



ISFAHAN XVIII. JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The beginning of the Jewish settlement in Isfahan is mixed with legends, but there are fragmentary source materials that enable us to reconstruct the major historical events concerning its Jewish community. According to *The Standard Jewish Encyclopaedia* (s.v. Isfahan), “The Talmud ascribes the foundation of Isfahan to Jews exiled by Nebuchadnezzar.” Muslim geographers such as Moqaddasi/Maqdesi (p. 388), Ebn al-Ḥadwqal (pp. 366-67), Ebn al-Faqih (pp. 261-62), and Yāqut Ḥamawī (I, pp. 295 ff., IV, pp. 1044-45) report the tradition that the town of Yahudiya (lit. the town of Jews), the center of Isfahan, was so called, because the exiled Jews of Babylonia chose to settle in that area, which probably would mean during the first phase of the Achaemenian Empire. Ebn al-Faqih records a tradition according to which “When the Jews emigrated from Jerusalem, fleeing from Nebuchadnezzar (Boḵt-al-Naşr), they carried with them a sample of the water and of the soil of Jerusalem. They did not settle down anywhere or in any city without examining the water and the soil of each place. This they did all along until they reached the city of Isfahan. There they rested, examined water and soil and found that both resembled Jerusalem. Upon that they settled there, cultivated the soil, raised children and grandchildren, and today the name of



this settlement is Yahudiyah” (Ebn al-Faqih, pp. 261-62; cf. Ebn al-Ḥawqal, pp. 366-67, tr., II, p. 358). According to Guy Le Strange, the medieval Yahudiya is the same town that was enlarged under the Safavids (Le Strange, p. 204).

According to Armenian sources, (Moses Khorenats'i, tr. Thomson, p. 293) the Sasanian Šāpūr II (r. 309-79) transferred many Jews from Armenia and settled them in Isfahan. According to the Middle Persian text *Šahris-tānihā ī Ērān*, the Sasanian king, Yazdegerd I (r. 399-421), settled Jews in Jay (Gay) at the request of his Jewish wife Šōšan-doḳt. Šōšan-doḳt, who is also credited by the same source with the founding of Šōš (an obvious anachronistic identification) is called the daughter of exilarch (*rēš-gālutak ī Yahudān šāh*) and the mother of Bahrām V Gōr (q.v.; *Šahristānihā ī Ērān*, secs. 47, 53; Darmesteter; Gray). This particular exilarch who is mentioned as the father of Šōšan-doḳt is not known otherwise. He may have been either Mar Kahana I, Mar Yemar, or Mar Zuṭra I, who successively filled the position of exilarch (*reš galuta*) for brief periods about that time. According to Ḥamza Ešfahāni, half of the Jewish population of Isfahan were killed and their sons enslaved by the order of the Sasanian king, Pērōz (r. 459-84), when there spread the rumor that Jews had flayed alive two Zoroastrian priests and used their skins in their tanning industry (Ḥamza, ed. Gottwaldt, pp. 55-56; Levy, tr., pp. 144, 147-48; Widengren, p. 143). This incident—if it happened at all, since it is not related by other known primary sources—might have taken place in 472 C.E.

In anticipation for the coming of the Messiah, the Jews of Isfahan celebrated the conquest of the city by the Arabs. According to Abu No‘aym (I, pp. 21-22) the Jews of Isfahān, while dancing and playing music, went to the gate of the city to receive the Arab conquerors. About a hundred years later, a Jew from Isfahan by the name Abu ‘Isā (q.v.) declared himself a messenger of the expected Messiah (*rasul al-masiḥ al-montazar*) and charged by God to rescue the children of Israel from the rule of insubordinate people. He prohibited divorce, eating of meat, and wine drinking and acknowledged the prophethood of Jesus, and Moḥammad. He gathered many thousands armed Jews and rebelled against the rule of the last Omayyad caliph, Marwān II (r. 744-50). Neither the details of his rise are known nor the exact date of his revolution, which is given differently in sources. According to Abu'l-Faṭḥ Moḥammad Šahrestāni, he founded a sect called ‘Isawiya after him and was eventually killed along with his followers near Ray (Šahrestāni, p. 168; tr. Haarbrücker, I, pp. 254-55; tr. Šadr Torka, pp. 168-69; Pines). The rise of Abu ‘Isā is recorded as an important Messianic movement in Jewish history



(Qerqisāni, tr. pp. 382-83). This event together with the report of Abu No‘aym indicates that Isfahan must have been populated with a large number of Jews who could allow themselves to take hazardous actions. Around the year 1179, another Jewish Messianic movement originated in Isfahan under the leadership of certain Abu Sa‘id b. Dāwud. It was reported that Maimonides had sent a special messenger to Isfahan, allegedly to inquire about this movement (Baer, pp. 155 ff.). Benjamin of Tudela (pp. 82, 88), who visited Persia around the 1160s, stated that Isfahan was the seat of the chief rabbi called Sar Šalom, who was appointed by the exilarch of Baghdad over all Jewish communities of Persia. According to this source Isfahan had a Jewish population of 15,000 souls.

At the beginning of the 17th century, Isfahan, located almost in the center of the Safavid kingdom with easy access to the Persian Gulf and at a safe distance from the Ottomon threat, was in the ideal position to become its administrative, political, religious, and commercial center. In 1005/1596-96, Shah ‘Abbās I the Great (r. 995-1038/1587-1629) made it the capital city of Persia and did not spare any efforts to rebuild, beautify, and enlarge it. He turned Isfahan into “the most famous and romantic of the cities of the east” (Curzon, II, p. 22), a cosmopolitan metropolis that became the residential and meeting place of Christian minorities, and European travelers, envoys, emissaries, diplomats, and missionaries, many of whom have left a record of their stay there. Thus we possess more information about the Jews of Isfahan during the Safavid period (1501-1736). According to *Ketāb-e anusi*, a versified history by the Jewish poet of Kāšān, Bābā’i ben Loṭf (q.v.), Jews of Isfahan, like the Jews of many parts of Persia, were severely persecuted under the Safavids (Seligsohn; Bacher; Fischel; Spicehandler; Netzer; Moreen). Nevertheless, they continued to conduct their religious life and cultivate their culture. ‘Emrāni (1454-after 1536, q.v.), one of the two great Judeo-Persian poets, flourished in Isfahan (Netzer, 1973, p. 41; Yeroushalami). In the colophon of an Armenian manuscript written in Isfahan in 1646, the Jews of Isfahan are praised for their knowledge and scholarship: “They know by heart the whole Bible, men and women, boys and girls. For they are very learned and of an inquiring disposition; they ponder over the deep laws of God; they do not pay heavy taxes as is being done in our land of Armenia, nor do all of them devote their time to handicrafts like our own people, for their art is of reading and learning, and to this only do they dedicate their time. Great and small are given to asking questions as did the old Athenians (Ajamian, p. 120). When Nāder Shah Afšār (r. 1148-60/1736-47) decided to have the Bible, and the



Qur'an translated into Persian, the rabbi Bābā'i ben Nuri'el (q.v.) of Isfahan was the one chosen to translate the Pentateuch and the Psalms of David from Hebrew with the help of other rabbis.

The number of the Jews of Isfahan decreased to an average estimated of 300 families, or about 1,800 souls (d'Beth Hillel, p. 109; Benjamin, II, pp. 183 ff.), even though, Isfahan in 1889 was considered as the largest of all Jewish communities in Persia (Neumark, p. 85). The turning point for modern education in Isfahan was the opening of the Alliance (q.v.) school in 1901 for the Jews of the city. According to the Alliance, Isfahan was the home of about 6,000 Jews in 1903-04 (Tsadik, 2005, p. 275). In 1948 there were an estimated of 10,000 Jews living in Isfahan, the majority of whom emigrated to Israel. At the beginning of the Islamic regime in Iran, there lived in Isfahan an estimated 3,000 Jews. The Jews of Isfahan bury their dead in a place called Ester (Esther) Kātun near Pir Bakrān village, some 30 km southwest of Isfahan (Honarfar, pp. 26, 28-29). The place is known in Hebrew as Seraḥ bat Ašer in the name of the granddaughter of Jacob the Prophet (Genesis 46:17; Targum Yerushalmi on Genesis 49:21, on Numbers 27:46), and as such is revered by Jews all over Persia. Ernst Herzfeld suggested the Jewish origin of the tomb of Pir Bakrān. "In the floor a rock is shown with the impression of a horse's hoof, with which the name of the prophet Elijah is linked ... The rock, perhaps, originally meant to replace the rock in the temple of Jerusalem. The Sūfī has usurped the Jewish sanctuary" (Herzfeld, quoted by Godard).

According to the report prepared by the Jewish Central Organization (Anjoman-e kalimiān) in Tehran, there were 1,500 Jews living in Isfahan in 2003, of whom 700 resided in the Jewish neighborhood (*maḥalla*) in Jubāra quarter (see [Figure 1](#) and

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