews. In Europe massacre followed massacre in Germany and France. When the crusaders arrived in Jerusalem they gathered the entire Jewish community together in a synagogue and burned it to the ground

killing three thousand innocent men, women and children. The Jews of the West were offered Baptism or death by fire, and the Jews of the East were offered Islam or the sword.

The Seljuk Turks found time amidst fighting the Crusaders to persecute and blame the Jews for their troubles.

The Jews of Persia believed that the end of the world was at hand and that it was an auspicious time for the arrival of messiah. There had been false messiahs before, but this time their resolve to be more cautious was overwhelmed by the despair at their plight and their empathy with their European brethren. This time the rumors began to spread from Azerbaijan. There rose to prominence a dynamic leader named Menachem ibn Solomon Alroy, originally from Amadiya, a city near Mosul. He claimed that he was a member of one of the ten lost tribes. He called himself 'David' in order to more closely associate himself with the concept of Messiah, the son of David. David Alroy's movement began around 1121 and he and his father (who claimed to be Elijah the prophet) gathered followers with great success.

David Alroy was a top student at the Baghdad yeshiva and an expert in mysticism as well. He called for prayer and fasting and preparation for the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. The Persian government immediately perceived the threat to their authority and outlawed the movement. The sultan threatened to kill all the Jews if the movement didn't end. Rumors preceded Alroy that he had escaped the king miraculously by stepping out of chains and manacles. He returned to Amadiya. There he led a large following and invited all Jews throughout the world to gather around him and witness how he governed the city. However he had as many enemies as friends. One of his detractors wrote a letter in his name and claimed that he would miraculously carry his followers to Jerusalem. When the event didn't occur immediately a disappointed and emotionally unbalanced person snuck into his quarters in the night and assassinated him in his sleep. Rumors later circulated that his father-in-law was the culprit but he was never punished for the crime. The incident is described in detail by the Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela.

Petahiah ben Joseph ha-Lavan of Regensburg, another Jewish traveler wrote extensively of the Jews in Persia and estimated the Jewish population in Persia at that time as being 1,200,000.

Chapter X

The Mongolian Conquest (1216 – 1381) and the Timurids (1381 – 1502)

The Mongols invaded Persia and conquered it in the 13th century. Mongol rule was disastrous for Persia. They destroyed major cities such as Ray, Tus, Ardabil, Hamadan, Maragheh, Neyshabur, and Qazvin, and they slaughtered almost all of the inhabitants as punishment for resistance. Ray and Tus were never rebuilt.

The Mongolian invasion began with Genghis Khan. He was born in 1167, the son of a local chieftain, Yesugei, who was captured by the Mongol's long time rivals, the Tartars, and killed. Genghis Khan, whose real name was originally Temujin, went to Ong-Khan, a powerful central Mongolian chieftain and asked for help. They teamed up with another chieftain, Jamuka, and the three went on to conquer the Tartars. Genghis Khan's brutality was legendary. His conquest of the Tartars included ordering the slaughter of all people taller than a cart handle. In 1202 Genghis Khan ended his war with the Tartars by exterminating them completely (when the Mongolian invaders entered Europe they were sometimes mistakenly referred to as "Tartars").

The next year he broke up his alliance with the other chieftains and subjugated them to his rule. At that time he changed his title from Temujin to Genghis Khan which means, "universal monarch."

From 1216 to 1221 he expanded the Mongol Empire westward into Central Asia, extending his sphere of influence to parts of Eastern Persia, Afghanistan, and southern Russia.

Mongol forces expanded quickly because defeated people were offered the choice between death and allegiance to the khan.

Genghis Khan had many wives and concubines including his first wife Borte, who gave birth to his four most famous sons: Jochi, Jagatai, Ögödei, and Tolui. Ögödei was designated by Genghis Khan to succeed him, and he ruled Mongolia and northern China. Tolui was the father Kublai Khan, who founded the Yuan dynasty in China; and Hulagu, founded the il-Khanid dynasty of Persia.

Hulagu led a huge army into Persia in 1251 and by 1256 had crushed the heretic Ismaili order of Muslims (also known as the Assassins). In 1257 he demanded Baghdad's surrender from the Abbasid caliph al-Mustasim and when they refused he besieged and sacked the city. Moslems and Jews were mercilessly slaughtered. Some Christian lives were spared, apparently due to the intervention of Hulagu's Christian wife. Baghdad burned for seven days, and 800,000 people, including the caliph and his family, were killed. Hulagu then captured Aleppo (now Halab) and Damascus in Syria and invaded the Holyland. In 1260, he received word his brother Mangu had died in China. Hulagu returned to Persia but his army stayed in the Holyland, where it was defeated by the Egyptians, thus stopping the westward advance of the Mongols.

Hulagu spent much of his later life near Lake Uremia in northwestern Persia. Many of the towns he and his soldiers destroyed were partially rebuilt during his lifetime. At the time

of his death, the Mongol empire stretched from the Amu Darya River in Central Asia almost to the Mediterranean Sea and from the Caucasus to the Indian Ocean. As per Mongol custom, several young women were buried alive with Hulagu, the last recorded example of humans sacrificed for a Mongol funeral. The Mongol empire at its greatest expanse reached from Ukraine in Europe to Korea in East Asia.

The Mongols devastated many regions, especially Khorāsān and Māzandarān, by destroying farms, irrigation networks and cropland. The harsh rule of the Mongols led to a continuing economic decline throughout the 13th century.

In about 1250 the Jewish Persian philosopher Eban Kamuneh wrote a comparative study of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism called “Tanqih Al-Abbes”. While Islamic philosophers were debating his work a mob gathered around Kamuneh’s school, the Montansariyeh in Baghdad seeking to burn him. He was smuggled out of town in a trunk and sent to Hilla, a town in Iraq.

Prior to 1295 Persia’s Mongol rulers, followers of shamanism or Buddhism, did not accept Islam. Their hostility toward Islam brought about the transformation of Sufi brotherhoods into religious paramilitary organizations. Although originally Sunni, many of these brotherhoods became increasingly tolerant of Shiite ideas, even blending these ideas into their own belief systems. In 1295 the new Mongol ruler Ghazan, himself a convert to Islam, restored Islam as the state religion, further bolstering the growth of new Islamic ideas.

Ghazan improved conditions and reversed Persia’s economic decline. In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, cities that had escaped the destruction of the Mongol invasions, such as Esfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz, emerged as new centers of cultural development. But trouble quickly followed and between 1381 and 1405 invasions by the Turkic conqueror Tamerlane destroyed more of Iran’s cities and uprooted most of the progress Ghazan had achieved.

It is remarkable that the Jewish community in Persia survived the Mongolian era. The Jews witnesses and experienced relentless violence and were totally unprotected despite the high positions many had achieved before.

The story of Sa’d al-Dawlah occurred during the Mongolian Il-Khanid dynasty. During the reign of King Arghun Khan (1284-1291) the court physician gained the king’s confidence through his great wisdom, skill, social graces, and physical beauty. This was Sa’d al-Dawlah ibn Hibbatallah from the small mountain town of Abhar. His Hebrew name was Mordecai and he is sometimes referred to as Mordecai of Abhar. In 1288 King Arghun summoned him to the Persian capital Tabriz, after gained renown in Mosul and Baghdad. In Baghdad he had learned much about administration and politics and became knowledgeable in many disciplines including astronomy, horticulture, arithmetic, and fluency in Arabic, Turkish, and Mongolian, besides his native Persian and Hebrew. His ability to administer medicine and organize the royal household led to his swift promotion as state administrator. The king felt himself lucky to have such a competent, trustworthy, hardworking and loyal citizen in his government and he gave him more and more responsibility and Sa’d rose to the challenge. The king at last felt no one else could run the country with as great success and promoted him to vizier, not unlike biblical Josef. Sa’d knew many people in the court were jealous of his position and would stop at nothing to remove him. His many enemies were thwarted when he was promoted to vizier and he removed those from power whom he knew were hatching plots.

He replaced them with competent and trustworthy people regardless of ethnicity including Persians, Mongols, Christians and Jews. Many of the Jews he appointed were his

highly educated and erudite family members, though this caused more jealousy.

His brother Fakhr al-Dawlah was made governor of Baghdad. His brother Amin al-Dawlah was made governor of Mosul and administrator of Diyarbekir and Diyarrahi. His cousin Shams al-Dawlah was made governor of Fars.

Even his Moslem enemies could not help but admit that the country was more expertly organized than it had ever been and that the royal treasury had been replenished for the first time in centuries. But their insane and violent jealousy was simmering all the while and just waiting for the moment when it could be allowed to lash out.

Sa'd had a secure position but only as secure as the king's health. When the king fell ill his rabid detractors spread rumors that he had poisoned the king. His supporters were many but when the king's health further deteriorated Sa'd and his supporters were all arrested during a royal reception in 1291, when they were gathered together, and many were put to death immediately. As his supporters were all killed he lost, one by one, his power base and the king was unaware and unable to respond. The next day Sa'd al-Dawlah and his brothers and family were all killed as well.

His employer, King Arghun Khan died six days later. Following the Vizier's execution there were massacres of Jews along with looting of Jewish property throughout Arghun's realm, including Baghdad. Sporadic massacres took place for nearly the following fifteen years. King Arghun, himself had been born a Buddhist but was sympathetic toward Christians. The same year Ghazan Khan (reigned 1291-1304) ascended to power over Persia and Babylonia. He ordered the destruction of all Jewish and Zoroastrian houses of worship. In Tabriz all Buddhist idols were destroyed as well.

The story of Sa'd al-Dawlah is soon followed by the tragically similar story of Rashid al-Din. Ghazan Khan's vizier, Rashid al-Din was a Jew who had converted to Islam in 1277. Rashid al-Din tried to quit his post under Ghazan Khan's successor, his brother, Sultan Mohammad Khobadandeh Oljaytu (reigned 1304-1316) but was not allowed to do so. When this Sultan was ill and on his death-bed, Rashid al-Din was accused by his enemies at the court (who were jealous of a Jew being in a high position) of poisoning the king. His sixteen-year-old son was executed before his very eyes. Rashid al-Din was then sliced in two, and then decapitated and his head was carried about town with a sign saying "the head of an infidel Jew".

In 1381 the era of the Timurids began in Persia. The Timurids dynasty was led and begun by the infamous warrior emperor Tamerlane. Tamerlane was the Napoleon of Middle Asia, the main difference being that Tamerlane never suffered crushing defeats. He did however win victory after victory and eventually ruled over a vast area of land from India to the Mediterranean sea and included southern Russia, Central Asia and Turkey.

Tamerlane (1336-1405), was a Turkic ruler (of and around Turkistan and Turkmenistan, not to be confused with Turkish, of and around Turkey) born near the important city of Samarqand, (near Bukhara) in what is now Uzbekistan. Tamerlane was a member of the tribe of Barlas, Mongols who had accompanied 13th-century Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan and his sons on conquests of Central Asia. The tribe of Barlas settled in Transoxiana (present-day Uzbekistan) after these conquests and adopted the local Turkic tongue, and eventually converted to Islam.

As the Mongol empire broke apart Tamerlane seized power from the weaker (or less vicious) leaders of Transoxiana and declared himself the new emperor of the Mongol empire which he single handedly took credit for restoring before he even restored it. But he made good on his claims and took advantage the confusion and lack of leadership in the surrounding areas. He then published an entirely fictitious family genealogy in which he

‘proved’ that he was a direct descendent of Genghis Khan. In one of his early raids he was badly injured by sword and ax wounds and made lame. He could never again lift his right arm nor bend his right knee, and he was thus tarred with the epithet ‘the lame’ (Timor- his given name, and Lane meaning ‘the lame one’).

After establishing a power base around Samarqand he proceeded to take his armies on vast marches to both plunder and prevent the rise of any rival power.

In 1381 he entered Persia and in the following years conducted what he called his “three-year,” “five-year,” and “seven-year” invasions there to ensure its subservience. He established another power base using the rich resources of Persia and extended his operations into Armenia and Georgia in 1392, India between 1398 and 1399, and Syria and Turkey between 1400 and 1402. In his last campaign he captured Aleppo and Damascus and, in 1402, defeated and took prisoner Bayazid I, sultan of the Ottoman Empire, in Anatolia. At this, the height of his power, he loosely controlled an empire stretching from India to the Mediterranean Sea.

Tamerlane’s main purpose was to loot and strike terror and he ordered atrocities that are still remembered to this day in those regions. At Isfahan, which had rebelled after surrendering in 1387, he massacred 70,000 people and constructed towers of human skulls. In 1398 at Delhi, in India, he had 100,000 Hindus slaughtered and razed the city.

After preparing an enormous invasion of China, Tamerlane died in 1405 near Otrar, in present-day Kazakhstan. His empire began to break apart immediately upon his death. He was buried in Samarqand, and his mausoleum, the Gur-e Amir, is one of Samarqand’s greatest and most famous architectural monuments. Tamerlane built many spectacular palaces and mosques, especially in Samarqand. Although he was notorious for his atrocities and cruelty in war he was also a patron of scholarship and the arts. His dynasty, the Timurids, which ruled Transoxiana and Persia until the early 16th century, was noted for its patronage of Persian and Turkish poetry, literature, architecture, and music.

When Tamerlane entered Persia several clans ruled the country and there was no strong central government. It was for this reason that his victories came so easily. Persia, which had once been the only force that could repulse and prevail against the mighty Roman empire, now, thanks to disunity and stubborn and petty rivalries, fell like a house of cards to a ruthless foreigner.

The Timurid era began in Persia with the murder and mass killings of Jews by all other peoples, conqueror and native alike. Moslem Tamerlane was intolerant of other religions and Jewish blood flowed like water. They were slaughtered in Georgia, Kabul, Nishapur, Gurganj, Gilan, Qandahar, and Isfahan. In Isfahan on Yom Kippur of 1387, legend has it that Tamerlane rode through the Jewish Ghetto on his horse. As he was passing the Harun Belayat, a large synagogue in central Isfahan, the congregation was reciting a loud prayer and his horse was frightened and reared. Tamerlane was thrown and fell and was injured. He was furious and ordered a massacre and thousands of Jews were killed. Legend or no, what is known is that the Jewish population of Persia was drastically reduced during the Timurids. The number of Jews who were killed, fled, or converted during this time was approximately 350,000. Tamerlane continued in 1393 to Khorranabad, Shushtar, and Shiraz and gathered the surviving Jews there and killed them. In Baghdad, the large Jewish population was decimated. Each one of Tamerlane’s soldiers presented their leader proudly with the gift of a severed human head which was used as a brick in a tower or wall.

Chapter XI

The Safavids (1502 – 1722)

With the death of the bloodthirsty Tamerlane, Persia had time to breathe a sigh of relief and rebuild its tattered country. In the 1400's several competing families and tribes, mostly of Turkic origins, ruled over various parts of Persia. The strongest were the Safavids, who were at the head of a militant Sufi order founded in the northwest by Shaikh Safi of Ardabil in the early 14th century. One of his descendents was Ismail I, who began his conquests with Tabriz and then continued with the remainder of Persia. In 1501 he declared himself shah (king), a title commonly used by Persian rulers before the Arab conquest. This marked the beginning of the Safavid dynasty and was the first time since the 7th century that all of Persia was unified as an independent state. Ismail was a Jafari Shiite Moslem. He established that as the state religion, and began to convert the largely Sunni population. Soon all of Persia was Shiite and the vast majority of Persians have remained so to this day.

The rule of the Safavids lasted for about 220 years and shaped Persia into what carried it to modern times. The religious wars of the Safavids against the Sunnis in general and the Ottoman Turks in particular joined a once proud people and returned them to their former unity of purpose, the by-product of which was a sense of nationalism and patriotism. This at the expense of justice for anything that stood in their way.

At the same time Persian artists and artisans flourished during this era and the majestic buildings and fine carpets left behind from these centuries are amongst the finest in the world. That is to say, surely such creativity had been in evidence prior to the Safavids, but little survived the turmoil. The Safavids gave the country a sense of nationalism. The work of their hands could survive by virtue of its being left unmolested by foreign conquerors and by relative internal stability.

Ismail fought a religious war against the Ottomans—Sunni Muslims who controlled a vast empire to the west. War between the Safavids and the Ottoman Empire continued for over 150 years. The ruler of each country in each generation accused the other of being a heretic, a crime punishable by death and justifying any aggression. The religious conflict was also a war over territory. Which conflict was the “main” conflict, religion or land, is a source of debate. Perhaps both were necessary for the situation to deteriorate to bloody conflict between two streams of Islam. Whatever the reason, the conflict raged for centuries and helped shape Persia's identity as a Shiite country. The territory over which they fought was the Zagros Mountains region and the fertile plains of present-day Iraq. In 1509 Ismail won control of the Iraqi territory, but it fell to the Ottomans when the legendary Ottoman ruler Süleyman I conquered Baghdad in 1534.

The Safavids recaptured Baghdad in 1623 under Abbas I and held it for 15 years before the Ottomans regained it in 1638. Abbas moved the Safavid capital from Tabriz, which was too close to the Ottoman border, to the city of Isfahan. He built the city up with many palaces, schools and bridges and most of these well preserved and magnificent structures still stand. Abbas also opened relations Europe whose markets acquired a taste for Persian carpets and silk.

The reign of Abbas II ended in 1666 and the empire soon declined. Later shahs heavily taxed the country and became corrupt in the extreme, living lavish lifestyles and encouraging

corruption amongst government officials while discouraging national improvement and investment.

The rule of shah Sultan Hosain lasted from 1694 to 1722 and witnessed the attempt at forced conversion of the Persian Afghans from Sunni to Shiite. The Afghans rebelled under Mir Mahmud. He proved a formidable foe and his army captured the Safavid capital of Isfahan. He besieged the city and captured it and executed the shah in 1722 ending the Safavid dynasty in Persia forever.

The Sunni-Shiite conflict was a disaster for the Jews, cultivating an atmosphere of religious intolerance. The Jews had been in the country much longer than any of the other numerous minorities, yet they became the target of widespread persecutions. They were forced to wear humiliating hats, books were burned, shops were looted in every city, and many Jews were forced to choose between conversion to Shiite Islam or death. Many chose the latter and those that did convert were insincere, a situation which infuriated the Moslems. Ordinarily when a conquered people were forced to adopt Islam, they did so with little protest. The pagans and Zoroastrians found that they actually preferred Islam. The Jews were never sincere converts, finding the entire concept of forced conversion to be anathema. Religion in Jewish thought is a deeply personal thing, each individual finding his own level of religiosity and respecting that of others. The prime example of conversion to another religion is embodied in the person of biblical heroine Ruth, who converts from paganism to Judaism of her own free will. Her mother-in-law Naomi had set such a fine example, that Ruth had converted gladly. What kind of religion needed to force others to convert? Only an insecure one. Or perhaps a brutal one. Either way, those Jews who loved their religion but were unable to bear the burden of watching their families sliced to ribbons or burned, converted out of fear, not conviction. At the soonest opportunity they converted back or fled the country. Those that remained often kept Jewish identity and customs in secret as their many brethren had done in Spain. Either way the phenomenon of the 'crypto-Jew' was certainly not unique to Spain and Europe.

Synagogues were destroyed and the Jews were gathered and forced to declare their fidelity in public. Besides the persecutions in Persia, the Safavid government forced the community to cut off all ties to the Baghdad community which was a terrible blow. The Jewish community of each country has always maintained contact with other communities especially with the most prominent. The loss of contact with Baghdad and later with the rest of the outside world isolated the Persian Jews, cutting them off from family and friends and from the leadership and encouragement of their brethren. Lost was any hope of rescue, assistance or moral support, gone when they needed it most. The loss of contact with the exilarch in Baghdad also meant the loss of official recognition of the Chief Rabbi of Persia in Isfahan who was forced to leave his post. The loss of central authority or leadership was traumatic and unheard of. Never had that prominent office been tampered with.

The Safavids were fiendishly clever in their ability to split and weaken the powerful Jewish community, and the infamous 'inheritance laws' which lasted to the time of the Qajars was instituted at this time. In this, if a member of an extended family converted to Islam, any inheritance of that family went to him. This cruel and unfair law did its part to split families and financially ruin businesses and was instrumental in many people leaving the place where they had made their home for centuries and moving to neighboring countries.

During this time the pilgrimages to Jewish holy sites continued and even grew in popularity as the survivors sought solace. Visits to the tombs of Esther and Mordecai in Hamadan, the tomb of Daniel in Susa, and the tomb of Sarat bat Asher in Pir Bakran (which can all be visited today) saw an increase in daily visitors.

The last contact with outside Jewish communities was ironically maintained by the community receiving visitors from the Holyland. Throughout the centuries the Jews that had lived in Israel in spite of all manner of difficulties, always looked to their Persian brethren for financial support and gave a sense of moral support and unity of purpose in return. The dream of returning to Zion in concrete and practical terms has never been forgotten and the Jews of the Diaspora always showed support for the brave and stoic community who maintained residence in Jerusalem, Tiberius, Hebron, Tzefat, and other places in the Holyland. Now, during the climax of anti-Semitism in Persia during the Safavid rule, visitors from Jerusalem were shocked to see the Persians at an all time low. Yet despite of this they still received generous donations to whatever extent the Jews of Persia were able. But the community was much protracted and emigration began to Afghanistan, Turkistan, India, Bukhara, the Caucasus, Egypt, Israel, and other countries.

When Ismail took charge of Persia he imposed Shiitism over as much of the country as was possible during his nearly twenty-five years reign. His son, Thmasp, became shah at age 10. Under his rule many Europeans began to arrive in Persia, including spies masquerading as merchants, artists, and teachers. Their goal was to incite the Shiite rulers of Persia to fight the Ottomans, thereby helping to take Ottoman pressure off of Christian Europe. Many of the foreigners brought hatred of the Jews with them. In particular the Spanish Ambassador, Del Garcia, under the rule of Shah Abbes the First, was a rabid Jew hater. Under the Safavid Dynasty, Shiite clerics were given a great deal of power. This power was used mainly against the Sunnis Moslems. Many Sunnis Moslems were massacred. At the earlier period of the dynasty, Christians and Jews were left alone. For example, the notorious and economically successful Shah Abbes I allowed Jews to build a new colony on the Caspian Sea in gratitude for their military assistance. Shah Abbes I was also something of a student of the Jewish Pentateuch. But later he grew despotic against the Jews finally went totally insane and put his own eldest son to death and gauged out the eyes of two of his other sons.

Under Shah Abbes I the capital of Persia was moved from Qazvin to Isfahan. The treatment of Jews worsened. New unfair laws were enacted. For example, if a Moslem killed a Jew he would be fined a negligible sum even if the perpetrator was a dangerous criminal. A debate ensued as to whether or not this contradicted Islamic law and Moslem scholars brought proof to each side of the argument from the Koran coincidentally supporting his own position.

Seeking relief in mysticism, many Jews turned to the Kabala, which in turn was banned by Abbes I. The mystical work, the Zohar, which was attributed to the talmudic sage, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, and which was written in Aramaic and is popular even today, was distributed in secret. Many risked their lives to study and teach its cryptic messages.

Abbes I decided to give the Jews a choice. He realized they were too stubborn to be forced to convert and that they were too strong in their conviction. He knew the Five Books of Moses and its declaration that the Jews were a stiff-necked people and he realized it was true. His harsh laws and measures were becoming a burden and distasteful and it was bad publicity in light of the high number of foreign guests in the country who criticized the conditions even though they were no worse than the conditions for Jews in their own lands. Abbes also knew of the Jews hope and dream that a Messiah would deliver them from their exile. Abbes told the Jews that he would ease their sufferings if they would agree to wait seventy years and no more for the Jewish messiah. If after seventy years their messiah hadn't yet arrived they would all convert to Islam. Realizing that their lot was unbearable as things stood, and that in seventy years Abbes I would be gone, and hoping that the next ruler would be more tolerant, they agreed. Their period of grace coincided with the advent of the

false messiah, Shabbtai Tzvi. But before that Persia saw the death of Abbes I and the ascension to the throne of Shah Safi (reigned 629-642). A hypocritical Shiite who loved wine as well as torture, he killed or blinded subordinates and even women of his harem.

Finally, in 1642 Shah Abbes II began his twenty-five year reign at the age of ten. He was also a heavy drinker. Under Abbes II the Jews were compelled to convert to Islam under their seventy year prior agreement. The hope that the coincidental shah would be more tolerant was dashed when it quickly became clear that Abbes II was even less tolerant than his predecessors. This situation took a radical turn when Shabbtai Tzvi, claiming to be the Jewish messiah gained international notoriety.

Shabbtai Tzvi, a child prodigy and talmudic scholar, was born in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) on the 9th of Av 1626.

He studied Kabala and the Talmud and was an ordained "Hakam", (a Sephardic rabbinical title). He began to claim title of Jewish redeemer by 1648 but was largely rejected by the Jewish community thanks to his strange behavior, emotional illness, and violations of religious law. Still, he gathered some followers which drew attention and finally he was expelled from Smyrna around 1651. For the next few years he gathered followers through Greece, Thrace, Israel, and Egypt.

His popularity must be examined in light of recent events which included the massacre of numerous Jewish communities in Russia by Chemelnicki and his Cossack hoards. Over 200,000 Jews were mercilessly slaughtered and the brutal Cossacks committed all manner of atrocities upon men, women, and children. The few remaining survivors were sold into slavery. The Cossacks consider Chemelnicki a great hero to this day and a statue of him stands in the city park in Kiev. The Chemelnicki massacres profoundly affected the Jewish community worldwide.

A dynamic leader and a depressed community is a dangerous formula and Shabbtai Tzvi's fame grew, and talk of his miraculous powers spread like wildfire. In 1665 he sought a cure for his poor mental health from the charismatic Nathan of Gaza, who convinced him that he was indeed the Messiah. Shabbtai Tzvi thereupon formally declared himself King and gained an even stronger following world wide, though the community was widely split on the issue, many denouncing him as a phony.

Shabbtai Tzvi lead a huge group of followers from all over the world to the Holyland to declare himself king in 1666. The Ottoman Turks who had dominion over Jerusalem at that time slapped him in chains and threatened to cut off his head if he didn't convert to Islam. He converted and was allowed to leave Jerusalem. The vast majority of his followers returned home despondent but a few die-hards stuck it out with him in despite his betrayal.

He died in exile in Ulcinj, Montenegro.

His conversion thus dashed the hopes of countless Jews world wide. In the forefront of those Jews were the Persians who had hoped that they would be absolved from the promise their fathers had been forced to agree to while under duress. Abba II demanded they keep their word and no argument or pleading could convince him otherwise. The Jews were forced to convert.

Under the vizier of Abbes II, Mohammed Beg, a fanatical Jew hater, the derogatory term "jahud" began to be used in Persia. Many Jews fled Persia for Baghdad, which was ruled by the tolerant Ottomans. It was rumored that the king of Persia ordered every Jew's eyes to be gauged out. While this was probably an exaggeration, many Jews who didn't flee pretended to be Moslems. This charade lasted at least seven years. In some cities, such as Kerman and Yazd, Jews were allowed to remain Jews possibly due to bribes.

In 1658 under Abbes II the Jews were ordered to depart the city of Isfahan and move to

a suburb. Any Jew found in the city the next day was to be incarcerated. Whoever resisted the expulsion was assaulted. Jews of all ages were driven homeless from the city. In addition, those who refused to convert were tortured in a fortress outside of Isfahan. Finally one of a group of Jews in the castle agreed to convert. He was congratulated and given a ring. Following this a learned Rabbi of the city was threatened with being drawn and quartered if he was unwilling to convert. He was told he would be disemboweled and his corpse would be tied to a camel and taken around the city while his family would be tortured. In the end he agreed to convert. Slowly the rest of the group in the castle followed him, after being told that their Rabbi had converted. In this way, one hundred and fifty Jews were converted to Islam in a period of four weeks.

A Moslem cleric was given the job of teaching them Islamic law. However all of them continued to be Jews secretly. Non-kosher meat that was bought publicly was taken home and buried in the back yard. When attending mosques, they silently recited prayers in Hebrew.

Following this event in Isfahan, Jews in the cities of Hamada, Shiraz, Lars, Qazvin, Ardabil, Tabriz, Qom, and Kashan faced the same fate as those of Isfahan. In other cities, like Kerman and Yazd, they were able to avoid forced conversion by bribing Moslem clergy or by running away.

In Farahabad, Jews claimed that the local prince did not have the permission from the king to force them to convert. The prince, Mirza Sadiq tortured them nonetheless, however they refused to convert. Eventually the prince did receive written permission from the king to convert them. Still the Jews refused to convert. Some were suspended upside down and beaten. The homes of Jews in Farahabad were invaded and both boys and women were raped. A number of the Jews from Farahabad were tortured on a daily basis. This continued for four months. Finally, the prince gave up and said they were free to go as long as they wore a patch identifying them as Jews.

Slowly the campaign to convert Jews throughout Persia began to wind down. At one point, Abbas II issued his famous Proclamation of Emancipation for the Jews to remain Jews. The proclamation gave the community new hope but they were soon disillusioned and disappointed.

A number of local chieftains immediately used it as a means of extorting wealth from Jews in Kashan and Isfahan by threatening to tell the king to rescind it.

A number of those who had pretended to being Moslem were able to return to Judaism while others never got the chance. Moreover, a number of Jews who, during this period, were given the chance to return to Judaism were so pessimistic about the future of Judaism because of Shabbtai Tzvi's conversion to Islam that they procrastinated. The conversion to Islam took place before the Ottoman Sultan in 1667, seven years after Shah Abbas' 1660 Proclamation of the Emancipation of the Jews of Persia. Moreover, the Grand Vizier of Persia, Mohammad Beg P'timad Al- Dawlah did everything in his power to prevent the Jews from returning to the faith of their heritage. Those Jews who had converted to Islam who showed indications of a tendency to return to Judaism were ordered tortured under the vizier. Other officials, aside from the vizier, actually kept the Proclamation of Emancipation secret from potential returnees. In the end during this period, Shah Abbas II's Proclamation of Emancipation, was little more than an empty phrase.

Many Jews fled for the Ottoman Empire and despite Abbas II's Proclamation, under him the Sunni Law of Omar, governing the relationship between Moslems and non-Moslem monotheists, such as Jews and also of Christians, was vigorously enforced even though Abbas II was a Shi'ite. Moreover, a number of rules that had been forgotten were reinstated.

These rules include the following:

- Jews may not have shops in a bazaar;
- A Jew's testimony is not admissible in court;
- In the event of rain a Jew can not seek shelter in an alley;
- Jewish women are to keep their faces uncovered in public;
- Jewish men are to wear drab clothing of the color blue;
- A convert to Moslem inherits the property of all of his relatives to a distant degree;
- Shoes worn by Jews are not to match;
- Jews must wear a red patch;
- They can not raise their voice to a Moslem nor are they allowed to pass a Moslem in a public thoroughfare;
- In the event that a Jew is cursed by a Moslem the Jew is not allowed to respond to him;
- Homes are to be simple and the interior of the rooms of Jewish homes are not to be painted white;
- They are to be lower than those of a Moslem home and doors are to be single in front, not double;
- The beards of Jews can not be trimmed with scissors;
- In the event of drinking wine it must be done in the privacy of a Jewish home otherwise a Jew faces capital punishment for drinking wine in public;
- Jewish weddings can not be held publicly;
- Fresh fruits are off limit as are white donkeys;
- If a Jew rides a donkey he must keep his feet together;
- Jews are to walk along the sides of thoroughfares and not down the middle; Prayers are to be said silently;
- Men must shave their heads;
- Upon entering a store owned by Moslems, particularly a bakery, nothing can be touched;
- If a Moslem says a Jew has insulted Allah, the Jew has a choice of forced conversion or death;
- Jews are restricted to a given neighborhood in a city;
- A belt used by Jews must be a rope rather than a customary shawl;
- There is a curfew on Jews after sunset;
- Turbans are off limits;
- Stores owned by Jews must be at least one step below those of shops owned by Moslems;
- A simple rag must be hung over the door of Jewish homes and Jews are to keep their heads lowered when speaking to Moslems.

In 1659 according to the chronicler, Baba'ivn Lotf, Abbas II arrived in Hasan that year after many Jews had converted forcibly to Islam there. The converts were brought before the King and in the crowd was a young boy who the King noticed and found attractive. According to Baba 'ivn Lotf, he could not find the boy immediately so he had all the converted boys brought together. But the parents hid the boy. Officials of the King called for the boy to be brought forward and threatened all the converts with punishment. Finally officials found the boy. The mother and father of the boy beat their heads and chests and begged the officials to leave the family alone but he was brought before the King.

According to the chronicler, "They brought that boy before the King; he was beautiful like the moon in the King's eyes. He said, "this is my lost moon. In what constellation did he

dwel?" The child was taken from his parents and never returned.

During the reign of the Safavid shah Sultan Hosain, three Jews by the names of Eliar, Kuchek, and Qalandar were playing musical instruments in a public park in the city of Kashan and a number of passersby stopped to listen to the sweet sounds. Suddenly, a group of fanatics came to arrest them. Qalandar realized the situation posed great danger so he refused to go with them and managed to escape. The others refused to flee, believing that their crime was not so serious as to warrant punishment. They were brought before a local court and sentenced to death. The court handed them over to the mob that brought them to the Fin gate and hacked them to pieces. This triggered a pogrom in Kashan and Isfahan and the Jews saw their possessions plundered and much blood was spilt. Finally the governor of Isfahan declared that playing musical instruments was not punishable by death but rather should be punished by charging the entire Jewish community a large fine for the 'satanic act'. When the government officials went to Kashan to collect their loot, the Jews were gathered in the Synagogue. They were attacked and dragged into the local square where they were burnt to death. The survivors of the slaughter were thrown into prison or sold into slavery.

Chapter XIII

The Afsharids and the Zands (1722 – 1794)

The rule of the last Safavid shah, Sultan Hosain lasted from 1694 to 1722. He made the mistake of attempting to convert the Sunni Afghans to Shiitism. While most of the Shiites of Persia had originally adopted their religion under duress, the Afghans were more tenacious. The Afghans rebelled under Mir Mahmud. He proved to be an indomitable spirit and powerful foe and his army captured the Safavid capital of Isfahan. He besieged the city and captured it and executed the shah in 1722 ending the Safavid dynasty in Persia forever.

Persia was plunged into seventy years of chaos and the Ottomans, Afghans, and Russians saw an opportunity and attacked and captured boarder towns. The military commander Nadir Shah, in Mashhad, gathered an army and freed Persia from foreign invaders in the 1730s and soon extended his rule eastward. He was assassinated in 1747 and again the county was plunged into chaos.

But Nadir Shah is remembered in Persian history as a brilliant strategist and his military victories are lauded to this day. His ability to drive out the Ottomans, Russians, and Afghans was inspirational. But as his success grew so did his ambition and grandiosity. He decided to change the religion of the entire nation back to Sunni Islam. By now the vast majority were Shiite and the previous era of the Safavids was romanticized. His attempt to discredit them and undermine all their accomplishments backfired. His enemies increased in number and audacity and many rejoiced when he was assassinated. But their elation was short lived as the country now had utterly no order and the power-grabs resulted in spilt blood.

The successful attempt to restore control and gain power came in the person of Karim Khan Zand of Shiraz. He ruled Fars and western Persia while his rival Muhammad Hasan Khan Qajar ruled Isfahan and Mazandaran. In 1750 Zand and Qajar met in battle and Zand was victorious. He ruled Persia until 1779 in what is known as the short-lived Zand dynasty era.

The fanatic anti-Semitism of the Safavid era was so intense that it carried over to the Afsharids and the Zands. The illiterate populace was so engrained with the notion of the 'unclean' followers of Moses that no amount of persuasion could convince them otherwise and the mullahs and clerics found it convenient to use this weapon against them. Karim Khan Zand had been a simple soldier in Nadir's army who rose through the ranks to become the most powerful man in the country. His opinion of Jews never changed from when he was an ignorant foot-soldier.

The defeat in battle and the change in power from the Afghan Ashraf to the Persian Shiite Nadir did not help the Jews' situation. The Afghan had persecuted both the Jews and Shiites ruthlessly. Hundreds of people were hanged in public venues including the town square of Isfahan. The Shiites went from being the persecutors to persecuted. But the Jew's situation sadly remained constant. When Nadir at last drove the Afghans out the Jews' situation went from bad to worse. The already impoverished community was presented with a demand to provide an exorbitant sum of money to finance Nadir's campaigns and rebuild the country. The leader of the community, Davud the Nasi attempted to collect as much money as possible. The currency of the previous Afghan ruler became worthless and tribute had to be paid in jewelry. The impoverished Jews were barely able to come up with a handful

of tin and copper cups and boxes. Nadir's furious men attacked Jewish homes and ransacked each one in turn. Finding nothing of value they proceeded to main and kill the inhabitants and destroy their houses. The Davud the Nasi decided that to convert to Islam was the only way to save the community. Many of the community elders refused and a debate ensued which bought them a little time. Meanwhile Davud asked his friend, an Islamic official Sayyid Abu al-Qasim to intercede on his behalf. Sayyid greatly respected the Nasi's wisdom and integrity and admitted that no one should be compelled to abandon his faith by force. He interceded with Nadir and the Nasi and all those who had converted under duress were eventually permitted to practice whichever faith they preferred. All those who had converted now converted back. The Jews continued to pay the pole tax which ostensibly was meant to pay for their protection. But their sigh of relief was short-lived. They had again miraculously survived yet another oppressive dynasty. But the worst was yet to come. While the rest of the world was finally seeing an end to unbridled cruelty by despots and the lessons of the French and American revolutions were ushering the world into a modern age, the Persians were sharpening their swords and readying for more violence.

Chapter XIV

The Qajars (1794 – 1904)

Whatever progress was made toward the Persian people's economic and social advancement by Karim Khan Zand was undone by Agha Muhammad and the Qajars. The Qajars were a Turkic tribe (not to be confused with Turkish) that originally came from Azerbaijan, which then was part of Persia. While winning victory after victory on the battlefield, Agha Muhammad's soldiers were rewarded by being given any number of women and children as slaves while he amassed the more subtle booty of gold. His lust for blood and gold was insatiable as a result of having been denied the gratification of sexual satisfaction. During one of his early and unsuccessful campaigns, his arch-enemy Adil Shah Afshar had captured and imprisoned him. He pleaded for his life and Shah Afshar granted it to him at a price. Agha Muhammad was castrated and thus had to satisfy his cruel desires by means other than those of sexual gratification. When he seized the city of Kerman, marking his final victory over the Zands, he ordered 20,000 pairs of eyes be gouged out from the surviving populace and presented to him. He also ordered the eyes of the remaining Zand family members be gouged out before they were killed. When he proclaimed himself king in Teheran in 1796, he had the remains of Karim Khan Zand removed from its grave and buried in front of his new palace so he could tread upon his bones everyday. He then took Nadir's grandson, Shahrokh, prisoner despite his being elderly and blind. He tortured the man by pouring molten lead on his head and demanded that he hand over whatever jewelry and gold he had inherited from the Afsharid's.

Agha Mohammad Khan's victories began in 1794 when he defeated numerous rivals and brought all of Persia into his domain, beginning the Qajar dynasty. The Turkic Qajars left their ancestral homeland in Azerbaijan. Agha Mohammad moved his capital to Tehran which has remained the capital of Persia ever since. Tehran was a small village near the ruins of the ancient city of Ray near present day Shahr-e Rey. His successor was his nephew (having fathered no heir), Fath Ali Shah, who ruled from 1797 to 1834. Under Fath Ali Shah, Persia fought a growing enemy, Russia, which was expanding from the north into the Caucasus Mountains, an area historically part of the Persian empire. Persia under the Qajars was defeated miserably during its conflicts with Russia. In the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, Persia was forced to recognize Russia's annexation of Georgia and ceded to Russia most of the north Caucasus region. Russia's power was growing and a later war with Russia in the 1820s was also an utter defeat. The impotent Qajars were forced to sign the Treaty of Turkmanchai giving Russia a huge area of land including the entire area north of the Arras River (territory comprising present-day Armenia and Azerbaijan).

However, the worst and most disheartening loss for the Persian people was their loss of dignity as they viewed their non-Persian leaders as being dominated politically by foreign powers. The Russian and English ambassadors were practically ruling the entire country as a result of their own rivalry.

Britain took as great an interest in Persia as Russia did so that it could protect its growing empire in India. Because of Persia's strategic location between the southern borders of Russia and the westernmost borders of British India, both Britain and Russia regarded an independent Persia as a buffer zone between the two empires. Yet neither had the audacity

to blatantly annex the entire country as they had with other smaller countries in the area. Still England and Russia both needed Persia to have a weak government so that they could more easily influence the country's internal affairs.

More territory was lost and under the rule of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848-1896) and his son, Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1906). Each sold another part of the country down the line while maintaining personal excesses including extended trips abroad and lavish palaces. Clearly a non-Persian ruler in Persia was going to choke the life out of the people. No Qajar ruler had the will or conviction to prevent Britain and Russia from encroaching into regions of traditional Persian influence. In 1856 Britain stopped the Qajars' attempt at retaking the important city of Herat, which had been Persian during the Safavids, but was lost since the mid-18th century. England wanted the city to be part of Afghanistan, a country they helped create in order to extend the buffer between India and Russia. By 1881 Russia conquered Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, cutting Persia off from its historic ties to the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand. At the same time, trade concessions by the Qajars put the economy under British control. By the late 19th century, the Persian people were saddened to have seen their leaders totally sell their country out to foreign powers. They had had enough. In the early 1900's after years of strikes and demonstrations, a popular movement called the Constitutional Revolution, forced the Shah to agree on the creation of an elected parliament.

In 1796 the Jews knew they were about to experience the kind of change that they'd witnessed many times before. A change for the worse. The forced conversions began almost as soon as Agha Mohammed declared himself ruler of Tehran. Many Jews in the area of Kashan were forcibly converted to Islam during this period, although generally they secretly practiced Judaism. In Qom, which is considered by Shiites to be a 'holy city', there was a massacre of Jews after a Jewish child was accused of laughing in the presence of Moslem pilgrims. In Qazvin, Jews were offered the choice between death and conversion to Islam. There were forced conversions in many villages. The emigration that started under the Safavids continued under the Qajar dynasty and the number of Jews in Persia dropped significantly. A number of those who were forcibly converted were able to return to Judaism during the reign of Nadir, but were once again forced to return to Islam under the Qajar dynasty.

In 1797 Agha Mohammed Kahn was murdered and was succeeded by Fath Ali Sahah. Under his regime many of his soldiers broke into Jewish homes in a number of Jewish neighborhoods. Men were killed, women were violated and their homes were looted. Fath Ali Shah forced a number of Jewish girls and boys into his harem.

In 1830 the Massacre of Tabriz occurred. This infamous event profoundly affected the Jewish community of Persia, of Asia, and of the entire world. The atmosphere in which such an atrocity could happen was fomented by the acclimation of the Persian people to the gradually growing acceptability of Jewish persecution coupled with the influence of foreign visitors during the Qajar era. The Jews had always been more vulnerable than their neighbors but had often shared the burden of violence wrought by conquering peoples. The Jews had survived sporadic often devastating and cruel flare-ups of anti-Semitic incidents, but after the mob had had its fill of blood lust had let the remainder live in peace for a while afterwards. At the Massacre of Tabriz the perpetrators demanded the death of every man, woman, and child, reminiscent of the plans of Haman, thwarted so many years before. But the European visitors influenced their Persian hosts in many ways. The perceived superiority of Europe at that time was not limited to their fashion and technology. The Europeans bragged about their methods of dealing with the Jews, not only by extemporaneous pogroms, (they had that

in common) but by cold, calculated planning, such as the device of the 'Blood Libel', in which a Jew would be accused of using a Christian child's blood for the baking of matzo. The Persians could hardly accuse the Jews of having killed their god, not wanting to admit their deity vulnerable, nor could they accuse them of using a Christian child's blood for baking matzo, being as Christian children were not readily available, and anyway it was popularly known that Jews had strict dietary disciplines, one of which was a prohibition from consuming any blood, animal or otherwise. But the idea of accusing them of murder and using that as an excuse to kill and loot appealed to them in its sinister simplicity. The atmosphere of intolerance, ignorance, violence, and Jew hatred combined as an incubator for a societal, collective disease. The results were the atrocities at the Massacre of Tabriz.

Tabriz is a large city in northwestern Persia, near Lake Uremia. At an elevation of about 1400 m (about 4500 ft), it is a manufacturing, commercial, and transportation center. Principal products include carpets, textiles, processed food, footwear, and soap. Tabriz is the site of the monumental 15th-century Blue Mosque, a 14th-century citadel, and the University of Tabriz. There has always been a strong Jewish population.

Tabriz has over the centuries been severely damaged by earthquakes (especially in 858, 1041, and 1721) and by invasions and conquest as a prime target by the Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Ottoman Turks, and Russians.

During the Qajar dynast many successful Jewish and Christian merchants were based in Tabriz. The most successful however was a Jewish merchant who aroused the jealousy of the Christian merchants. They decided to import the old tried and true method of false accusation against the merchant to rid themselves of not only the merchant but of all the Jews. They convinced one of his workers, a Christian named Richard, to kill a child and hide the body in the Jew's property, for which they would grant him a substantial reward. For three days the search for the child went on until the rival merchants told Richard to inform the governor that his employer was the guilty party. He then led the authorities to the place where he had stashed the body.

The child had been from a prominent Moslem family and his father was also a scholar of Koran. The merchant insisted that he knew nothing of any missing child and that the authorities were welcome to search his property which he guaranteed them would be found unsullied. When they were brought straight to the item in question the mob went wild and fell upon, first the merchant and his perplexed family, then the entire Jewish population. The Moslems used swords, daggers, kitchen knives, farming tools, stones, and whatever they could get their hands on and attacked the hapless Jews until they could find not a single survivor. The few who had managed to flee never returned to Tabriz, thus ending three thousands years of continuous Jewish community. The assault against the Jews spread to Azerbaijan and the Jews of Ardabil and Zanjan were also wiped out. Azerbaijan, Persia's neighbor to the north, had been part of Persia during the Safavids, but was lost to them since the Ottoman Turks. The fate of the isolated and ancient Jewish community of Azerbaijan has been intrinsically tied to that of the Persian community.

The year after the incident of Tabriz a plague broke out in Tabriz and the neighboring provinces and left thousands of Moslems dead in its wake. Moslem religious leaders published letters stating that this was their punishment for the murder of innocent Jews in the Tabriz pogrom.

But the contrition was brief and in 1834 at the onset of Mohammed Shah's regime in Isfahan, a pogrom broke out and 130 Jews were killed.

The Blood libel of Damascus took place in 1840 and not only badly wounded the Syrian Jewish community, but sent shock waves throughout the Jewish world. The Jews in Persia

were familiar with this type of despicable, outrage which only served to strengthen the perpetrators and set a new standard of injustice.

When a European preacher disappeared in Damascus, a group of anti-Semites spread rumors that the Jews had murdered him and used his blood for religious purposes. The French consul stepped in to shed light on the subject and restore calm. He publicly announced that the Jews were well known to be responsible for such actions throughout history. The mob ransacked the Jewish neighborhood and seized seven leaders of the community. They were tortured all night in order to extract a confession. When none was forthcoming they continued their brutal treatment and a number of the victims died. The incident became publicized and became a media event in Europe as everyone who heard about it took sides. In England, Sir Moses Montefiore was outraged that such ignorant allegations could resurface after having been proved untrue centuries earlier. He set up a council and headed for Egypt to meet Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman viceroy. Montefiore proved to the viceroy that the allegations were groundless. At the same time other Jewish leaders met in Istanbul and met Sultan Abd al-Majid and the result was a proclamation exonerating any and all Jews in the Ottoman empire of the charge of using gentile blood for religious ceremonies.

THE LAST JEWS OF MASHHAD

Mashhad is an important city in northeastern Iran, capital of Khorasan Province, near the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and today boasts a population of about two million. It has always been one of the countries largest cities, and an important commentarial and religious center. Carpet manufacturing, based on local wool supplies, is a traditional industry there. The burial shrine of the early 9th-century religious leader Imam Reza, regarded by Shiite Muslims as one of Persia's holiest places is a popular destination. The grave of caliph Harun ar-Rashid is in the same shrine. Shah Abbas I (reigned 1588-1629) made the city the jewel of his empire, and Nadir Shah made it the capital of his empire.

The Jews have had a strong community there for literally thousands of years.

In March of 1839 a fanatical group of Moslems attacked the Jewish neighborhood, burned all the synagogues to the ground, and started to hack the Jews to death with makeshift weapons. The religious leaders saw the gathered survivors about to be killed and called upon the mob to allow them to be spared provided they convert to Islam. They converted and practiced Judaism in secret until they were able to move to Tehran, Afghanistan, or Israel. Most of the Jews of Afghanistan were those that fled Mashhad. This is why the Jewish emigrants to Israel from Afghanistan didn't speak the Afghan language Pashto when they arrived, but rather spoke a dialect of Persian.

In 1848 Israel Joseph Benjamin commenced three years of travel in the vicinity of and inside Persia. He noted that in Shiraz, due to coercion, 2500 of 3000 Jews there were forced to convert over a twenty year period with most of them staying secretly Jewish, including secretly circumcising their sons.

He wrote, "Most of synagogues have been destroyed. A local apostate said, "We were compelled to convert. We did it to save ourselves from tyranny and death. We still cling with all our hearts to the faith of our fathers""

These words touched the traveler who replied, "Have patience my brethren and continue to put your confidence in God. Perhaps the Monarchs of Europe, under whose protection

your brethren live happily, may be able to alleviate your misfortunes and place noble rulers on the throne of Persia who will loosen your bonds and allow you freely and openly to avow your belief.”

At one point, Benjamin was revealed to other travelers in his company as a Jew and shot at by another in the caravan but the bullet missed him. The tour guide then vowed to protect Benjamin.

Benjamin further wrote, “Throughout Persia, the Jews are obliged to live in a part of town separated from the other inhabitants. For they are considered as unclean creatures who bring contamination. If a Jew is recognized in the street, he is subjected to the greatest insults. The passersby spit in his face and sometimes beat him so unmercifully that he falls to the ground and is obliged to be carried home. Sometimes the Persians intrude into the dwellings of a Jew and take possession of whatever pleases them. Should the owner object he incurs the danger of paying for it with his life. If a Jew shows himself in the street during the three days of the Katel Feast he is sure to be murdered.” Benjamin adds however, “the Jewish doctors are much sought after.”

In 1855 Dr. Jakob Eduard Polak began a six year stint as the Shah’s physician and subsequently writes of Hamada and Jewry, “They live under great difficulties because they are considered as outcasts. They are constantly exposed to the caprices of the governor who uses every pretext to plunder them. Should a Jew appear in the street dressed decently or on horseback the spectators are indignant at him for daring to appear like a Moslem. Should he on the contrary be dressed miserably he is followed by a crowd of young rascals who throw mud and stones at him.”

In 1864 a Moslem cleric claimed a Jew had touched a container of food at a grocery. He incited a mob to attack the Jewish neighborhood and sixty Jews were killed. One of the victims was a rather portly man named Daniel Mukhtar, whose cadaver was rendered for making a tincture from his fat subsequently known by the name of “Oil of Daniel the Jew”.

In 1865 the Chief Rabbi of Tehran wrote a letter to the Alliance Israelite Universelle. After the Damascus Blood Libel this organization was set up in France to help defenseless Jews living in despotic regimes and to promote Jewish education. This was due largely to the philanthropy of Sir Moses Montefiore.

The Rabbi wrote, “We are scorned by our enemies who see us without protection and who may do with us as they please. A Muslim who kills an Israelite is not brought to justice and if the testimony of a Muslim should prove the crime, the most that could happen is that the murderer would be required to pay a small fine”.

In 1866 there was a riot against Jews in Barfursh. The Shah put a stop to the riot. At least eighteen were killed, including two burned alive.

In 1871 the water supply of a Jewish neighborhood was maliciously shut off. Emergency wells were dug by the inhabitants adverting disaster.

In 1873 an Alliance Israelite Universelle bulletin stated as follows:

“In Iran, the worst kinds of religious violations take place. Iran has a bigoted population and a weak government. Despite all the promises made by the government to rectify the disorder, it appears that social decline in that country is gradually worsening the Jews’ situation”.

In 1875 there were more riots in Hamadan. There was looting and a number of Jews were killed. Acts of belligerency were encouraged by the local Moslem mullah (preacher). The central Tehran government reprimanded the instigators and fined the mullah.

In 1883 Ephraim Naumark departed from Tiberius, Israel, on an extended trip through

the Levant. After three years of travel he wrote an historically significant travel log which included the following on the Jews in Persia,

“In Persia, they (the non-Jews) do not purchase bread or other food stuffs from Jews and should a Jew wish to purchase from a Moslem, he must point to the product he wishes to purchase from a distance. A Jew who becomes a Moslem, may, backed by the testimony of several illiterate persons, claim that any deceased Jew is his relative, and in this manner take possession of all his property. The local governor treats the Jews as a master treats a slave and it is perhaps for this reason that they call him ‘lord of the Jews’. The pole tax which the Jews must pay the king’s representatives, are collected from within the community and the burden is divided according to the individual’s ability to pay. If the lord of the Jews is not satisfied with the collected sum, he expropriates Jewish property. The Jews’ only hope is their doctors who are known by the title Hakin. These doctors are the only ones who are allowed to ride on horseback and are permitted to visit the sick.”

In 1883 Jews in Tehran who traded fabrics faced complaints by Moslem competitors. Fabrics were burned. The Jews protested to the Minister of War and sent him a bribe, as was customary in those days. He was initially successful in reinstating the Jews’ right to sell fabric but was subsequently overruled by another official.

In 1892 there was a riot in Hamadan on the evening prior to Yom Kippur. Jews left synagogue for their homes but some remained in synagogues and were forced to say conversionary vows or be killed.

The Tehran government tried to intervene on behalf of the Jews, but without success. Restrictions on Jews were enforced with greater strictness. Many Jews fled from Hamadan. Selling food to Jews in Hamadan was prohibited but the Ottoman Council managed to get this religious decree rescinded. The fanatic Mullah Abdullah forced the local police chief, who had tried to assist the Jews, to desist and to kiss his foot. The city’s Rabbi was severely beaten.

In 1895 the Jews of Tehran mourned the loss of Ezra Ya’qub. Ezra Ya’qub was a successful businessman who prospered despite the anti-Jewish laws imposed upon him. His charitable acts were well known. He generously supported many families who had been run into bankruptcy and sponsored numerous institutions to lessen the plight of the indigent. His commercial ties with England and his impeccable integrity earned him legendary status among the merchant class and his philanthropy was admired by all. When the governor of Tehran tried to make the Jews suffer by denying them access to public water supplies, he thwarted their plans by building a cistern in the Jewish ghetto with a six-month storage capacity. His organization erected the first modern school for the children of Tehran. His charity also extended to other cities as well and he even gave generously toward building in the Holy Land including financing the building of a Synagogue in the Misgav Ladach hospital in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately he was not immune to the poison of anti-Semitism, despite being loved and respected by all. Almost all. A jealous land-owner by the name of Sayyid Rayhanalla couldn’t enjoy his own success or accomplishments as long as the Jew, Ezra Ya’qub was prospering. His own wealth meant nothing to him as long as even a single Jew was not reduced to rags. He lived near the Jewish school and was constantly reminded of his baseless hatred whenever Ezra passed. He decided to take advantage of the unfair arcane laws which were still on the books. When Ezra was on his way to the school he positioned himself between the road and his own house, one cold and wintry day. As the Jew passed by he called out to him that the snow was piled high on his land and demanded that he shovel the snow away. Ezra Ya’qub’s was suffering from poor health and explained that he would be

happy to hire people to do it at his own expense. Sayyid showed his utter contempt for all things decent and demanded that Ezra do it himself. For hours the ailing community leader was stoically slaving while passers-by observed in shock and implored the land-owner to call off his barbaric cruelty. He gleefully refused. When the work was at last finished Ezra Ya'qub was ruined. He could barely move or breathe and had to be carried home where he contracted influenza and pneumonia. His utter exhaustion and weakened condition foiled all of the finest doctors' abilities and he died at the age of forty at the height of his career. Sayyid's plot to end his life had succeeded, but his plan to end his charitable work failed. Ezra Ya'qub's saintly wife, Senobar, dedicated the rest of her life to continuing the work of her departed husband with great success. She not only continued to support and organize institutions to care for and educate the poor in Persia, but she also visited and supported the Jews of Jerusalem.

In 1897 there was a riot in Tehran. At a religious leader's orders the Jews were forced to shave their heads. The long-forgotten rule regarding wearing of a patch was strictly enforced. The Jewish ghetto was invaded and many were beaten. The following year in Tehran new restrictions severely impacting their livelihood was imposed on Jews.

In 1901 there were more riots in Tehran. Jews and Armenians were sermonized for drinking wine. Hoodlums following a religious leader entered the Tehran ghetto and looted its shops and beat some inhabitants. At the urging of foreign embassies some of the perpetrators were arrested. The religious leader who fomented the riot went into hiding.

In the early part of the twentieth century the Jews were not the only ones who had had enough of a corrupt foreign government. The Jews suffered as a result of the government's lack of integrity and due to their encouragement of anti-Jewish crimes. But the Persians themselves needed little prodding. The religious intolerance that occurred as a result of the Shiite/Sunni conflicts helped create an atmosphere of religious persecution for which the Jews suffered worst. The influence from foreign powers, which for the first time in Persia's history came from the West, brought new and contemptible forms of anti-Semitism. But the change in government would come slow. First in the form of the Pahalavi dynasty and the modern shaws, then after the first and second World Wars, in the form of the Islamic revolution, placing in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini on the throne that had once belonged to Darius the Mede.

Chapter XV

The Pahalavi Dynasty (1907 – 1979)

The Persians were fed up with their leaders who weren't even Persians. In the early 1900's strike after strike and demonstration after demonstration could no longer be ignored or put down by force. A growing and popular movement called the Constitutional Revolution forced the shah, Muzaffar al-Din, to agree on the creation of an elected parliament (the Majlis). He also was forced to accept a constitution that, for the first time, limited royal power.

Britain and Russia agreed in 1907 to divide Persia into zones in which each would exercise exclusive influence. In 1908 the shah Mohammad Ali attempted a coup against the elected government, bombing the Majlis building, but the constitutionalists deposed him and he fled to Russia. His son Ahmad Shah, vowing to respect the constitution, was installed under a regent. Britain purchased large interests in Persian oil companies and from then on behaved increasingly like a sovereign power in southwestern Iran.

During World War I (1914-1918), Britain and Russia, who were allies, launched attacks from Persia against the Ottoman Empire, which was allied with Germany. Although Persia was officially neutral, many battles were fought in the west between Russia and the Ottomans. These battles destroyed villages, killed many civilians, and caused famine that killed thousands more. The government's inability to protect the country provoked rebellions in the north.

The situation caused Reza Shah Pahalavi to take action. Pahalavi was an officer in Persia's only military force, the Cossack Brigade. Joining a newspaper publisher, he and his troops in 1921 began a coup against the government. Within four years he clawed his way to the being the most feared man in Persia. He reorganized the military, restored order, and gave the country leadership in the form of a native Persian. In 1925 he deposed Ahmad Shah, the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty and became the new shah.

Reza Shah Pahalavi, as new leader promoted industry, railroads, education, and infrastructure to modernize Persia. Between 1925 and 1941 Reza Shah's development plans changed Persia completely. His popularity peaked however when he, too, became despotic and cruelly punished anyone who opposed or even criticized him. By the 1930's he had become a dictator. His attempt to phase out foreign influence helped to keep him popular enough at home. He also changed the country's name to "Iran" in 1935 using the name that a large percentage of the country had known them as for two millennia. "Persia" was a name, Pahalavi argued, coined by the Greeks. "Iran" is a more authentic name, being derived from the word "Aryan" meaning those who speak one of the Indo-European languages and who are a distinct race, separate from the Orientals or Africans. In other words, white. The generic "white man" was revered by people in African and Oriental countries where people's skin is naturally darker. Europeans and Americans were looked upon as more technologically advanced and more economically and militarily powerful. To this day people in oriental countries try to stay out of the sun as much as possible in order to appear lighter of skin. Pahalavi recognized this attitude and acknowledged it by naming the country "Iran".

By undermining foreign influence he gained popularity at home, but infuriated the British. Also undermined by these steps were the Russians who in 1922 consolidated the

Russian Empire into the USSR. Still, Britain, through its ownership of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, controlled all of Iran's oil resources. When Britain demanded that the Shah expel all German citizens, Reza Shah Pahalavi refused, saying he needed their technical assistance. During World War II the country was split between the Allies and the Axis.

In August 1941, after Reza Shah again refused to expel all German nationals, and generally showed sympathetic leanings toward the Nazis, Britain and the USSR invaded Iran. They quickly beat the Iranian army and sent Pahalavi into exile. The English and Russians put Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahalavi, on the throne as a puppet leader. He remained shah of Iran from 1941 to 1979.

In 1942 the United States sent soldiers to Iran, officially to help keep the railroad running but in actuality to keep an eye on things. In 1942 Britain and Russia agreed to withdraw their troops when the war ended. The USSR withdrew its troops in May 1946, but refused to give autonomy to Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijan crisis was the first case to be brought before the Security Council of the United Nations. This was the opening move of the Cold War between the United States and the USSR.

In 1944 Iran held elections for government offices. New parties formed, some in favor of complete democracy demanding an end to any form of monarchy, and some which feared reform and sided with the shah. With foreign invaders gone, British control of Iran's oil fields became the central issue regarding foreign intervention. England still controlled all the increasingly valuable oilfields and a major popular movement developed to end this situation.

In the mid-1940s Mohammad Mosaddeq, an Iranian statesman led the oil nationalization movement. He supported the shah as a democratic monarch and campaigned to free Iran of all foreign influence, especially in the oil fields. Mosaddeq became prime minister in 1951 and Britain responded with an oil embargo. In 1953, the United States reversed its pro-Iranian policy saying Mosaddeq was causing instability which could be exploited by the USSR to expand its regional influence. The Cold War affected everything that Russia and the U.S. did at that time and neither side wanted Iran to go over to the other side. As a result the United States decided to use the CIA to overthrow Mosaddeq, much to the delight of many of his political enemies in Iran, including the shah. In a coup in 1953 Mosaddeq was arrested, and the shah remained in power. The oil monopoly held by Britain passed to a consortium of British, Dutch, French, and U.S. oil companies which shared profits with the Iranians and was seen as a fairly workable compromise.

With Mosaddeq out of the way Shah Mohammad Reza Pahalavi emerged as a powerful monarch, contrary to the initial goals of the original Constitutionalist revolutionaries which by now had been forgotten. He appointed his own prime ministers and controlled elections according to his whim.

Oil revenues after 1973 due to higher prices and increased sales, providing ready funding for social reform but the Shah only became more oppressive and corrupt.

To the Iranian people, the Shah's teaming up with the CIA and expelling Mosaddeq seemed like a betrayal and was reminiscent of the previous regime which had been too subservient to foreign nationals. The United States building up the Iranian military only fueled the fire which was popularly viewed as the US interfering and strengthening the Shah. The shah also granted diplomatic status to U.S. military personnel in a special bill which infuriated the extremist elements who viewed this as capitulation to foreign influence.

The shah's main opponent became the Islamic scholar and Shiite fanatic, Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini's arrest in June 1963 led to huge riots throughout Iran and left 600 dead and thousands wounded. The shah exiled the Ayatollah (a word meaning 'scholar')

Khomeini to Turkey in 1964 where he thought he would keep quiet for some reason. From there Khomeini moved to Iraq and led a movement to overthrow the shah. He published a book, "Velayat-e faqih", that argued for an Islamic Shiite government in Iran. His following grew and grew. They grew in numbers and in fanaticism. The close ties the shah maintained with the U.S. infuriated Khomeini's ever growing movement.

Finally the lid blew off. During a pro-Khomeini demonstration in Qom in January 1978 a riot broke out and police violence resulted in 70 deaths. From Iraq, Khomeini demanded that his disciples commemorate the victims on the 40th day after their deaths, in accordance with Islamic custom. The mourning services turned into demonstrations which in turn turned into riots which resulted in more deaths. This began a perpetual cycle of mourning/riots/mourning/riots which seemed never to end. The shah imposed martial law on Tehran and 11 other cities. This infuriated Khomeini and his followers even further. Anything having to do with Khomeini was outlawed, his books, his photos, everything. This further escalated tensions. The entire country went on strike including the oil industry, paralyzing the country. Khomeini's sermons were recorded and reproduced and distributed on thousands of cassette tapes, and smuggled all over the country.

Shocked by Khomeini's popularity and influence and fearing that which a ruler fears most, a grass-roots popular all out rebellion, the shah did what little he could to stop it. He persuaded the Iraqi government to expel Khomeini. But not only did that not stop him, it strengthened him. Khomeini immediately found asylum in France, where he found access to the international media. In January 1979 the shah realized he had lost the game and left the country for good. Two weeks later, and after 14 years in exile, Khomeini returned to Iran in triumph. On February 11, 1979, the royalist government was overthrown, and on April 1 Iranians voted overwhelmingly to establish an Islamic republic.

During the Pahalavi dynasty the Jews found their positions to be tenuous. Some prospered and others suffered poverty. Incidents of anti-Semitism did occur.

In 1909 there was a riot in Kermanihah. The Muslim employee of Jew who converted to Islam died of heart failure but rumor of the employer's ritual murder of this employee was spread. The ghetto was ransacked; hundreds made homeless. Some Muslims fed homeless Jews.

In 1910 a Jewish school teacher, Mashallah Nisani, tried to stop Muslims from beating two Jews children in Shiraz. The teacher was killed. The murderer was imprisoned but his family paid a bribe and had him released. Following this, a few months later, a child's body was found and the Jews of Shiraz were accused of a blood libel. In fact, the body was of a Jewish girl who had died some eight days earlier and whose body had been exhumed and brought to the city square. A riot ensued with widespread looting. Six thousand Jews lost their possessions. Government soldiers were sent in to protect the Jews and ended up joining the looters. Much of what could not be stolen was destroyed. Twelve people were left dead, fifteen injured. A woman's ears were torn off in order to get her earrings. Some Muslims protected the Jews. Others, subsequent to the riot distribute food to them.

In 1910 a Jew who was forced to convert to Islam in Sanandaj was killed nonetheless after being falsely accused. His home was looted and relatives harassed but before the mob could do more damage, government soldiers arrived. In Hamadan, the Sanandaj riot had an effect after a Jewish man bumped into a Muslim woman in a narrow alley. A number of Jews were stabbed after religious figures sermonized against the "offender" who was himself protected by the local police chief.

In 1922 the Jews of Azerbaijan were uprooted after living there for 2,500 years. The Azerbaijani leader, Simitqu, extorted money from Jews and killed those who would not pay.

Jews fled the region selling their possessions off for a pittance. The vast majority moved into Iran.

In 1922 a riot occurred against the Jews in Tehran after alleged disrespect toward Moslems was shown at a Jewish school. A number of Jews were beaten by hoodlums. The ghetto was ominously surrounded by a mob and the American ambassador, himself a rabbi, asked the minister of war for help. He complied and an almost certain massacre was averted. The Prime minister promised to punish the instigators.

During World War II the Nazi propaganda against the Jews affected the Iranian people despite the Shah Mohammad Reza's close relationship with American and his benevolent stance toward the Jews. His father had been ousted by the British and he remained in power until 1979. During the war the Iranians were caught up in Nazi propaganda and published and distributed anti-Jewish literature. But as soon as the war ended the 'modern' popularity of Jew hating ended and sympathy for the Jews became a world-wide phenomenon, outside of Arab lands. Iran was never pro-Arab, but had been Moslem since the Arab conquest in 642 CE. The new Shah never supported Jew hatred and the golden-age of modern Jewish Iranian history followed until the shah was ousted by Shiite fanatics. Anti-Semitism in word, print, and action began again in earnest with the ousting of the shah in 1979.

Chapter XVI

Islamic Republic (1979 – Present)

In 1979 asked Mehdi Bazargan to form a provisional government.

Bazargan resigned in November 1979 in protest over the hostage crisis in which 66 American's were taken hostage by students who stormed the American embassy in Tehran. Khomeini, as faqih, or supreme spiritual leader, held the highest authority in the country. During the hostage crises, in September 1980, Iraq attacked Iran initiating the eight year long Iran-Iraq war in which over 170,000 Iranians were killed, and 700,000 were injured. Eighteen thousand were listed as missing and never found. Thousands of refugees pouring *into* Iran during the war including 200,000 escaping the oppressive government in Iraq and over one million from Afghanistan escaping the Russian occupation in 1979. The war destroyed the economy and caused 30 billion dollars worth of damages. The cities of Ābādān and Khorramshahr, as well as several towns and hundreds of villages, were erased from the map.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran temporarily improved after the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001, which killed 3,000 people in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Iran cooperated with the U. S. By helping to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had supported the al-Qaeda terrorist network responsible for the attacks. The Iranians also helped set up a new government in Afghanistan. But the United States regarded Iran's position in the Arab/Israeli wars as being intolerable. By supporting terrorism and contributing toward instability in the area, the Iranians were proving themselves to be not only an obstacle toward ending the conflict, but rather instigators of and perpetrators of the conflict, and threatening world peace. In January 2002 Israel intercepted a ship carrying Iranian weapons to Palestinians fighting Israel in the Gaza Strip. The U.S. Government declared Iran as part of an "axis of evil," declaring that Iran supported terrorist groups such as Hamas and also was pursuing nuclear weapons aggressively.

In 2003 the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) stated that Iran had enriched uranium and separated plutonium, which are used to make nuclear weapons.

Later that year Iran signed a protocol allowing their nuclear sites to be inspected but by then it was too late. The assurance that the materials were to be used for atomic energy didn't make sense and in the meantime new underground sites which were kept secret from the IAEA were made operational. The thought of nuclear weapons in the hands of fanatic Shiite Moslems has been a cause for alarm in the West ever since. Iran's neighbors also don't want nukes in the hands of the trigger-happy Iranians, nor do the Chinese, or anyone else.

Ayatollah Khomeini never hid his anti-Semitic beliefs. In fact he used it to rise to power by creating an enemy and a problem that didn't exist and promising to solve the problem. While in exile he was quoted as saying, "Non-Muslims of any religion or creed are *najas* (infidels). In 1971, after the celebrations marking the Shah's anniversary, he criticized the festivities and fireworks, saying, "the Jews are to blame for the decadent extravagance. They were behind the exuberant expenses and overspending. Israeli technicians planed the festivities and tainted them with impurity. The money spent on the celebration should have been spent on our people."

Apparently he wasn't so concerned with the plight of his people when objected to the

sale of oil to Israel which would have improved the depressed economy. In his speech opposing sales of oil or any other goods to Israel he stated, "We should not ignore that the Jews want to take over Islamic counties." In a message to the Syrian foreign minister he stated, "If Muslims all got together and each poured one bucket of water on Israel, a flood would wash them all away."

In 1979 Jewish businessman Habib Elqaniyan was arrested by Iranian authorities. His successful business which he had built up from nothing was an inspiration to the Jewish community. But it also caused jealousy amongst his neighbors and the government. As the case became publicized the Khomeini received more and more bad publicity. He quickly put an end to it by rushing the trial and execution as the world looked on in horror. The Jews felt this did not bode well for them and mass emigration began again. Most families left with nothing.

In 1993 the Jews were blamed for causing the economic chaos in the country. The instigators said that the bad press that Iran was getting throughout the world was the fault of the Jews.

In May, 1998 thirteen Jews were arrested and imprisoned. The excuse was given that they had been 'spying for the Zionist enemy'. The wealthy Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh, who was known for his charity and integrity, was publicly hanged despite never having been afforded a trial, nor were formal charges against him ever brought. The international media publicized the event underscoring the fact that there are not only Jews still living in Iran, but their situation is as perilous as always.

With the birth of the State of Israel in 1948 thousands of Jews left for the Holy Land. Many of them walked and arrived with nothing but their heritage. In Israel they have done well, using their business sense to good advantage. One man I talked to described his former life nostalgically. He had been born in the early 1920's. He said his family was successful selling gems and carpets. He recalled fondly their annual pilgrimages to the tombs of Esther and Mordecai. His family gave up a good and comfortable life to accept any hardship that traveling to Israel might entail. He never regretted giving up physical wealth, he told me, to inherit the spiritual wealth of being able to live in a country he could call his own in Jerusalem, where he could study Torah and watch his children and grandchildren live in a Jewish homeland. They arrived with nothing and started over with joy.

During the Islamic revolution and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, the main remnant of the once powerful community left Iran for good, some settling in Israel, but the majority moving to America, where they set up strong communities in Great Neck, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles. The Persians communities in Israel and America maintain a strong and distinct identity. The remaining Jews in Iran are as they always have been. Proud, successful, tenacious, hopeful, watchful, cautious. They are, as always, subject to the unpredictable whims of their neighbors. One thing is for sure. If they are left alone they will prosper. But they are never left alone for long.

Conclusion

The religious wars of the Safavids against the Ottoman Turks in general, and the Shiites against the Sunnis in particular, joined the Persian people together. They had once been the rulers of the greatest empire in the world, and had never forgotten it. But disunity had weakened them and the war against the Sunnis was strengthening them and uniting them once again. It returned them to their former unity of purpose, the by-product of which was a sense of nationalism and patriotism. But this came at the expense of justice for anything that stood in their way. As in numerous examples of European history, political success came at a price. The noble ideals of the French Revolutionist, liberty, equality, fraternity, were acquired at a price. The price of the Reign of Terror and the guillotine. The Persians gained much during the Safavid era. They became a modern nation. But it was built on the blood of countless innocents and not-so-innocents that died in the resultant power struggles and persecutions. The Persians had numerous noble accomplishments. But did they live up to their own high standards? The measure of the sincerity of any nation is the way they treat their less-privileged. Anyone can have noble ideas for himself. But how do you treat the less fortunate? The majority may have a right to rule. But not to treat the minority in an unfair fashion. You speak of noble ideas. But how do you treat, for example, the Jews of your nation? The Germans claimed to be cultured, sophisticated, modern, and progressive. Maybe they were. Or maybe they were barbaric, bloodthirsty, and greedy. How can we tell which they were? The litmus test is the way they treat their minorities and the way they treat their guests. Those gentle, creative, spiritual, productive, courageous, loyal, artistic, guests, the Jews.

But the Persians have not always been consistent in their treatment of the Jews. At some points in history they treated them well and gave them privileges and autonomy. At other times they gave them big trouble. Which is the exception and which is the rule? What made them change or change back? Is there even an explanation? Is the way they treat the Jews contingent upon the behavior of the Jews or on something else? Have the Jews been fairly consistent over the centuries in their behavior? There are certainly repeating themes in history in general and in Jewish history in particular. Once exiled from their land the Jews often seek refuge and find it in another country. They arrive there, flourish, are appreciated and welcome. Eventually the relationship begins to stale like a guest who overstays his welcome. They are eventually persecuted and forced to leave. This happened again and again to the Jews in Egypt, Babylonia, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Poland, Russia, etc, etc. Will it happen in America? Could it happen? It certainly could happen, anything is possible. But is it likely? If it begins to happen will we recognize it or deny it?

It is true that America is different from Persia. But will that difference make a difference? What is the difference? In other countries the Jews are separate from the indigenous people of the nation in which they find themselves. They are guests. But in America, which is a mixture of different nations, the Jews are no more or less a member of the nation than anyone else. The Persian people are all Persian. They are all descendents from the same ancestor. If you're not Persian you're a guest in their country. This doesn't give them or anyone else a right to mistreat people. But at least it makes some kind of sense. But in America, one person is no more American than anyone else. The Jews are not guests in America. They are Americans as much as any other American. This is indeed a difference between Jews in America and Jews of Persia, France, Germany, or elsewhere. But is this

enough of a difference to make a difference? Or will the pattern of “welcome/flourish/persecution/expulsion” be repeated in America?

There certainly does exist anti-Semitism in America. Perhaps a scenario of anti-Semitism could be imagined. Middle America is under financial recession and the Moslem extremists are making trouble, violently rioting and blaming the Jews for their plight. There are already millions of Moslems in America and the numbers are growing. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. America is a democracy. An intolerant politician like George Wallace or Pat Buchanan gets elected to the presidency. A Jewish person is caught and accused of a serious crime. Perhaps he even committed it. In history Jews have been blamed for crimes they didn't commit (Ezra Ya'qub, Dreyfus, Belus, the list is endless), and crimes they did commit. But which ever the case may be, the entire Jewish population is always blamed. Suddenly a riot or pogrom happens and a Jew is lynched or his house burned down. Once a mob situation begins it is impossible to stop. The riots spread; the government turns a blind eye to the situation thanks to the atmosphere of intolerance, general dissatisfaction, pent-up frustration, and the need for a scapegoat. The violence spreads. It could happen. It has happened countless times in the past. Let's hope it doesn't happen but thank G-d the state of Israel exists. And let's thank the holy, industrious, dedicated people of Israel for creating an escape option, while we're at it.

A friend of mine once overheard a conversation. Two gentiles were talking. They were talking about the Jews and their contribution to America. The same conversation that must have happened in Persia, Germany, or anywhere else. They were discussing the Jews' pros and cons. Both agreed that their contributions to science, entertainment, administration, medicine, economics, literature, and social services were many and great. They were winding down the conversation and wanted to sum up and end it.

“Yeah, but the Jews aren't really Americans,” is what one of them said. That was the punch line.

Why do people feel this way? The answer is because any country has the potential of going to war with any other country. America and England are great friends and allies. But they did fight two wars against each other, the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The chances of us fighting another war are slim but not impossible.

America and Israel have an excellent relationship. But sometimes the relationship is strained. That's natural, not every issue can be resolved to the maximum benefit of both countries, and there must be situations when something will be in the interests of one but not the other. Is it possible that a situation could arise where-in the two could go to war, or at least be on the opposite sides of a war? It has to be possible, as unlikely as it seems.

And what of American Jews? Which side would they take? Which side should they take? Are they first Americans, then Jews? Or first Jews and then Americans? Are they all the same? And even if they are first Jews and then Americans, does that mean that they are unlikely to support America over the modern state of Israel? Many Jews have strong Jewish identity but do not feel that modern Israel is necessarily a “Jewish State.” Rather it is a state like any other country but happens to have a majority Jewish population. The government of Israel goes to great lengths to try and pretend that they are no different from any other country and that the Jewish religion is not a consideration in their decision making processes or laws, much to the chagrin of much of their population. Whatever the case, the fact is that many citizens of the USA have dual citizenship with America and some other country, so that the phenomena of dual loyalties is nothing near unique. What about people with French/American citizenship? What if America goes to war against France? This was actually a problem in WWII. There were many Germans, Japanese, and Italians living in

America at the time. It did indeed create a big problem.

The fact that the Jews contributed greatly to Persian economy, pop culture, fine art, education, science, justice, and infrastructure is very nice. But anti-Semitism is never a logical phenomenon. The contribution of the Jews to America is also great. Their contribution to Spain, Germany, England, France, Russia, Poland, etc., was also great. Yet anti-Semitism they did experience, brutal, cruel, impossibly ruthless and unjustified anti-Semitism. It happened before and it will happen again. Why should the Jews be persecuted? Aren't they just like everybody else? By comparing the history of the Jews of Persia to those of other countries remarkable patterns emerge. Their special contributions and remarkable survival skills are revealed. The Jews are special. That makes them unique. But just like the Jews in Persia proved, you can't be unique and just like everybody else at the same time.

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