Published: May 1, 2012
Last Updated: April 27, 2017

KASHAN VIII. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES (1) JEWISH COMMUNITY

KASHAN

viii. Religious Communities

This sub-entry is devided into two sections:

(1) Jewish community.

(2) Bahai community.

(1) Jewish Community

Kashan was home to an important Jewish community and cultural center starting at least in the Safavid period. Although Kashan's Jewish dialect indicates an ancient presence in the region, medieval sources do not mention a Jewish community among the Shiʿite population of Kashan (Ṣafā , I, p. 232). It is possible that prior to the Safavid period Kashan Jews mostly inhabited the surrounding villages, such as Ārān and Bidgol, where the variation of the Central Dialect spoken was very similar to the one used by the Jewish

community of Kashan.

The migration of the Jews into Kashan may well have begun to increase early in the 16th century with the Safavid state-sponsored expansion of the silk industry, in which the Jews played a central role in trade and manufacturing. In places such as Ārān, there is evidence of Jewish rural population until the early years of the 19th century, when Jews are said to have converted to Islam (Levi, III, pp. 520-21; Shofet, p. 89). This coincided with the ascendancy of *oṣuli* Shiʿism and drastic changes in Iran's legal system.

The condition of Jews under the Safavids may be characterized as a mix of relative economic prosperity and religious persecution. Voluntary and involuntary conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was not unusual under Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1588-1629), and it was at times accompanied by material incentives (Della Valle, tr., pp. 573, 606). However, instances of mass conversion seem to have been limited to Isfahan, where converts for the most part reverted to Judaism. The pressure for conversion of Jews to Islam took on a more aggressive and violent tone under Shah ʿAbbās II (r. 1642-66), as part of a campaign led by the grand vizier Moḥammad Beg, aimed at "purifying" the urban centers from *šariʿa*-prohibited vices and "impurities." In order to protect Muslims against possible contact with "impure" (*najes*) non-Muslims, the Jews of Isfahan were given the choice of either converting to Islam or moving out of their homes in the cities (Waḥid Qazvini, p. 218). These and other measures, such as closure of Isfahan's brothels and coffeehouses and other miscellaneous so-called pollutants, such as fur sold by Armenian merchants, were meant to impose an Islamic appearance on the city, while aiming to extort money from Jews and Armenians and perhaps, at the same time, to divert public attention away from economic crises of the time (Matthee, pp. 20, 23-28). According to a contemporary Kāšāni Jewish source, *Ketāb-e anusi* (Book of the forced convert), a versified account by Bābāʾi Ben Loṭf, the Jews of Kashan were forced to convert to Islam in 1656 (Moreen, p. 95).

Almost seven years later, in 1662, Kashan new Muslims reverted to Judaism after intervention by the prominent Shiʿite Sufi and scholar Mollā Moḥsen-Moḥammad Fayż Kāšāni (d. 1679) and the efforts of a Kashan Jewish leader, Mollā Ebrāhim. In reverting to Judaism, the Jews had to pay back the financial rewards they had been granted for converting to Islam and repay the suspended poll tax (*jezya*) levied on the adherents of officially recognized non-Muslim faiths. This was a "hefty sum" (*mablāḡ-e ḵaṭir*) paid annually,

according to one chronicle, and points to the affluence of at least some Kashan Jews (Waḥid Qazvini, p. 218; Māšiaḥ Ben Rafāʾel, apud Netzer, 1988; Moreen, pp. 130-32). A small community of Jewish converts to Islam referred to as *Jadid*s (short for *Jadid-al- Eslām* "new convert"), who lived in their own quarter and were known for their tenacity in holding to Islam, survived until the 20th century (Shofet, p. 89).

Among the wealthy and cosmopolitan Kashan Jews of the Safavid period was a certain Mollā Masiḥ, a Jewish physician whose family came from Safet in Palestine and whom Shah ʿAbbās I brought from Shiraz to Kashan as his personal resident physician. Pietro Della Valle met the innovative and inquisitive physician in 1618 and became impressed by the physician's knowledge, his collection of printed books and manuscripts, and his immense credibility in Kashan (Della Valle, tr., p. 574).

According to Bābāʾi Ben Farhād (pp. 145-46), under the brief rule of Maḥmud and Ašraf Afghan (r. 1724-26) Kashan Jews were especially favored and well-to-do with thirteen functioning synagogues. During this time, the status of non-Muslims (including Zoroastrians) reportedly even superseded that of the Shiʿites. However, according to Bābāʾi Ben Farhād and another contemporary Jewish poet, Benyāmin Aminā, after the rise of Nāderqoli (the future Nāder Shah) the condition of Kashan Jews deteriorated, leading to yet another nominal mass conversion to Islam, this time lasting seven months (Netzer, 1977; 1988). It is possible that such a negotiated mass conversion was a countermeasure by the Jews to avoid multiple payments of *jezya* taxes to various contenders during a civil war and in the absence of central rule.

Religion and culture. Kashan in the early modern era is known for its poets and scholars, including Bābāʾi ben Loṭf, his grandson Bābāʾi Ben Farhād, Judah ben Eleazar, Benyāmin Aminā , and the well-known eccentric and multi-confessional poet and the favorite of the Mughal emperor Dārā Šokōh, Saʿid Sarmad (d. 1661), though Sarmad's city of origin is not known for certain (Schimmel and Waghmar, p. 116; Ṣafā , V/2, pp. 1228-30). Kashan's Jewish literary tradition is the only one of its kind that has survived. This cultural heritage, along with a heterodox Karaite link that survived until the early 20th century (Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, pp. 38-40; Mousa Amanat, pp. 191-92), as well as the overrepresentation of Kashan rabbis as community leaders in the Pahlavi period (Shofet, pp. 254-66), point to the community's cultural significance. Even though Kashan was never a center of Jewish learning or the seat of a yeshiva, it may very well owe its cultural importance to the city's

cosmopolitan character and its geographic location on the crossroads of trade and as a center of industry.

However, the wide gap in Jewish written accounts after the 18th century may in part be explained by the community's state of education. With the exception of high-ranking rabbis and physicians, the Jews were generally deprived of learning Persian and Arabic because of a more strict enforcement of impurity laws. A notable example of a highly educated Jewish scholar was Ḥakim Hārun of Kashan, who became a court physician in Tehran and was known for his immense wealth and vast medical knowlege (Tsadik, p. 11, note 43; Mehrdad Amanat, 2010, p. 123, n. 9).

Nevertheless, education among Kashan Jews was limited to the study of Hebrew and Judeo-Persian at the synagogue. This contributed to an increase level of cultural isolation. Kashan's first Jewish school started in 1910-11 and was named after its founder, Āqā Yequtiyel, after Jewish elders opposed an initiative of the Alliance Israélite Universelle for a new school. The Alliance girl's school was established some time later. Women were traditionally deprived of formal education, but young girls and teenagers received training in homemaking and mostly silkrelated crafts by spending time in homes of other Jewish families as apprentices (*dāsi* "helper") .

By the late 19th century, despite its rich cultural heritage, Kashan's Jewish community became increasingly monolithic under the control of the traditionalist rabbis, who were primarily concerned with the strict observance of the Sabbath and dietary laws. This was in part due to pressure from Shiʿite ulama, whose message to the Jews was, according to one source, "Either convert to Islam or obey your own clergy" (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, p. 257). In one instance, a disenfranchised immigrant Jewish woman, accused of buying less expensive, non-Kosher meat, was reportedly placed in a sack and beaten with a stick by a rabbi. In another instance, an elderly Jewish man had to spend the night in the cold outside the Kashan city gate, as the rabbis had prohibited entry though the gate on the Sabbath (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, pp. 256-57).

Extreme expressions of devotional piety among Kashan Jews were not uncommon. Examples included fasting regularly twice a week and self-flagellation in the form of whipping administered by a rabbi as repentance for one's sins on Yom Kippur, during which time some even stayed in the synagogue all day to avoid seeing non-Jews (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat,

2006, pp. 188, 233, 257-58). Nevertheless, the rabbis did not have exclusive control over the religious life of the Jewish community. We know of at least of one example of a well-liked, enlightened mystic (*ʿāref*), a certain ʿAšur, late in the 19th century, with non-conformist views mostly held in private. He reportedly "refused to be called a rabbi (*mollā*), because he scorned the title" (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, pp. 278-79). A more pronounced and widespread voice of nonconformity in this period was expressed by a small community of mostly younger Jewish men who were attracted to the newly founded Bahai faith (see bahaism), which, unlike Islam, did not demand a complete break with the converts' Jewish past. One instance of mass conversion among Kashan Jews to the Bahai faith is reported in the late 19th century, when the followers of a rabbi, a certain Mollā Solyamān, voluntarily converted en masse but subsequently reverted to Judaism (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, p. 214). A more common pattern of conversion was more widespread among young Jewish men from Kashan who left home in search of economic opportunities in trade centers such as Hamadān or Arāk and saw conversion to the Bahai faith as a means of reconciliation with the modernity they encountered there. The rabbis saw it as their duty to oppose conversions and sought the help of the local governors, who were ready to intervene and imprison the converts and collect fines before releasing them (Rayḥāni, tr, Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, pp. 224-33).

Population and economy. Up to the 1850s, Kashan Jews are reported to have been relatively prosperous and politically less vulnerable than other Jewish communities. They were active participants in Kashan's silk industry as traders and dyers of silk used in manufacturing carpets, fine velvets, brocades, and embroidery (Stern, pp. 179, 182; Benjamin, pp. 195-96; Curzon, II, pp. 13, 525). Yet later in the century the Jews of Kashan suffered a distinct decline in living standards as a result of being increasingly excluded for religious reasons from having a business in the main bazaar. This may have been contrived by Muslim merchants to eliminate competition by their Jewish counterparts. They were also affected by a general decline in Kashan's bustling economy, in part due to Western domination of the market in inexpensive textiles after the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, as late as the early 20th century, Kashan Jews played an active role in the silk trade and manufacturing, organized based on gender divides. Jewish women had a monopoly over sorting of silk yarns, a trade they engaged in at home using a manual loom (*kupi*). The Jewish men engaged in trade of raw silk produced locally and in Gilān and in the spinning of the sorted yarn for use by weavers,

who were mostly Muslim men. Some Jewish men were engaged in trade and production. They purchased the raw silk, supervised its manufacturing, and exported textile products such as scarves and shawls to places like Kurdistan, where they were used for local traditional attire (Mousa Amanat, p. 39).

Unlike other large Jewish centers in Iran, Kashan was relatively immune to anti-Jewish riots. However, at least on one occasion around the turn of the century, a persecution episode (*yahud begiri*) followed a passion play (*taʿzia*) performance. The affair canme to an end after the Jewish elders made a heavy payment to the instigatiors (Rayḥāni, in Mehrdad Amanat, 2006, pp. 241-42). Relations of Jews with the conservative Shiʿite majority were often marred by the stigma of impurity (*najāsat*), which created a social barrier and caused isolation. Though there was much distrust, congenial relations also existed between the two groups. The community leaders included rabbis (*haḵamim*), elders (*kadḵodās*), and those with influence with the authorities. It was customary for the community leaders to present gifts to the governor on occasions such as Nowruz.

According to estimates by outsiders, the Kashan Jewish community was 200 families in size in the mid-19th century and 1,800 individuals around the turn of the 20th century. They mostly, but not exclusively, lived in the Jewish quarter. According to another source, among a variety of other taxes, only fifty to sixty families paid a meager annual poll tax of one toman per household, though this may well be based on a deliberately loose definition of a household which tends to underestimate the numbers for tax purposes (Stern, p. 171; Tsadik, p. 9; Abbot, p. 122).

A Jewish council of elders and notables (Anjoman-e Kalimiān-e Kāšān) was in charge of community affairs. In the early decades of the 20th century, the community had seven functioning synagogues, including one built by and named after a Jewish convert to Islam, Naṣr-Allāh (Mollā Nisān; Shofet, pp. 54-56). The Jewish cemetery, known as Bet Haym and later Beheštiya, was a large, unenclosed, bare tract of land located outside the ʿĀttar Gate of the city with a number of tombstones vandalized, persumably by Muslims. Bodies were washed at home and then carried by relatives to the cemetery (Mousa Amanat, p. 49). Among Kashan's Jewish sacred sites, the tomb of the Kabbalist Moše Halevi is worthy of note (Shofet, pp. 62-63).

By 1943, after waves of immigration to trade centers such as Hamadan, Rasht, Arāk, and primarily to Tehran, only 1,380 Jews remained in Kashan (*ʿĀlam-e*

Yahud, no. 22, 15 January 1946, p. 379; no. 28, 12 March 1946, pp. 472–73). Today no sign of the Jewish community is visible in Kashan, an indication of Iran's increasing ethnic and religious uniformity. Only a glimmer of ethnic loyalty has survived among those Jews in Tehran, California, and Israel who still claim Kashan as their city of origin.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Keith Edward Abbot, *Cities and Trade: Consul Abbot on the Economy and Society of Iran 1847-1866*, ed. Abbas Amanat, London 1983.

Mehrdad Amanat, "Negotiating Identities: Iranian Jews, Muslims and Baha'is in the Memoirs of Rayhan Rayhani (1859- 1939)," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006.

Idem, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith*, London, 2010.

Mousa Amanat, *Bahā'iān-e Kāšān*, ed. Noura Samimi, forthcoming. Bābā'i Ben Farhād, *Ketāb-e sargoḏašt-e Kāšān*, ed. Vera Basch Moreen as *Iranian Jewry During the Afghan Invasion: The Kitāb-i Sar Guzasht-i Kāshān of Bābāī b. Farhād*, Stuttgart, 1990.

Bābā'i Ben Loṭf, *Ketāb-e anusi*, see Vera Basch Moreen. Israel Josef Benjamin, *Eight Years in Asia and Africa, from 1846 to 1855*, Hannover, 1859.

George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 vols., repr., London, 1966.

Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle, il Pellegrino*, 2 vols., Brighton, UK, 1843; tr. Šoʿāʿ-al-Din Šafā as *Safar-nāma-ye Petro Delā Vāla*, Tehran, 1969.

Ḥabib Levi, *Tāriḵ-e Yahud-e Irān*, 3 vols., Los Angeles, 1984.

Rudi Matthee, "Career of Mohammad Beg Grand Vizir of Shah ʿAbbas II (r. 1642-1666)," *Iranian Studies* 24/1-4, 1991, pp. 17-36.

Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of*

Bābāi Ben Lutf's Chronicle (1617-1662), New York, 1987.

Amnon Netzer, *Sifrut parsit yehudit: Cronika šel Bābāʾi Ben Farhād*, Jerusalem, 1977.

Idem, "Bābāʾī Ben Farhād," in *EIr*. III/3, 1988, p. 297.

Ḏabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā , *Tāriḵ-e adabiyāt dar Irān*, 5 vols. in 7, Tehran, 1959-85.

Annemarie Schimmel and Burzine K. Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture,* London, 2004.

Y. Shofet, *Ḳāṭerāt-e Hāḵām Yedidyā Šofet*, Los Angeles, 2000.

Henry A. Stern, *Dawnings of Light in the East: With Biblical, Historical and Statistical Notices . . . during a Mission to the Jews of Persia . . .* , London, 1854.

Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shiʿis: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Comunity*, Stanford, Calif., 2007.

ʿEmād-a-Din Moḥammad- Ṭāher Waḥid Qazvini, *ʿAbbās-nāma yā šarḥ-e zendagāni-e 22 sāl-e Šāh ʿAbbās-e ṯāni*, ed. Ebrāhim Dehgān, Arak, 1950.