



YAZD IV. THE JEWISH DIALECT OF YAZD

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The name “Judeo-Yazdi” is applied to a Central dialect spoken by some Jews of Yazd. The Jewish community of Yazd is one of the oldest in Persia. Although it had never been large, it was divided into two neighborhoods, referred to as *ma:le* (NPers. *maḥalla*). These neighborhoods, separated by a road, are socio-economically, as well as linguistically, distinct (for another Jewish community, see [HAMADĀN ix](#)). Judeo-Yazdi is spoken only in the poorer, northern neighborhood (*un ma:le* “that neighborhood”). Jews in the southern neighborhood (*in ma:le* “this neighborhood”) speak only New Persian “with a Yazdi accent.” According to Amnon Netzer (p. 20), this linguistic situation was created because the Jews of the southern neighborhood came from [Hamadān](#).

Jews in Kermān and Rafsanjān speak dialects almost identical, to the one spoken in Yazd. Kermāni Jews came from Yazd in the 19th century. Rafsanjāni remains completely undocumented, but all informants, as well as Raphael (p. 105), assert its similarity to Judeo-Yazdi. Gabri, the Zoroastrian dialect of the same area, shows some similarities to Judeo-Yazdi, but also differences to the point of mutual incomprehensibility. Other Median Jewish dialects, such as Judeo-Isfahani, have also evolved differently.



Judeo-Yazdi belongs to the group of the [Central Dialects](#), which are in turn part of the larger Median group, that is, the group of Northern, or rather non-Southern, Western Iranian dialects. Pierre Lecoq (p. 313) refines the definition, classifying Judeo- Kermāni and Zoroastrian Yazdi (Gabri) under the southeastern sub-group of the Central Dialects. This sub-division is geographical rather than linguistic. Today, most Judeo-Yazdi speakers have already left Yazd for Tehran, Israel, or the United States. The dialect, as spoken today, is already contaminated with Persian and Hebrew, or English, and faces extinction.

Gabri, the Zoroastrian dialect of Yazd, has received much more attention than Judeo-Yazdi. The earliest studies of Gabri are from the 19th century. The description of Gabri in *Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie* is based on papers dating from as early as 1873. Gabri was studied also by D. L. R. Lorimer (1916), Harold W. Bailey (1936), [Vladimir Ivanow](#) (1940), and a number of others.

The earliest work to mention Judeo-Yazdi is a study of several Median Jewish dialects published by Ehsan Yarshater in 1974. His work is of special importance, as it contains the first documentation of a text in Judeo-Yazdi and in Judeo-Kermāni and allows an objective comparison of the phonology of the dialects. The first description of Judeo-Kermāni was published by Gilbert Lazard in 1981. Amnon Netzer refers to Judeo-Yazdi in his 1987 article about Jewish dialects of Persia, which deals mostly with Judeo-Isfahani.

More recent research has been done in Persia by Homā-doḡt Homāyun (1998), regarding the verb system in Judeo-Yazdi. In her bibliography, she mentions an unpublished paper about the Jewish dialect of Yazd done in the Research Center for Human Sciences and Cultural Sciences in Tehran.

The description and examples for the present article are taken from Judeo-Yazdi material gathered in Israel in the 1970s by Abraham Ben Meir and in 1998 by Tamar E. Gindin (see Gindin, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, and forthcoming).

Phonology. Phonological points worthy of note are the typical Median $b < *IE d(h)w$, for example *bar* “door,” *bi* “other,” and *ka-* < *kṇa-*, e.g., *ḵab* “good” (NPers. *ḵub*), *ḵā*, “eat” (past stem, NPers. *ḵord*). Some phonological differences from Judeo-Kermāni include the vowels $ö < ō$ (MPers. and Hebrew), for example *göš* “meat” and “ear,” and $ü < ūy$, for example *mü* “hair” (for a more detailed list of shifts and differences from Judeo-Kermāni, see Gindin, 1999 and idem, forthcoming).



As a rule, the stress is on the penultimate syllable. This rule is evident especially in loanwords, e.g., *móre* (Heb. “teacher”), *tálmid* (Heb. “pupil”). Stress may have a morphological or emphatic role. In these cases, it may appear on a different syllable. Emphasized words may have the stress on more than one syllable, for example, *kód-éš*, *ā’dam-éš*, *mo né-zün-in* “himself, his man, I don’t know.”

Morphology. Most nouns lack gender distinction. Interrogative pronouns distinguish a living entity (*ki* “who” vs. *či*, *čiji* “what”). Humanity is distinguished syntactically, as only human plurals show number agreement in the verb. Case is optionally distinguished only in the personal pronoun. Three degrees of determination—indefinite, definite and unmarked—are expressed differently for singular and plural (based on Gindin 2003(b), p. 53; idem, forthcoming; TABLE 1).

The plural morpheme is always stressed. *Ežāfa* use is optional. It usually takes the same form as in New Persian, that is a final *-(y)e*. In words ending with a vowel, it may change or change the word (e.g., *zū’no* “wife” becomes *zūnī-ö kā’kā* or *zūni-ö’-ye kā’kā* “the brother’s wife”).

Judeo-Yazdi possesses only one set of freestanding personal pronouns, namely *mo*, *to*, *em/éno*, *mā*, *šomā’*, *enā’/onā’*. The corresponding affixed pronouns are: *(e)m*, *(e)t/ta*, *(e)š/ša*, *mun*, *tun/tum*, *šun/šum*. They serve for oblique case only, denoting possession, direct or indirect objects of a verb, complementing prepositions, and with slight changes serving to denote the agent in transitive past verbs and modal present.

In oblique case affixes, the phonological environment determines the final nasal in plurals and the presence of *e-* in the singular. The forms in *-a* are very rare, and appear in prefixes separated from the main verb by another word, for example, *ta kóštan t-in* “I will have you killed (lit. I will give you to killing).”

The verb has two stems: present, serving for present, future, imperative, and subjunctive, and past, serving for imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect (the last two are semantically indistinct). Secondary past stems are formed by adding the suffix *-ā(r)-* (< *ād-*) to the present stem. This derivation is typical of Median dialects, while Southern dialects have *-īd-* as a weak past-stem suffix. The present stem may be as short as a single consonant, for example, *á-t-in* “I give.” In one case it completely disappears: *á-t-in* “I come”: *a-* is the durative prefix,



–*t*– is a glide consonant, and –*in* is the person suffix.

Verbs in the past and some present modal verbs are syntactically nominative, but morphologically ergative (Gindin, 2003a). Intransitive verbs show the agent by the same suffix as the present, and transitive verbs express the agent through prefixes similar or identical to the pronominal oblique case affix. Verbs use the suffixes –*in*, –*eš*, –*o*, *am*, *et*, *un* in the present tense. The present copula and intransitive (non-modal) past suffixes are identical to these suffixes except 3rd. singular copula *en*, and zero past suffix. In the intransitive past, the final consonant appears only before a suffix, thus *rā'sā* “he/she arrived,” but *rā'sār-in* “I arrived.” Modal present and transitive and modal past express the agent through the oblique case person affix as a prefix, with the exception of 1st plural *un/um*. The 3rd singular suffix in the present is for some verbs –*i*, –*e* or –*ö* (e.g. *dír-i* “he/she has”). Gilbert Lazard (p. 335) regards these as “vocal present stems” with a zero suffix.

Aspect and modal affixes, as well as negation, come right before the stem; that is, in transitive past verbs, they come between the prefix and the stem. These affixes include: perfect – stressed *e* before the past stem: *é-šu* “he/she had gone,” *t-é-di* “you have seen”; present and imperfect (habitual past) – accented *a*: *á-ker-in* “I am doing,” *šum-á-bā* “they used to say.” Subjunctive and imperative *ve-/vo-/o-* are followed by the present stem. Second singular has a zero suffix in the imperative. An exception is the verb “to give,” which has an *a-* prefix and a different present stem in the subjunctive and imperative: *á-do* “give (thou)!”

Stress on the root syllable distinguishes future or general present statements (knowledge, feeling, habits) from the present: *a-zü'n-o* “he/she knows,” *a-kóš-in* “I will kill.”

The perfect may optionally be constructed with the present or past copula, with no semantic difference. In intransitive verbs, the copula agrees in person with the subject, for example, *ímo ber-in* “I had come.” In transitive verbs, it takes the form of 3rd singular, for example, *m-é-di n-én* “I have never seen.”

The passive voice hardly exists. When it does appear, it uses the New Persian passive participle, phonetically modified for Judeo-Yazdi. The auxiliary is usually “to come” (*úmo*, *á-t-e*), or “to be” (*bu*, *en*).

Compound verbs are especially current with Hebrew infinitives, for example,



litkā'ten šun-kā' “they got married.” In transitive past compound verbs, when the person prefix is separated from the verb stem, the singular assumes the form in *-a* (*ma, ta, ša*). The aspect affix remains “glued” to the verb stem, for example, *ša göš e-kā*, “he had listened/obeyed” (nominal element *göš* “ear”).

The present copula is identical to the person suffix (*in, eš*, etc.), except 3rd singular *en*. The verb “to have” lacks an *a* prefix in the present, thus *dír-in* “I have.” Some additional words of interest are: *-borz-* present stem “to go up,” *rej* “day,” *jen* “woman,” *-zun-* present stem “to know,” *esbo* “dog,” *kórā* “God,” *kéro* “house,” *por* “son” (Judeo-Kermāni: *pur*), *kákā* “brother,” *iv* “water,” *bóraḵs-* present stem “to escape” (taken by young Israelis to be a Hebrew loanword, but actually = NPers. *goriḵtan*), *gaf + köv-* “to talk” (*-köv-* present stem “to hit,” *gaf* hypercorrected by one informant to *ḥarf*, although it originates from OPers. *gaub-* > NPers. *goftan*).

Informants 1998: Miriam Ben Meir, born in Yazd around 1920, immigrated to Israel in 1952, lives in Jerusalem, a housewife. *Rachel Dayan* (Miriam Ben Meir’s daughter), born in Yazd, 1950, immigrated to Israel in 1952, lives in Jerusalem, employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Miriam Eldadi* (Ora Emdadi’s mother, Eliyahu’s aunt), born in Yazd, 1925, immigrated to Israel in 1963, lived in Beit Shemesh, and now lives in Jerusalem, a housewife. *Eliyahu Emdadi*, born in Yazd, 1941 (according to identity card), immigrated to Israel in 1963, lived in Beit Shemesh, and now lives in Jerusalem; senior manager in the Ministry of Health. *Ora Emdadi* (Eliyahu’s wife, Miriam Eldadi’s daughter), born in Yazd, 1942, immigrated to Israel in 1963, lived in Beit Shemesh, and now lives in Jerusalem, a housewife. *Ruh-Angiz Shamai (Kalanit Hamedani-Cohan)*, born in Yazd, 1945, moved to Tehran 1964, immigrated to Israel in 1987, lives in Bat-Yam. *Dorit Yitzhaqi*, born in Tehran (to a Yazdi family), 1976, immigrated to Israel in 1987, lives in Kefar Sava, a student. Yitzhaqi and Dayan only helped me with the interpretations.

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