Iranian Jewish History Reflected in Judaeo-Persian Literature

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The concept of "literary history" in the sense of History of Literature is an ancient and much loved discipline of the Humanities. But the concept of "history *in* literature" is generally deemed suspect by scholars of both literature and history, and both groups tend to share a rather disdainful attitude toward the genre of historical fiction even if many scholars furtively enjoy its fruits. However, few would dispute that literature is a powerful, often infallible guide to that illusive concept known as *zeitgeist* and therefore can be a useful supplementary tool of the historian, especially if used judiciously and in conjunction with other types of evidence. Bearing this in mind, I intend to describe and analyze here the gradual shift in the attitude of Iranian Jews toward Islam as reflected in Judaeo-Persian literary texts, defined broadly to include both poetical and theological/philosophical works.

In earlier studies of two Judaeo-Persian chronicles, the seventeenth-century *Kitāb-i Anusī* ["The Book of a Forced Convert"] of Bābāī b. Luṭf and the eighteenth-century *Kitāb-i Sar Guzasht-i Kāshān dar bāb-i ʿIbrī va Goyim-yi sānī* ["The Book of Events in Kāshān Concerning the Jews; Their Second Conversion"] of Bābāī b. Farhād, I demonstrated that, on the whole, these texts are trustworthy historical documents of the external and, especially, the internal – Jewish communal – events they describe.[1] Unfortunately, additional strictly historical documents have not turned up thus far. The possibility that they might yet surface cannot be excluded until the large repository of Judaeo-Persian manuscripts at the Jewish National University Library in Jerusalem is fully cataloged and manuscripts still in private hands in the West, and especially in Iran, are exhaustively accounted for. Nevertheless, one can already state with some measure of confidence that additional texts, if they will surface, are going to be few. Iranian Jews should not be blamed for their seeming disregard of scholars' dreams nor should they be reproached for having been especially remiss in recording their history. In fact, the Jewish tendency not to write full-fledged historical accounts is not a peculiarly Iranian Jewish shortcoming. In his virtuoso study on Jewish historiography, Y.H. Yeroushalmi explains the phenomenon in terms of Jewish understanding of the Bible, especially the perception of the paradigmatic nature of Jewish history, and

1 Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of Bābāī Ibn Lutf's Chronicle (1617-1662)*, New York/Jerusalem 1987; ead., *Iranian Jewry During the Afghan Invasion. The Kitāb-i Sar-Guzasht-i Kāshān of* Bābāī b. Farhād, Stuttgart 1990.

the role of Jewish memory as reflected primarily through two channels, ritual and recital.[2] The same study makes one keenly aware not only of the interplay between memory and historiography but also of the numerous types of sources from which Jewish "memory," hence history, can be retrieved. Here I would like to engage in such an exercise of retrieval in an attempt to expand our understanding of pre-modern Iranian Jewish history.

Even in the absence of full-blown historical texts, there is much that can be learned about Iranian Jewry, especially in the realm of cultural history. Two features are of particular interest. The first, which is not the subject of this contribution, is connected with the book world of Judaeo-Persian manuscripts and I mention it here only briefly. Having recently completed a catalog of the Judaeo-Persian manuscripts of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, numbering some two hundred manuscripts, I am keenly aware that if it would be studied in conjunction with Amnon Netzer's catalog of the Judaeo-Persian manuscripts housed at the Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, a great deal of information about the intellectual parameters of Iranian Jews between the 14th and the second half of the 19th century would come to light even before other collections are fully cataloged.[3] Judaeo-Persian manuscripts also provide a wealth of information about aspects of the "book arts" of Iranian Jewry which, in turn, reflect the material culture of Iranian Jewry and its ties to the majority Muslim culture.[4] The second feature, the actual topic of this study, concerns a diachronic evaluation of the contents of major Judaeo-Persian literary texts and what they reveal about Jewish Iranian attitudes toward Islam. I will focus on four groups of texts arranged by genre and in chronological order within each genre. In my view, these texts are "a treasure trove" of historical information regarding Iranian Jewry's attitudes toward their environment. The texts are as follows: 1. one text from the Cairo Genizah; 2. three Judaeo-Persian epics; 3. four occasional poems. 4. a philosophical/theological text.[5]

I. Iranian Jews in Buddhist and Sunnī realms

1. The earliest group of Judaeo-Persian documents hailing from Central Asia and the Cairo Geniza attests to the mobility of Iranian Jews, especially between the 9th and 11th centuries CE. Commercial letters indicate a considerable flow of people and goods across the various frontiers of the Muslim world. These docu-

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2 Y.H. Yeroushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle 1982, p. 11.

3 Vera B. Moreen, *Catalogue of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, New York (forthcoming); Amnon Netzer, *Oṣar kitve ha-yad shel yehūdē Paras be makōn Ben Ṣevī*, Jerusalem 1985.

4 Vera Basch Moreen, *Miniature Paintings in Judaeo-Persian Manuscripts*, Cincinnati 1985.

5 Parts of most of these texts have been translated and annotated in my anthology, *In Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*, New Haven/London 2000.

ments show that Iranian Jews were active in the silk, textile, and sugar producing industries.[6]

The letter of a Jewish merchant from Dandān-Uiliq, northeast of Khotan (East Turkestan), is one of the earliest (second half of the 8th century) Judaeo-Persian documents to have come to light thus far. Its greatest historic merit lies, in my view, less in its content, which consists of "the legal resolution of property taken unlawfully,"[7] but in providing solid evidence that Jewish merchants were active even somewhat north of the Silk Road and, by extension, probably on the Silk Road as well, in what were largely Buddhist territories. Donald D. Leslie maintains that Judaism reached China through the commercial activities of Jews hailing from Muslim lands, including Iran.[8] To my knowledge, no record of Buddhist animosity toward these early merchants, probably identified as Muslims rather than Jews, has come to light.

That the pre-Mongol Sunnī caliphate in its far-flung and complex history was, by and large, a welcoming place for many races and religions, including the Jews, is a statement that needs no elaboration here. Suffice it to say that we have few Judaeo-Persian texts from the pre-Mongol period and they tend to be religious texts, such as biblical commentaries, glossaries, etc., of Karaite origin.[9] This group of texts is sufficient to indicate that the production of Judaeo-Persian texts in Persianate lands, although likely never voluminous (the relative scarcity of paper would have impeded this for all strata of society before the twelfth century[10]) was more than likely continuous at least until the Mongol invasion. As is well known, the upheaval caused by the latter affected all layers of society and all aspects of Iranian life. The spectacular rise and fall of such prominent Iranian Jews as Saʿd al-Dawla b. al-Ṣafī (d. 1291) and Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh b. Abī l-Khayr (d. 1318), both of whom rose to the office of Grand Vizier only after converting to Islam, is an early indication that Jewish origins, combined with court intrigue were, ultimately, insurmountable impediments to a stable political career at the Sunnī court of the Mongols despite the latter's vaunted "tolerance."[11]

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6 S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* 1-4, Berkeley 1967-88, vol. 1, pp. 50, 103; vol. 4, pp. 247, 253.

7 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden*, p. 23.

8 Donald Daniel Leslie, *The Survival of the Chinese Jews. The Jewish Community of Kaifeng*, Leiden 1972, p. 118.

9 Shaul Shaked, "Early Judaeo-Persian Texts with Notes on a Commentary to Genesis," in *Persian Origins – Early Judaeo-Persian and the Emergence of New Persian*, ed. Paul Ludwig, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 195-219.

10 Irāj Afshār, "Paper in Classical Persian Texts," in *Dirāsat al-makhṭūṭāt al-Islāmiyya bayna ʿtibārāt al-maddā wa-l-bashar: aʿmāl al-Muʿtamar al-Thānī li-Muʾassasat al-Furqān li-l-Turāth al-Islāmī*, London 1997, pp. 79-82; Willem Floor, *Traditional Crafts in Qajar Iran (1800-1925)*, Costa Mesa, CA 2003, pp. 273-4, 283-4.

11 Moshe Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages*, Leiden 2004, pp. 483-6.

2. Judaeo-Persian Epics

The lives of ordinary Iranian Jews remain opaque during the Mongol era. Iranian culture as a whole begins to recover only in the 1400s and it is then that the trail of Judaeo-Persian texts picks up with the advent of the Īl-khānids, specifically, with the epics of Mowlānā Shāhīn, who lived during the reign of Abū Saʿīd (d. 1336). As I have indicated in some of my studies, the level of Jewish acculturation is considerable in this poet's *masnavī*s, which are based on biblical narratives.[12] His mastery of the form bespeaks a thorough knowledge of Persian poetic tradition and may also imply that he had had Jewish predecessors. The introductory chapters to Shāhīn's *masnavī Bereshit-nāma* (based on Genesis; written in 1358) and *Mūsā-nāma* (based on Exodus and written earlier, in 1327), contain panegyrics in praise of Sultan Abū Saʿīd.[13] While their language and imagery is highly conventional, their very presence in a Judaeo-Persian epic is striking for several reasons. First, and perhaps foremost, Shāhīn adheres faithfully and eloquently to the relatively new form of *masnavī* but, in my view, these panegyrics intimate more. Their presence suggests the poet's hardly concealed hope that his verses would come to the attention of Muslim audiences, perhaps even to that of the royal patron himself, an ambition that implies the possibility of a Jew appearing at court. Such a possibility makes the following verses appear less trite and sycophantic:

> If in ages past, in Nūshīrvān's[14] fabled times,
> Lambs and wolves drank from the same spring,
> Now, in this monarch's age, no bloodthirsty wolf
> Dares even to appear at the gates of a house.
> The shah rids the world of all seeds of oppression;
> He tears the hearts of enemies to shreds.[15]

Appearing as it does in a Judaeo-Persian work with biblical content (but including some Muslim legendary lore from the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* [Ar., "stories about prophets"] tradition), Shāhīn's primary audience must be presumed to have been Jewish. Nevertheless, these panegyrics, which could presumably have been dispensed with in a work written strictly for the Jewish community, suggest not only that

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12 "A Dialogue between God and Satan in Shāhīn's *Bereshit [nāmah]*," in *Irano-Judaica III: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages,* eds. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 203-13; "The Iranization of Biblical Heroes in Judeo-Persian Epics: Shāhīn's *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *Ezra-nāmah*," *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996), pp. 321-38; "Is[h]maʿiliyāt: A Judeo-Persian Account of the Building of the Kaʿba," in *Judaism and Islam. Boundaries, Communication and Interaction. Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, eds. Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes, Fred Astren, Leiden 2000, pp. 185-202; "Moses, God's Shepherd: An Episode from a Judeo-Persian Epic, *Mūsā Nāmah*," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991), pp. 107-30; *Queen Esther's Garden,* pp. 26-119.

13 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden*, pp. 289-92.

14 Khosrow Anūshīrvān (Chosroes I; r. 531-579) is particularly idealized in Persian poetry.

15 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden,* p. 291.

Shāhīn adhered faithfully to the formal requirements of the *masnavī*, which included panegyrics to rulers and/or patrons, but also his assumption that Jewish audiences would have been accepting of their contents, perhaps not just as a literary formality. Yet the same poet, in a *masnavī* composed in 1333, and thus toward the end of the reign of Abū Saʿīd, writes impassioned verses in defense of the Torah as transmitted by Ezra, verses that can only be read as defense against the Muslim claim of *taḥrīf* charging Ezra with having made deliberate changes to the Torah.[16] In *Ezra-nāma* Shāhīn anticipates, as it were, these charges by having Ezra's own contemporaries urge him to double check his memory:

> But ever since evil Bukhtansar had burned it,[17]
> There was no longer Torah in the land.
> Ezra, however, had memorized it all;
> Thus skilled through miracle and might.
> He wrote it all down as it was at first;
> Not a jot or tittle of it was changed; then
> He gave this precious gift and offering
> To Jacob's progeny. But Kalīm's[18] people said:
> "O moon-faced prophet, you made the Torah
> Manifest to us through God's will and grace;
> Might not an error, more or less,
> Have crept in unawares? Seventy years have,
> After all, passed by since that unjust king
> Burned the Word. Since then the world
> Has been bereft of Torah; none has recited it.
> Yet all of it, the entire Torah, the words
> Of the Living Judge, survived preserved
> In your heart. But it may be
> That you remember a little more or less…[19]

The Jews then dispatched Ezra to the land of Rekab[20] where, according to Jewish legend, a group of Levites, who had survived Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the First Temple, continued to preserve perfect copies of the Torah. Although distressed by the Jews' mistrust, Ezra traveled magically, by means of the Tetragrammaton, to this mysterious land where he found, unsurprisingly, that "not even a

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16 Cf. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds. Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton 1992, pp. 50-74.

17 That is, Nebuchadnezzar (r. ca. 630-562 BCE.; cf. Second Book of Esdras 14:20: "For your Law is burnt, and so no one knows what has been done by you or what is going to be done. But if I have found favor before you, impart to me the Holy Spirit, and I will write all that has happened in the world since the beginning, which were written in your Law, so that man can find the path" (*Apocrapha*, pp. 95-96; cited in *Queen Esther's Garden*, pp. 329-30 n. 29).

18 *Kalīm Allāh* ('God's interlocutor'), the qurʾānic epithet of Moses (Q 4: 164).

19 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden*, pp. 110-11.

20 Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* 1-7, Philadelphia 1939 [repr. 1968], vol. 4, pp. 316-418; vol. 3, pp. 76-77; vol. 6, p. 409 n. 57.

dot's worth/Of difference existed between Kalim's/And Ezra's versions [of the Torah]," an acknowledgment made by the Levites themselves.[21]

The Genizah fragment, the careers of Saʿd al-Dawla and Rashīd al-Dīn, and Shāhīn's affecting poetical polemic indicate, cumulatively, that the Sunnī environment of pre-Safavid Iran, however benign and "multicultural," was not free from polemical pressures and outright persecution of Jews. Nevertheless, Shāhīn's polemics also testify to the existence of a certain freedom of expression, albeit in poetic, and therefore least offensive form.

II. Iranian Jews under Shīʿī Domination

The absence of literary data in the period between the mid-fourteenth century until the emergence of ʿImrānī (1454-after 1536), the next significant Judaeo-Persian poet, may not mean their total nonexistence. ʿImrānī's work heralds a noteworthy shift in Jewish attitudes toward their surroundings. His major biblical epic *Fatḥ-nāma* ["The Book of Conquest"], begun in 1474, was interrupted several times by difficult circumstances in the poet's life and was finished only some three decades later.[22] Its composition thus straddles the end of the Timurid (1453-1501) and the first three formative decades of the Safavid eras (1501/2-1722). *Fatḥ-nāma* is a deliberate continuation of setting biblical books into classical Persian verse, the effort that began with Shāhīn's epic renditions mentioned above. ʿImrānī versified the Books of Joshua, Ruth, I Sam., II Sam., and the first chapter of I Kings. His *masnavī* appears to be unfinished and it is reasonable to assume that it would have included more parts of I Kings and II Kings as well. On deeper acquaintance with *Fatḥ-nāma* one becomes increasingly aware of ʿImrānī's pronounced change of attitude toward his environment. To begin with, the title of the epic is itself suggestive. While Shāhīn named his epics either after significant heroes, such as *Mūsā-nāma* ["The Book of Moses"] and *Ardashīr-nāma* ["The Book of Ardashīr/Ahashuerosh"; based on the Book of Esther], or after specific biblical books, such as *Ezra-nāma*, ʿImrānī bestowed a remarkably martial title on his epic, *Fatḥ-nāma* being the usual designation for an official announcement of victory in the Iranian-Ottoman world.[23] True, the biblical books he chose to versify, with the exception of the Book of Ruth, are the "historical" and largely bellicose books of the Bible, and "*Fatḥ-nāma*" neatly accounts for the epic's general contents, but this may not be the only explanation for ʿImrānī's designation. Completed sometime during the early Ṣafavid era, this 10,000 couplet-long *masnavī* appears at times to be both

21 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden*, p. 111.

22 David Yeroushalmi, *The Judeo-Persian Poet ʿEmrānī and His Book of Treasure. ʿEmrānī's Gangnāme, a versified Commentary on the Mishnaic Tractate Abot*, Leiden 1995, pp. 11ff.

23 See G.L. Lewis, "Fatḥnāme," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition 1-11, Leiden 1960-2004, vol. 2, pp. 839-40.

complimenting and contrasting the new Turco-Iranian dynasty's swift ascendance with the Jewish conquest of Canaan while drawing non-too-subtle parallels with it. *Fatḥ-nāma*'s heavy reliance on the imagery and rhetoric of Firdowsī's *Shāh-nāma* suggests inevitable comparisons between Jewish biblical heroes, such as Joshua, David, and Samson, with Iranian counterparts like Rostam, Kay Khosraw, etc., from the Persian national epic. Although biblical ethos, mixed with a considerable dose of Sufism, prevails in *Fatḥ-nāma*, ʿImrānī did not refrain from adding and altering details to give some of the narratives a thrust that can only be explained by the poet's thinly disguised wish to ingratiate himself with the powers that be. Unlike Shāhīn's epics, while *Fatḥ-nāma* adheres to the literary conventions of the *masnavī*, including the obligatory introductory panegyrics, it does not contain a panegyric in honor of any particular ruler but only to a late patron, a certain R. Yehudah.[24] Aside from indicating the poet's gratitude to a real patron, ʿImrānī's panegyric also suggests that he harbored no illusions that his work could reach the court. However, this does not mean that ʿImrānī did not aspire to a Shīʿī, not only a Jewish, audience. His use of numerous terms culled from Muslim religious vocabulary, such as *ṣalāt*, *takbīr, taṣbīḥ, taḥlīl, ilhām, khuṭba*, etc. can be justified in a biblical epic on the grounds that these were commonplace pious expressions in the mystical *masnavīs* ʿImrānī had undoubtedly read; nor are they incompatible with a Jewish religious context. More difficult to rationalize are specific Shīʿī references, such as to the high-ranking Shīʿī clerical office of *ṣadr-i imāmat,* or adjuring the reader "by the Fourteen Innocents" [*bi-ḥaqq-i maʿṣūm va imāmat*], that is, Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve imāms of Twelver Shīʿism. ʿImrānī's repeated references to the various Canaanite tribes, enemies of the Israelites, as *kafirān* and *gebrān*, echo not only clichés used in epics but also bear the imprint of the prejudices of his times.[25] Even more difficult to justify or explain are ʿImrānī's audacious, innovative details and deliberate alterations of the biblical text, such as the episode in I Sam. 4:12-22. It describes the sudden and violent death of the High Priest Eli upon hearing that the Ark of the Covenant was seized by the Philistines and that his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were killed in the battle. The messenger bringing this bad news to Eli and the Israelites to whom he brings it engage in excessive mourning of the type expressly forbidden by both Jewish and Islamic law[26] but strongly reminiscent of Shīʿī Muḥarram ceremonies. The messenger, identified in midrash as the future King Saul, picks up "two hard stones/ [and] striking his breast [he] lamented," while the people, on hearing the news, "scat-

24 Yeroushalmi, *The Judeo-Persian Poet ʿEmrānī*, p. 25 n. 14.

25 For example, *gebrān* ("infidel, fire worshipper") is the pejorative term found in Safavid and Judaeo-Persian chronicles, see i. e., Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril*, Index under 'Zoroastrians.'

26 See, e.g., the chapter on funerals in Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Cairo 1872/1873, vol. 3, pp. 161-7.

tered straw/Upon their heads. Men women, youths/And old men everywhere, tore out their hair/And scratched their heads and faces."[27] While the Bible and post-biblical sources relate that Phinehas and Hophni, Eli's sons, were killed by the Philistine enemy, ʿImrānī changes this claim to an instance of martyrdom: "Brave Hophni and Phinehas rent their breasts/With their own daggers…." These are but two examples of a phenomenon that a careful reading of *Fatḥ-nāma* shows to be by no means negligible as I will indicate in a forthcoming study.[28] It would appear that ʿImrānī wished to imply certain ingratiating similarities between the righteous monotheist practices of the Israelites and the contemporary Shīʿī triumphalist ethos of his day. This, in itself, is not surprising as epics tend, according to scholars of the genre, to "tell about the past, but reflect upon the present."[29] What is definitely surprising, however, is that in *Fatḥ-nāma* these literary tamperings occur with the text of sacred Scripture and not with rabbinically sanctioned midrash, or found in Muslim *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. Seldom treated as mere literature, yet the source of exuberant "innovations" through midrash, the Hebrew Bible treated *as* literature is often a more important and revealing source about those who engaged in this practice than about Scripture itself. In the cases of Shāhīn and ʿImrānī, the grand "agenda" of the poets was, first and foremost, to create national epics out of the Bible comparable to and on a par with the *Shāh-nāma*, the national epic of Iran. To achieve this goal both poets took interesting liberties with the biblical text primarily in order to achieve greater dramatic effects. In the event, they succeeded, in my view, in revealing quite a lot about their own and possibly their contemporary Jewish coreligionists' attitudes towards their Muslim environment.

III. Judaeo-Persian Occasional Poems

The large collection of Judaeo-Persian, not to mention Hebrew, poems written by Iranian Jews, is even less explored than the epics just mentioned. Here I will discuss only four poems that seem to me to be significant signposts indicative of the complex Jewish attitudes toward the dominant faith of Islam.

1. The first poem bears the explicit title, "The Tale of the Anguish of the Community of Forced Converts" by the Jewish apostate poet Ḥezekiah, whose fuller identity is thus far unknown. Wilhelm Bacher assumed, for reasons that he did not explain, that this dirge dated back to the 17th century, to the wave of per-

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27 All references to *Fatḥ-nāma* are to the following manuscripts: Ben Zvi Institute 4602, fols. 134a-137b; British Library Or 13704, fols. 121a-124a; Jewish Theological Seminary 1366, pp. 209-14. All the translations are mine.

28 See my "Literary, Polemical, and Pictorial Features of ʿImrānī's Judeo-Persian Epic, *Fatḥnāma* (15th-16th cent.)," [forthcoming].

29 Gary A. Rendsburg, "Investiture Address. The Blanche & Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History," Rutgers University (October 2004), p. 16.

secutions and forced conversions during the reign of Shāh ʿAbbās II (r. 1642-66) described in *Kitāb-i anusī*.[30] He may be correct but internal evidence does not allow for such a firm connection. In my view, Ḥezekiah's poem could just as plausibly have been written in the early part of the 18th century, during the persecutions and "voluntary" conversions described in *Kitāb-i Sar-guzasht-i Kāshān dar bāb-i ʿIbrī va Goyimi-yi Sānī*, the second Judaeo-Persian chronicle, or even during the forced conversion of the Jews of Mashhad in 1836 (although there appears to be no textual documentation of this event and historians rely exclusively on oral accounts).[31] What is beyond doubt is that these moving verses, with the funereal *radīf, īn dīn-i parishānī*, were written by a conscience-stricken rabbi at a time when he and his community succumbed to pressures to convert to Islam and the community continued to be riven by internal dissensions:

O Lord, You Who are One,
Peerless, and without compare,
Remove from our heads
This afflicting faith [*īn dīn-i parīshānī*]
[…]
By the grace of Aaron's God,
Deliver us from this faith
[…]
We are split into seventy groups[32]
The crazed Mosaic nation,
Driven to madness through
This afflicting faith.
We're without synagogue and Torah;
Plunged into a state of sorrow;
[…]
We're without Sabbaths
[…]
We're without schools and teachers;
[…]
We're without New Year; the fast [of Yom Kippur]
[…]
We lack spiritual guides and teachers
[…]
We're without rule of Law,
We've increased Islam's riches
[…]

30 Wilhelm Bacher, "Elégie d'un poète judéo-persan contemporain de la persecution de Schah Abbas II," *Revue des études juives* 48 (1908), pp. 94-105.

31 Raphael Patai, *Jadīd al-Islām. The Jewish "New Muslims" of Meshhed*, Detroit 1997.

32 The idea of seventy, seventy-one, or seventy-two nations/languages, to which some seventy sects can be traced, is ancient and can be found in both Jewish and Muslim sources; see Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 1, p. 173, vol. 5, pp. 194-5 n. 72; A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* 1-8, Leiden 1936-1971, vol. 5, p. 135f (*firqatun/firāq*).

Through Muslim ways we've lost our souls;
[…]
We have lost everything
[…]
We've gambled our fortune away,
Having cast our own die,
And with our hands we've grasped
The Muslim prayer beads
[…]

Pathetically, Ḥezekiah concludes,

My name is Ḥezekiah,
I am a Muslim preacher [*ākhūnd*];
I am ashamed of what I've done for
This afflicting faith.
I used to drink cup after cup of wine
From the Jewish faith, but now
I drink cup after cup of poison from
This afflicting faith.

2. In addition to contending with periodic persecutions and bouts of forced conversions, Iranian Jews in the late Middle Ages also had to resist the attractions of the majority faith, particularly its Sufi expressions. The attractions of literary Sufism (evident in the epics of Shāhīn and even more so in those of ʿImrānī) aside, Jewish ambivalence toward Sufi teachings and rites is clearly expressed in two diametrically opposite Judaeo-Persian poems. The first is from the pen of the erudite poet Siman Ṭov Melammed, the spiritual head of the community of Mashhad until his death (either in 1823 or 1828). It is embedded in his bilingual (Judaeo-Persian and Hebrew) religious-mystical opus, *Ḥayāt al-rūḥ* ["The Life of the Soul"], and it is an idealized, downright passionate paean in praise of Sufism with the refrain,

Godly and radiant like roses
The Sufis are, the Sufis,
Whose carnal soul is dead,
Doused their desires, the Sufis.

Without mentioning any specific *ṭarīqa*, Melammed characterizes the Sufis as,

Well-spoken, generous
To beggars and kings alike;
Forgiving all sins
[…]
Clad in threads, drinking dregs
[…]
Their hospices are spacious castles,
Their tables, [are] gardens, and rose beds
[…]

Of pleasant face, of pleasant state,
Good character, right bearing,
[…]
Well-mannered and discerning.[33]

It is doubtful that Iranian Jews shared Melammed's enthusiastic views *en masse*, for another, equally passionate anti-Sufi poem written by a poet named Jacob, whose identity and period are still unknown, has also come to light. It denounces fervently anyone who forsakes the Jewish faith and disparages unsparingly the (unidentified) Sufi ceremony of initiation:

Whoever abandons his faith
Becomes a savage like Majnūn,[34]
Roaming about, confused
[…]
Bravely he is called a friend [*yār*],[35]
But he turns common instead of chosen[36]
[…]
They make him don a golden tunic,
An orange sash over his head,
While all around him they cry, "Hū," "Hū";[37]
Rascal, dervish minstrels before him
Surround him, front and back,
Leaping around him for his sake
[…]
They shout around him on every side,
They strike their breasts and clamor
[…]
According to Jacob, the initiate soon comes to regret his choice:
His night and day have both grown dark;
He sighs constantly and groans,
And all his plans are spoiled;
[…]
He has become intimate with grief,
And he is consumed by sorrow,
[…][38]

3. Given the intermittent persecutions recorded by the two Judaeo-Persian chronicles mentioned above, it should not be surprising to find that the Afghan conquest elicited at least one panegyric in praise of the Sunnī Afghan Shāh Ashraf (r. 1725-29) who, the Jews hoped, would perhaps alleviate their capricious treatment at the hands of the increasingly severe Shīʿī hierocracy of the Safavids. Such a panegyric

33 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden,* pp. 262-5.
34 The distraught Bedouin lover of Layla and the paragon of mystical lovers in Sufi literature.
35 A common Sufi designation for fellow mystics.
36 That is, he relinquishes the biblical "chosen people" status of the Jews.
37 The ecstatic utterance derived from Ar. *hūwa* (He) referring to God.
38 Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden* , pp. 265-7.

was written by Binyamin b. Misha'el, known by the pen name "Amīnā" (d. after 1732). A prolific poet who wrote many excellent Hebrew, Persian, and bilingual Hebrew-Judaeo-Persian poems, Amīnā was an important member of the Jewish community of Kāshān. Having lived between 1672/73-1732, he must have experienced first hand the oppressive policies of Ṭahmāsp Khān, the future Nādir Shāh (r. 1736-47), described in *Kitāb-i Sar-Guzasht-i Kāshān*. His exaggerated praise of Shāh Ashraf testifies less to this short-lived shah's political abilities than to the Jews' hope, also clearly expressed in *Kitāb-i Sar-guzasht-i Kāshān*, that their condition might improve under the new Sunnī regime, at least as far as freedom to practice their religion was concerned. Amīnā repeatedly appeals to the Afghan conqueror's sense of justice:

> O just Shāh Ashraf, your dower will certainly grow,
> First Egypt and India second, third Rome, and China fourth.
> May God be your refuge and protector; because of you endure
> First justice and faith second, third honor, and religion fourth.
> Through the blessing of your good fortune, in Iran perished
> First war and anger second, third rage, and vengeance fourth…[39]

IV. A Judaeo-Persian philosophical-theological treatise

Ḥovot Yehudah ["The Duties of Judah"] is a Judaeo-Persian philosophical-theological treatise (with many Hebrew words whose English translation is italicized below) written in 1686 by R. Yehudah b. El'azar. A physician by profession hailing from either Isfahan or Kashan, R. Yehudah undertook to outline the basic tenets of the Jewish faith, much of it based primarily on the Thirteen Articles of Faith of Moses Maimonides (d. 1240).[40] What is important about *Ḥovot Yehudah* from the perspective of this article is not Yehudah b. El'azar's elaboration of the articles of the Jewish faith but his perception of the non-Jewish world around him. Written only some twenty five years after the wave of forced conversions under Shāh 'Abbās II, the polemical features of this treatise mirror the tensions still felt within the Jewish communities of his day. Clearly responding to conversionary pressures, R. Yehudah emphasizes several times the idea of the Jewish people's divine election:

> …although God's beneficence [*iḥsān*] extends equally to all *mankind*, He chose one people from among the nations and made them special [*makhṣūṣ*] with regard to their worship of Him…Since the Israelites are a chosen people, their [mode of] worship is different and special [in comparison with] the common one of the nations of the world.

According to R. Yehudah, this chosen status is discernible through the Israelites' greater purity (due to women's observance of ritual purity laws), and God's direct

39 Ibid., p. 292.
40 Amnon Netzer, *Ḥobot Yehudah le-Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar*, Jerusalem 1995.

protection of and involvement in Jewish history. For the same reasons, true prophecy exists only among the Jews for, "the nations, however *proficient in wisdom*, they cannot [truly] prophesy since they are not under the yoke of the Torah." In what can be considered a direct response to the waves of conversion less than a generation earlier, R. Yehudah insists that it is impossible for Jews to change their religion:

> They cannot belong to another faith and religion because, whether they change their religion willingly, or are forced to do so and have no escape, they still remain *Children of Israel…* [for it is written], *"Even though he sinned, he is an Israelite"* [BT, Sanhedrin, 44.61].

Adding more proof verses, R. Yehudah recounts that in the view of R. Meʿir, one of the great sages of the Talmud, "the Israelites are always to be regarded as *children*, even if they are strangers and are ignorant … even if they should become idolaters, as it is written *depraved children*" [Isa. 1:4]. R. Yehudah does not hesitate to attack what he believed to be erroneous beliefs of both Christians and Muslims. He adduces standard Jewish polemical objections to the virgin birth, Jesus's divine sonship, and his death to atone for the sins of mankind. Like Maimonides, R. Yehudah ranks Moses' prophetic powers above all others who succeeded him, presumably including Muḥammad. Clearly responding to the charge of *naskh*, according to R. Yehudah the "heavenly Torah" can never be abrogated and is inimitable, although he does not use the technical term *iʿjāz* [*al-Qurʾān*].[41]

The few texts presented here briefly are not, strictly speaking, historical yet they are considerably revealing about the extent and the manner in which Iranian Jews related to their Muslim environment throughout the latter part of the Middle Ages which, in Iran, can be said to have lasted until the advent of the Qājār dynasty (1779-1924). A gradual, if not exactly linear, deterioration of their condition, especially while passing from Sunnī to Shīʿī domination, is plainly discernible. Equally apparent from these texts is the fact that the Iranian Jews' struggle for physical survival was accompanied by painful spiritual tensions as well, against both the attractions of Islam, especially in its Sufi aspect, and the conversionary pressures emanating from the increasingly more harsh Shīʿī religious establishment toward a Jewry progressively weakened demographically and intellectually. These texts, to which we may be able to add many more from the large number of unexplored Judaeo-Persian manuscripts, mirror the hardships of pre-modern Iranian Jewry. A judicious use of them helps shed light on many psychological aspects of Jewish life in Iran.

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41 Vera B. Moreen, "Jewish Responses to Anti-Jewish Muslim Polemics in Two Judaeo-Persian Texts," in *Irano-Judaica IV: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages*, eds. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer, Jerusalem, pp. 203-13; ead., "A Seventeenth-Century Iranian Rabbi's Polemical Remarks on Jews, Christians, and Muslims," in *Safavid Iran and Her Neighbors*, ed. Michel Mazzaoui, Salt Lake City 2003, pp. 157-68.

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