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Conversion, Identity, and Memory in Iranian-Jewish Historiography: The Jews of Mashhad

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Abstract

The paper discusses the narratives of Jews from Mashhad, who were forced to convert to Islam in 1839. The community narrative as well as academic research is dominated by a modern understanding of religious identity and religious boundaries that fail to account for the diversity of practices among the community of converts, including multiple forms of religious belonging, and the switching of identities according to time and place. Based on historical sources and interviews with descendants from the Mashhadi community, the paper traces how a particular narrative of the history of the Jews from Mashhad prevailed and which significance this narrative entails for Mashhadi community and identity until today. While the Jews from Mashhad are a rather unique case among Iranian Jews—due to the long period in which they lived as converts—their pattern of memory building reflects a general trend among Jews from the Muslim world to assimilate to modern ideas of being Jewish.

Keywords: conversion; crypto-Jews; Iranian Jews; Mashhad; Iran; religious identity

In January 2019, I was in Mashhad for two days as part of a longer visit to Iran.¹ A friend showed me around the former Jewish quarter, where today hardly any memory of its Jewish past remains. Mashhad is the second largest city in Iran, located in the province of Khorasan, and the most important place for Shi'i pilgrimage in Iran, as it is home to the shrine of Imam Reza. The Mashhadi community stands out in the history of Iranian Jews, since they were forced to convert to Islam in 1839 and lived secretly as Jews for several generations.² However, there also were others, who did not define themselves clearly as Jews, Muslims, or even converts, since their self-understanding, their practices, and their relationships with the various (Muslim and Jewish) communities did not fit into any of these categories.

Today there are no more Jews living in Mashhad, and the space for ambiguities is extremely small when it comes to official religiosity in Iran. Although Judaism is among the legally recognized religions and there are several active Jewish communities in Iran, the drive of the authorities to construct the Iranian public sphere as religiously homogenous is predominant.³ However, ideas of religious identity

¹This trip to Iran was part of my research project, “Narratives of Being Jewish in Iran,” conducted at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (2018–21). The research is based on long-term collaboration with informants in Iran and interviews with Iranian Jews in Iran, Israel, Europe, and the United States, as well as biographical research. All interlocutor names are pseudonyms.

²Reuben Kashani, *Anuse Mashhad* (Jerusalem: privately published, 1979); Rafael Patai, *Jadid al-Islam: The Jewish “New Muslims” of Meshhad* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Yaghoub Dilmanian, *History of the Jews of Mashhad 1746–1946 A.D.: From Their Entrance to Mashhad at the Time of Nader Shah Afshar until Their Migration from Mashhad to Tehran* (New York: privately published, 1999); Jaleh Pirnazar, “The Anusim of Mashhad,” in *Esther’s Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar (Beverly Hills, CA: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), 115–36; Hilda Nissimi, *The Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis: The Shaping of Religious and Communal Identity in Their Journey from Iran to New York* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2007); Haideh Sahim, “Two Wars, Two Cities, Two Religions: The Jews of Mashhad and the Herat Wars,” in *The Jews of Iran*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 75–108.

³Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity are among the legally recognized religions in Iran and have official representation in parliament, whereas the Baha’is and Ahl-i Haqq are not considered rightful religious minorities.

and religious boundaries were not always as rigid as they are today. Iranian Jewish historiography usually invokes the Pahlavi era (1925–79) as the time of religious freedom and pluralism, since the Pahlavi drive for modernization and a strong state required the suppression of religious difference to a certain degree. Although most Jews experienced considerable upward social mobility during this period, Iran's encounter with colonial modernity and accompanying concepts of exclusive national and religious identity had come to fruition by this time as well, leaving little room for multiple and overlapping identifications.

This paper deals with a time before ideas of modern nationalism and the religious identities they encapsulated gained a foothold in Iran, proposing that an understanding of Jewish life in Iran in the 19th and early 20th centuries is only possible when we historicize our concepts of religious identity and belonging. As Mana Kia points out, "This range of Persianate selves not only challenges nationalist narratives but also reveals a larger Persianate world, where proximities and similarities constituted a logic that distinguished between people while simultaneously accommodating plurality. To be a Persian was to be embedded in a set of connections with people we today consider members of different groups."⁴

It is not my intention to put forward a notion of "Persia" by essentializing a polarity between the modern and the premodern era. Rather than representing a unique and monolithic position without contradictions, modern nationalism marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.⁵ Neither is the purpose of this paper to recover an original history of the Mashhadis. The point is to analyze what the Mashhadis chose as worthy of remembering, as what they choose to recall constitutes their communal identity. Group memories are expressions of how communities locate themselves with respect to other relevant groups, for example with regard to the global Jewish community and to Iran as a (former) homeland. I argue that modern concepts of national identity and religiosity have influenced the Mashhadis' process of memory formation, leaving no space for grey zones and multiple affiliations. However, this paper does not seek to assert "truths" about the Mashhadi past or judge claims about its continuity. When explaining controversial issues of Mashhadi identity, my aim is not to evaluate, validate, or invalidate such claims. Instead, I trace how narratives of the past have taken shape and how they influence and are influenced by changing concepts of identity, belonging, and convergence.

The Jewish Community of Mashhad

Although Jewish settlements in Iran date back to the 7th century B.C., the Jewish community in Mashhad was a relative latecomer. In the course of Nader Shah's (r.1736–47) resettlement policies, about forty Jewish families from Qazvin settled in Mashhad, where no Jewish community had established itself previously.⁶ Due to its position along the Silk Road, Mashhad attracted Jews from other Iranian cities such as Yazd and Kashan. In the 1830s, the community encompassed about 2,500 individuals, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the population of Mashhad at the time. In 1839, a riot erupted, during which the Jewish community was forced to convert to Islam. This event was called Allahdad (God given).⁷ The main narrative states that the riot was triggered in connection with a dead dog, used for medical reasons by a member of the Jewish community, allegedly ridiculing the Muslim holiday of Muharram that was taking place at the time. It is likely that the perpetrators used this story as pretense to attack the Jewish community. Mehrdad Amanat ascribes the reasons for the outbreak to a combination of the following factors: "Great Power rivalries, changes in the economic status of some Jews, the pressures created by a renegade

⁴Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 4.

⁵Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

⁶Nader Shah's motives for the relocation sprung from the idea to employ Jewish merchants as agents for the commercial revival of his reconstituted empire. During his reign, he had as many as 300,000 individuals brought to the province of Khorasan as part of an enormous population transfer, of which Jews and Christians comprised a small part (Azaria Levy, *The Jews of Mashhad*, privately published, 1998).

⁷The then religious leader of Mashhad, Imam Jum'ah Haji Seyyed Ashgari, called the incident "Allah-Dadi," which Dilmanian translates as "Divine Justice"; the Mashhadi community also has used the term to this day (Dilmanian, *History*).

Qajar army, local elite rivalries, the local administration's ineptitude, and possibly imported European anti-Semitic ideas.⁸

The regiments of the Persian army involved in the riot had suffered a defeat in Herat in 1839 at the hand of the British and retreated to Mashhad. The disenfranchised soldiers, of whom a majority were Russian deserters and native Assyrian Christian recruits, saw the Jewish community as a scapegoat, as many Jews of Mashhad at that time were not only successful businessmen but also served British officials in the region.⁹

Rather than a sudden outburst of irrational hatred, sources suggest that the riot also was the result of a rivalry between one religious authority, supported by the central government, against another religious authority representing a new interventionist attitude among the 'ulama'. The latter, trustees of the Imam Reza Shrine, must have anticipated the value of the allegiance of a sizable community who as "new converts" would be dependent upon his favor: "Such protection could only be provided in the physical setting of the shrine, where non-Muslims could enter only after having converted to Islam."¹⁰

To avoid conversion, almost half of the community left for Herat, in today's Afghanistan; they thereafter constituted the Herati Jewish community. Some moved to other Iranian cities such as Shiraz or joined the Jewish community in Bukhara, although Albert Kaganovich states that Mashhadi migration to Bukhara was for business reasons and not due to persecution. According to Joseph Ferrier, two-thirds of the Jewish community left Mashhad in the 1840s.¹¹ The community narrative states that from 1839 onward, those who remained resumed Jewish practices in secret, while outwardly professing Islam, which included a change of name and regular attendance at the mosque. However, according to Ephraim Neumark (1947), a Jewish traveler and writer born in Eastern Europe who visited Mashhad in 1884, those who continued Jewish practices right after the Allahdad were a few individuals who lived rather isolated and it was only after about 30 years, that Jewish practice accumulated renewed attention in private.¹² The extent to which they practiced Judaism differed significantly however, as did the ways in which individuals accommodated Islam in their daily lives. Over time, this diverse community became the closely-knit community of *Jadid al-Islam* (New Muslims). From the 1920s onward, when the Qajar dynasty collapsed and Reza Shah Pahlavi came to power, the Mashhadis practiced Judaism more openly.

Today's self-representation of the Mashhadis frames the Allahdad and the ensuing "underground period" as a mere shift of a homogenous and unchanging Jewish practice from public to secret (and later back to public again). Hilda Nissimi refers to this "memory of sacred history" as the most important layer of identity for the Jews of Mashhad.¹³

The mainly orally transmitted narrative of the past is indeed crucial to constituting today's communities, which sustain it at commemorative events and in academic and community publications, memoirs, and personal conversations.

One could ask how it is that the descendants of the Mashhadis, who had immersed themselves in non-Jewish culture and society, have come to act so much like Jews today—to an extent that they are considered more Jewish than others.¹⁴ Daniel Swetschinski argues that, in the case of the Portuguese crypto-Jews, it was not so much the loss of memory of Jewish traditions but the rejection of the memory of their crypto-Jewish past that helped define their later Jewish identity.

⁸Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 47.

⁹Walter Fischel, "Mulla Ibrahim Nathan (1816–1868): Jewish agent of the British during the first Anglo-Afghan war," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 29 (1958): 331–75.

¹⁰Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 56.

¹¹Joseph Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and Beloochistan: With Historical Notices of the Countries Lying between Russia and India* (London: William Clowes, 1857); Albert Kaganovich, *The Mashhadi Jews (Djedids) in Central Asia* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2007).

¹²Ephraim Neumark, *Masa be Erets ha Qedem* (Jerusalem: privately published, 1947).

¹³Hilda Nissimi, "Memory, Community, and the Mashhadi Jews during the Underground Period," *Jewish Social Studies* 9, no. 3 (2003): 76–106.

¹⁴In most of my interviews Mashhadi Jews as well as other Iranian and non-Iranian Jews tend to describe Mashhadis as particularly "traditional" and "religious." Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 319.

Similarly, Mashhadi history rejects elements of the past and reframes them to conform to contemporary demands of Jewish identity. This was necessary for the Mashhadis, for whom neither Mashhad (after 1946) nor Iran (after 1979) proved a feasible homeland anymore. Many Mashhadis, most of them by then already living in Tehran, emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, and the bulk of the community came to the US following the Iranian revolution in 1979. Ideas about Jewish identity, as encompassed in the national framework of the state of Israel, affected the Jews of Mashhad in particular: when many Mashhadis were waiting in Iran to get permission to immigrate to Israel in the 1950s, some of the Israeli authorities had doubts about their status as Jews. Yitzhaq Raphael, head of the Jewish Agency's Department of Immigration, turned to the two chief rabbis of Israel for an authoritative opinion on their religious status. Rafael Patai writes, "The reason for this step was that in certain religious circles, doubts were entertained about the Jewishness of the Meshhed Jews, similar to the doubt that was attached to the status of the Ethiopian Falashas. The significance of the issue lay in the fact that Israeli law accorded the right of immigration to Israel to all Jews, but only to Jews; the Israeli institutions were supposed to bring to Israel only Jews who had the legal right to immigrate. Yitzhaq Raphael felt that before he could mobilize institutional help for the Meshhed Jews, he first had to ascertain whether rabbinically they were considered Jews who had the right to come to Israel."¹⁵ Although the Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yitzhaq Halevi Herzog, demanded more investigation and proof of the Mashhadis' Jewishness, the Sephardic chief rabbi, Ben-Zion Meir Hay Ouziel, ruled that they were "pure Jews." Finally, the Israeli authorities reached the conclusion that the Mashhadi Jews were rightful Jews, and they received institutional help to come to Israel.

This incident shows that proving a "true" and unbroken Jewish identity in the eyes of the state of Israel was of vital importance for the Mashhadis to be accepted among the global Jewish community, after they had to leave Iran and steer themselves toward a new (symbolic) homeland.¹⁶ Their attachment to the Land of Israel, which most contemporary Mashhadis attest to, is one variant of the aforementioned "sacred memory," as it is retrospectively located in the community's early days and also updated to include modern Jewish-Israeli history. But before discussing the history of the converts' lives in Mashhad and its contemporary interpretation in more detail, I will address some aspects of Iranian Jewish historiography that are relevant to this endeavor.

Historiography of Jews in Iran and the Middle East

Recent scholarship on Jews in the 19th- and 20th-century Middle East increasingly shows how Jews engaged intellectually and politically in their home countries.¹⁷ Despite this departure from one-sided portrayals that cemented a mutual exclusiveness between Muslims and Jews, the concept of religious identity has experienced little historicizing.¹⁸ European missionaries, government officials, and European Jewish institutions that have perpetuated a Eurocentric and essentialist understanding of religious identity in their writings have informed the accounts of Jewish communities in 19th-century Iran. In many of these texts, the theme of isolation and oppression recurs, coupled with the alleged

¹⁵Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*, 110–11.

¹⁶Looking like "Middle Easterners" and having Muslim names, many Mashhadis reported that they were viewed with suspicion or denigration in Israel. Also, outside of Israel, European and North American Jews questioned the Jewishness of the Mashhadis, due to their Middle Eastern background. See, for example, Esther Amini, *Concealed: Memoir of a Jewish-Iranian Daughter Caught between the Chador and America* (New York: Greenpoint Press, 2020). Several of my non-Mashhadi interview partners indicated that until the 1970s the Jewish community of Iran (mainly Tehran), tended to view the Mashhadi Jews with suspicion due to their history as Jadids. This might have contributed to their insularity as well as their need to establish an unambiguous community narrative.

¹⁷Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Michelle Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Lior Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁸This pertains to analytical categories such as religious identity and belief as primordial and unchanging, and the truncation of multiple and indeterminate aspects of individual and communal religiosity in the process of classifying it (often according to national ideas of origin). Another problem for analysis is the positioning of a dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

ignorance of Iranian Jews.¹⁹ Christian missionaries, some of whom were themselves Jewish converts (like Joseph Wolff or Henry A. Stern), explicitly targeted Jewish communities in the Muslim world, as their employers regarded them particularly suited for this task due to their knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish traditions. Although many European and later American missionaries and travelers tended to observe Iran's society from a position of cultural or civilizational superiority, with open denigration or misconceptions about Islam and Muslim culture, they also purported the idea of a singular and privatized religiosity.²⁰ This process has led to the alienation of individuals not only from each other but also in their ways of defining themselves according to worldviews that did not fit into these official narratives.²¹ Within this framework, it is not possible to grasp the multiple affiliations of Jews in 19th- and 20th-century Iran other than in terms of force, secrecy, or deceit.

In 19th-century Iran, where the Mashhadi narrative originates, categorical differences relating to religion did not need to be absolute or mutually exclusive. Although it was a clearly hierarchical society, the social structure allowed for multiplicities of meaning and interpretation. Identities were constituted relationally, so that the meanings of origin and belonging could be multiple and shifting. This multiplicity produced an "understanding of difference as overlapping gradients, rather than as mutual exclusivity."²²

This is not to say that there were no differences between Iranian Jews and other Iranians, but formulating categories with discrete borders like "Iranian" and "Jewish" is a way of knowing rooted in modern epistemology. The identities of Mashhadi Jews, and to a certain extent Jewish identities in Iran more generally, might be seen today as a set of paradoxes. But seeming contradictions appear so through the lens of our present. Rather than assuming identifications as a stable set of beliefs or practices, I argue that there were overlapping identifications with porous, permeable, and indeterminate boundaries. This approach also departs from notions of a "hybrid" identity of converts, as hybridity assumes pre-fixed identities mixing with each other.

The teleological histories of modern nationalism eradicated the shifting and at times indeterminable identities of 19th-century Iran. As a result, many historical accounts resort to a rather rugged classification of Jews as distinct from their surroundings.²³ In particular, they gloss over the perspective of individuals who changed their religion sometimes more than once and maintained affiliations with different religious traditions simultaneously. During my fieldwork, I realized that the way in which religious identities were defined, negotiated, expressed, and perceived in Iran did not correspond with the idea of

¹⁹Joseph Wolff, *Researches and Missionary Labours among the Jews, Mohammedans, and Other Sects* (Philadelphia: O. Rogers, 1835), and *Narrative of a Mission to Bukhara in the Years 1843–45* (New York: Harper, 1845); Henry A. Stern, *Dawnings of Light in the East* (London, 1854). Stern declares that the Jews in Bushehr, "like most Jews in the East, (are) exceedingly ignorant" (86). We can only assume what reactions this pretension elicited among the Jewish communities, but their response reflects his expectations. The rabbi of Kazerun reportedly greeted Stern with the words: "welcome, ye travellers from far countries, and messengers of joy to the captives of Zion, whose hearts are throbbing with fear in a strange land, and among a cruel people" (114). Laurence Loeb provides a more recent example from the field of anthropology with his book *Outcaste: Jewish Life in Southern Iran* (London: Routledge, 2011). Loeb's work, which is rich in insights into the daily life of the Jews of Shiraz in the 1960s, laments the slow or reluctant implementation of the directives given by emissaries from Israel among the Shirazi Jews. He writes, "Most teachers are also rather ignorant with regard to Judaica, being acquainted only superficially with *Siddur*, *Tora*, and *Midrash*. . . . They were unable or unwilling to read texts in Hebrew, and a Jewish history text in Persian had not yet been completed. As a result, a historical conception of Jewish identity was completely absent among the younger generation" (143). Loeb also mentions that an emissary from Israel burned elements that were part of the "religio-magical" tradition of the Jews "in a bonfire" (220). From statements like these we can infer that there were grave differences between the Jews in Shiraz and the emissaries from Israel regarding ideas of proper religiosity.

²⁰Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 39–46; Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), and *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Adam H. Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²¹Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, esp. xii–xiii.

²²Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 11.

²³Marina Rustow addresses problems in the historiography of Jews in medieval Spain and Portugal before their conversion, in particular regarding their relation to normative Judaism and preexisting doubts and heterodoxy; "Yerousalmi and the Conversos," *Jewish History* 28, no. 1, (2014): 11–49.



Figure 1. Publication of the United Mashadi Jewish Community of America. Property of the author.

religiosity as an individual, inner conviction.²⁴ Neither was religious identity a category itself; its dissection from the political, cultural, and economic context made actions of individuals unintelligible. There were more realities than being Jewish, Muslim, or a convert. There were gradual transitions from one direction to the other, during which individuals often were in a state not clearly definable by the terms at our disposal.

In the course of the 20th century, ideas of religious and national belonging further narrowed. The evolution of political Zionism and later the 1979 Iranian revolution propelled concepts of Iranian and Jewish identities according to a rigid religious-national teleology, leading to the incorporation of Jewish histories into a framework of clear boundaries and political loyalties. The history of the Jews of Mashhad shows how these processes have affected the constitution of a distinct group memory.

The Mashhadi Narrative

The community narrative consists of a few central elements that exclusively relate to religious aspects such as forced conversion, keeping Jewish faith in private, outwardly pretending to be Muslim, and secret religious practices. These elements testify to the steadfastness of the Jews to their ancestral faith and explain all actions based on Jewish history alone, enforcing the boundaries of the environment in which the Jews had lived.

As the 2019 brochure of the United Mashadi Jewish Community of America shows, Mashhadi communal identity celebrates the Allahdadi as a formative element (Fig. 1).²⁵ The text notes that, in accordance with the teachings of 12th-century sage and rabbi Moses Maimonides, the Jews of Mashhad accepted conversion to spare their lives. With the invocation of Maimonides, explanations for the event resort exclusively to religious legitimacy, disregarding social and economic circumstances that

²⁴One observation was the simultaneous existence of a strictly religious public sphere with indeterminate and multifaceted subjectivities. An individual whose ancestors hailed from the Jewish community of Mashhad told me about a variety of different religious expressions and identities among his ancestors following the forced conversion, ranging from insanity that my interview partner ascribed to the conversion following the Allahdadi, to a Muslim identity dotted (unconsciously) with Jewish practices, to a complete integration into Mashhadi religious society, yet with a lingering memory of a Jewish past. My interview partner had immersed himself in the history of his family's Jewish roots and the history of the Jews of Mashhad, including religious tenets of Judaism. Successful business ties as well as intermarriage connected him with Iranian and Mashhadi authorities. Yet, he did not define himself as Muslim, nor would the Jewish community in Iran accept him as one of them. The global Mashhadi Jewish communities outside of Iran were of no relevance to him either. He embodied the marginalized space in-between that all communities rejected, as he undermined the drawn boundaries.

²⁵"180 Years after Allahdadi" (booklet) (Great Neck, NY: Shaare Shalom, United Mashadi Jewish Community of America, 2019). Orit Bashkin's warning against a "Farhudization" of Iraqi Jewish history, that is, viewing the 1941 *Farhud* riot as typifying the overall history of the relationship between Jews and the greater Iraqi society, is apt for Mashhadi history as well: the Allahdadi has come to be the overarching aspect of identity; *New Babylonians*, 138.

might have led the Jewish community to accept conversion. Consequently, the text frames all reference to Islam and Muslims in terms of “unwanted” coercive “force.”

In the following sections, I will show that the border between Jewish and Muslim practices was not as clear-cut as retrospectively assumed, although the relationship to Islam took on a distinct character for the converts in Mashhad. I will focus on the three main elements of the narrative: forced conversion, inner and outward religiosity, and secrecy.

Forced Conversion

The official Mashhadi narrative tends to explain the forced conversion in 1839 based on Muslim fanaticism and hatred toward Jews (blood libel). However, the riot, in which more than thirty individuals were killed and houses looted, had a profound political dimension that went beyond religion and beyond the borders of Iran: it was a period of political crisis in Iran, in which the province of Khorasan was deeply involved, particularly in the Anglo-Iranian war over Herat. Colonial encroachment by the British and Russian empires and ongoing political fragmentation affected the relationship between Shi'i Iranians and religious minorities, who appeared as the sole beneficiaries of foreign intervention. As successful tradespeople, the Jews of Mashhad were in a position of economic advantage, and their connections to the British, for whom they acted as trading contacts, moneylenders, or messengers, rendered their allegiance questionable for the Shi'a majority.²⁶

Yaghoub Dilmanian provides a detailed account of the conversion. During the riot members of two Jewish families, who already had close ties to the Muslims, held a meeting and decided to accept Islam. These six or seven individuals announced their decision to the looters on the street, then went to Mirza Ashgari, the Imam Jum'ah of the Shrine, and converted to Islam by saying the shahada. The Imam congratulated them, gave them Muslim names and distributed sweets among them. “According to the Imam Jomeh's ordinance, those who had initiated the mass conversions were obligated to recruit more converts. However, many tried to stall and used any excuse to avoid an audience with the Imam Jomeh. Up to a month after the incident, very few had actually gone to the Imam Jomeh. They all began to orient themselves with the teachings and rituals of Islam, so they could present themselves as Moslems.”²⁷

This context is important to understanding the fault lines within the community as well as agency across religious boundaries, as the families who acted as intermediaries between religious authorities and the Jewish community had “considerable power” and saw themselves as leaders of the Mashhadi Jews. There also was the possibility of evading the Imam Jum'ah's wish for the Jews to convert “officially” in his presence.

Jews, as a minority, were a vulnerable group that suffered especially in times of upheaval.²⁸ Members of the majority could employ existing inequalities and stereotypes to enforce privileges and interests. But the Jews of Mashhad also flourished at times and had other social roles than being “Jews.” Many histories of Mashhadi families, for example, oscillate between memories of wealth and respectability, on the one hand, and oppression and fear on the other. The latter aspect of the narrative is so dominant, however, that references to a good or even “normal” life in Mashhad only occur now and then, without destabilizing the main narrative.

A recently published memoir by Esther Amini, daughter of Mashhadi immigrants who came to the US in the 1950s, has shed new light on this.²⁹ Amini's father came from a financially successful, highly

²⁶Iranian Jews often saw the British as protectors in situations in which the Iranian authorities seemed weak or unreliable. The alliance between the British and the Mashhadis evolved from the strong rivalry between Russia and Britain at the time in Khorasan. The British actively utilized minorities for their service, including promises for a “land of their own.” Mashhadis employed by the British often put their lives and assets in jeopardy to complete their service. A few members of the Mashhadi community received British pensions. Afghan Jews, on the other hand (many of whom had hailed from Mashhad), tended to be against the British as they had occupied Afghanistan. See Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Minority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 35; and Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 50–57.

²⁷Dilmanian, *History*, 25–27.

²⁸For the connection between religious holidays and riots against religious “others” in the Middle Ages see David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

²⁹Amini, *Concealed*.

respected Jewish Mashhadi family and attended a London boarding school in the 1920s, an opportunity open only to wealthy Iranians at that time. In Mashhad, he had owned “acres of farmland and fruit orchards, raising sheep, goats, and chickens, all attended to by hired hands.”³⁰ Amini’s great-grandfather, Benyamin Aminoff, born in 1847 and having lived most of his adult life in the “underground” period, was a successful merchant. He owned multiple slaughterhouses in Iran’s province of Khorasan in addition to three caravansaries (one in Mashhad and two in Merv), a huge farm outside of Mashhad, and a profitable icehouse. He grew poppies to harvest opium, which he sold to pharmaceutical companies in Germany. As an offspring of the wealthy Aminoff clan, Amini’s father celebrated his wedding accordingly: “The streets of Mashhad were lined with festive lanterns and red roses. My father wore a top hat and tuxedo; my mother, a French wedding dress. Pop had purchased Parisian lace embroidered with baroque pearls and had it stitched to a gown for his bride in Mashhad. They rode through the streets in a chariot drawn by eight rose-festooned horses. It was 1938, and the pomp and pageantry outshone all other weddings.”³¹

By addressing previously neglected aspects of Mashhadi history, Amini breaks the common narrative pattern that she describes a few pages earlier: “For generations, my ancestors hid in plain sight, living a lie, pretending, adapting to a culture that wanted to annihilate them. They befriended Muslim neighbors and shopkeepers, spoke in their vernacular, danced to their Islamic melodies, cooked their foods, used their spices, and shouted their curses. Mirroring Muslims, they painted the palms of their hands with henna, rubbed it on their hairs, slapped *dayerehs* (framed rim instrument with jingles resembling a large tambourine), and wore chadors, only to go home and braid challah, light Shabbat candles, keep strict kosher, perform circumcision, and marry solely among themselves.”³²

The assumption that befriending Muslim neighbors and shopkeepers and sharing the same language, music, and food was part of faking a Muslim identity, whereas the Jewish identity would not have comprised any of these features, employs a constricted concept of Jewish identities severed from their environment. Rather than being mutually exclusive, privilege and oppression existed side by side and played out differently according to changing social contexts.

Amini furthermore acknowledges how her father longed for a return to Iran after having immigrated to the United States: “For Pop, uprooting was heart-wrenching. In Mashhad, the Aminoff name and legacy commanded multigenerational respect. There, he had once led a regal life surrounded by housekeepers, gardeners, fig trees, lemon groves, and acres of real estate. Even here in Tehran, men strolling the boulevards now tipped their hats, warmly acknowledging him.”³³

The Aminoff family might have been exceptional due to their financial success, but, although economic privilege did not necessarily guarantee political safety, the successful business networks of some Mashhadi families suggest interactions with the Muslim environment based on respect and agency rather than oppression, fear, and deceit.

Assuming that at least among some segments of the society there were “soft” boundaries between Jews and non-Jews in Mashhad, it is possible that they did not view mutual boundary breach as a threat and even could eventually amalgamate into one community. Differences in dietary and religious practices may not have prevented the sharing of a range of other practices between Muslims and Jews. Besides being engaged in trade networks, Jadids in Mashhad worked as arbiters for business and personal disputes, consulted by Muslims and Jews alike, or as midwives who delivered babies for Muslim and Jewish families.³⁴

Swetschinski makes this point when he suggests that “actual evidence for the difficulties . . . felt in living with a so-called split conscience is difficult to come by.”³⁵ Can we assume that some individuals were unaware that a particular opinion sprang from Muslim rather than Jewish tradition, or that they thought the splitting of opinions into separate traditions was unnatural or meaningless? Evidence suggests that the distinction made by the Mashhadi Jews between force inflicted on them by particular groups and a

³⁰Ibid., 39.

³¹Ibid., 39–40.

³²Ibid., 33.

³³Ibid., 80.

³⁴Author interview with Mersede, December 2020, Israel; author interview with Roshan, December 2020, UK.

³⁵Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 315.

general appreciation for the authorities in Mashhad and Persian culture in general was not a mask covering an irresolvable deeper tension.

Jewish-Iranian identity has unique features that distinguish it from the Muslim tradition, but it also developed and existed in an interactive cultural milieu. Mashhad, renowned for religious orthodoxy and traditionalism, also was a space for intense exchange across confessional boundaries and heterodox currents, providing remarkable religious curiosity and debate, as I will show in the next section. From the mid-19th century onward, religious authorities countered this dynamic and aimed to control and homogenize the public sphere. Mehrdad Amanat ascribes this development to the rise of more conformist and legalistic interpretations of Islam, as well as to being “a response to early manifestations of modernity and European hegemony.”³⁶

The Split Between the “True” and the “False” Religion

The Mashhadi Jewish narrative has established a trajectory of unbroken, orthodox Jewish practice. Splitting individual consciousness into an inner religious conviction and an outwardly faked one sustains this unambiguous and unvarying Jewish identity. Many community histories evolve around how the Mashhadis kept Shabbat, slaughtered kosher meat, congregated for prayer in small underground rooms and married according to Jewish law, all under the threat of their Muslim neighbors exposing them.³⁷ In this depiction, the demarcation between inside and outside, between Judaism and Islam, is very clear. However, the missionary Joseph Wolff, who visited Mashhad in 1831, eight years before the forced conversion, gives an account of the interaction between some Jews and Muslims:

The Jewish Soofees of Meshed . . . acknowledge Jesus, Mohammed, and 124,000 Prophets, without feeling themselves bound to act under the control of any of these Prophets; . . . I met here in the house of Mulla Meshiakh, with a Hebrew translation of the Koran³⁸ . . . I frequently heard the Jewish Soofees at Meshed say that they had two religions: the *zaher*, i.e. the Exterior, and the *baten*, i.e. the Interior; or the religion of the people and the religion observed in their lodges. I tried to make them aware of the danger of their system, and of the reasonableness of a divine revelation, as contained in the Bible and the New Testament.³⁹

This account suggests that at least part of the Muslim and Jewish leadership in 19th-century Khorasan did not emphasize confessional borders. The Jews in Mashhad, who were active in Sufi circles, were primarily the leaders and learned members of the community, suggesting that they were part of an educated and rather wealthy stratum of the wider society.⁴⁰

Islam was part of the dominant culture, and there were clear asymmetries resulting from this hierarchy, thus influence was rather one-directional. Although Nadir Shah had requested the translation of parts of the Torah to Persian, the familiarity and embracement of religious and cultural texts from the

³⁶Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 59.

³⁷Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*; Shlomo Kaboli, *Du Qarni Muqavamat: Tarikhi Yahudiyani Mashhad* (New York: Tova Press, 2006); Nissimi, *Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis*. These themes also were central in the interviews that I conducted.

³⁸Mulla Meshiakh also is known as Mulla Mahdi Aqajan. *Mahdi* is Persian for “Messiah,” pointing to the messianic expectations prevalent at the time among different religious groups.

³⁹Wolff, *Researches*, 128–29. Wolff describes Jews and Muslims eating and drinking together: “It was amusing this evening to hear those Jewish and Mohammedan Soofees discussing with great gravity, and with eyes lifted up with devotion, the propriety of eating pork, drinking wine, and eating without first washing their hands” (132).

⁴⁰Mulla Mahdi, to whom Wolff refers as “Mulla Meshiakh,” owned an “interreligious library.” Mullah Yizghil from Mashhad, who was a teacher of the Torah and Talmud, had a Judeo-Persian copy of Jalal ad-Din Rumi’s *Masnavi*, from which he taught his favored students, alongside the regular Jewish religious literature. Mulla Pinchas, the assistant of the chief rabbi, also was a Sufi and took part in interreligious discussions at the house of a Muslim cleric (Wolff, *Researches*). Inclination to Sufism had been part of Jewish and Muslim cultural engagement for centuries and has permeated the literature and poetry of Iranian Jews to such a degree that it is almost impossible to distinguish between genuine Sufi and non-Sufi elements; Shervin Farridnejad, “The Jewish Hafez: Classical New Persian Literature in the Judeo-Persian Garsuni Literary Tradition,” *Festschrift François de Blois*, ed. Adam Benkato and Arash Zeini, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32 (2021). The Jews of Bukhara, among whom many Mashhadis settled in the 19th century, reportedly despised the fact that the Mashhadi Jews read the poetry of Hafiz instead of the Torah (Wolff, *Researches*, 177). This suggests that Bukharan Jews at the time had a different point of view about mystical Persian poetry.



Figure 2. Mashhadi merchants in Peshawar, today's Pakistan. Source: Shlomo Kaboli, Du Qarni Muqavamat: Tarikhi Yahudiyani Mashhad.

از راست به چپ: ابراهيم رحمانيم - عبدالرحيم ايرانيان - يعقوب ديلمانيان - پيشاور هندوستان ۱۹۳۰
Right to left: Ebrahim Rahmanim, Abdolrahim Iranian and Yaghoub Dilmanian in Pishavar, India, 1930

Muslim tradition (including classical poetry and the Qur'an) was so common among Jews that they transcribed them into Judeo-Persian and Hebrew. These elements created shared spaces of spiritual and cultural practice, albeit predominantly for certain elites. Wolff's report reveals his limited understanding of these practices, as the Protestant views he had acquired in the course of his education informed his own religious outlook.

The Shi'i concept of religious dissimulation (*taqiyya*), as well as elements of Islamic mysticism such as the complementary forms of esoteric and exoteric (*zāhir* and *bāṭin*), accommodate a simultaneity of religious identifications.⁴¹ In some cases, individuals employed these practices to avoid persecution, but they also used them to gain certain privileges, or to facilitate daily activities and temporary interactions. A society in which religious belonging was not only an individual choice but primarily an element of communality and social coherence formed the backdrop to these developments.

Similar to converts in 17th century France, as Monica Martinat argues, "dissimulation as presented here was neither a potential lie nor a real lie about one's faith, but rather a means to satisfy the ideological requirements of authorities, who insisted on putting religion at the centre of individual and collective life. . . . in other words, this reality indicates that the ideal of an exclusive religious affiliation was not necessarily shared by a large group of men and women whose attitudes, both intellectual and practical, were much freer than has been supposed until now."⁴²

The traditional separation of public and private spheres in Iran allowed for individuals to have multiple religious identities even after a conversion.⁴³ The necessity to practice different religions simultaneously thus created multiple forms of deviation from the ideal of a homogenous public sphere. Individuals finely calibrated expressions of public and private religiosity to uphold a certain degree of conformity, while at the same time actively transforming these religious practices. Therefore we can assume that a new boundary between Jewish and Muslim identities only developed some time after the Allahdad.

As businesspersons traveling between the centers of transnational trade ranging from Herat over Merv and Bukhara to Peshawar and Bombay, the 19th-century Mashhadis traded in furs, precious stones,

⁴¹ *Taqiyya* is lawful in Shi'ism in situations when revealing one's faith would result in danger.

⁴² Monica Martinat, "The Identity Game," in *Dissimulation and Deceit*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon and Tamar Herzig (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 76.

⁴³ Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 78.

spices, carpets, and silk (Fig. 2). They were highly mobile and resorted to a diverse repertoire of identifications. Nevertheless, the community memory ignores any advantages that this kind of multiplicity may have brought. On the most mundane level, an ability to present oneself in any number of guises created opportunities in an area in which tribal conflicts, smuggling, and monopolies were common.⁴⁴

For Joseph Wolff, the absence of religious boundaries he encountered in Mashhad was hard to fathom. At times, he ascribed it to the alleged delusion of the Iranian people, who, he argued, had yet to understand that one could adhere exclusively to one religion. He notes: “Nissim is a complete infidel in sentiments: at Meshed he is a Mussulman, and a Jew at Sarakhs, Khiva, and on his journeys to Europe.”⁴⁵ This description confirms that individuals could don different religious identities depending on objective and place.

Many Mashhadis lived in the border region of Turkmenistan for several months at a time to conduct their business, while their wives and children stayed in Mashhad. In his memoir, Farajullah Nasrullayoff Livian describes how Jewish tradesmen living in Turkmenistan did not pay attention to keeping the Shabbat or eating kosher, and only adopted these practices toward the end of the 19th century. Since they were away from their families for a long time, some Mashhadis also took a second, Muslim wife.

About one hundred years later, when the Mashhadis had dispersed into a global but closely knit community, having Muslim relatives was something that one “did not talk about.” One of my interlocutors stated that the Mashhadi community in which he now lived frowned upon individuals who stayed in touch with their non-Jewish relatives in Iran.⁴⁶

In the late 1880s, a new emphasis on Jewish practices developed, which affected the Jews in Mashhad as well as among the communities in the border towns.⁴⁷ Although documentation is scarce on this development, we can infer from the few existing accounts that it affected the Mashhadis living in Turkmenistan insofar as they started to keep Shabbat (as a day of rest, not kindling a fire for dinner) and eat kosher meat. This development was possibly due to the influx of Jews from Herat, who remained in Mashhad after the Persian army had laid siege to Herat in 1854 and took all Jews that they considered Iranian subjects as prisoners back to Mashhad.⁴⁸

Practices and beliefs such as those familiar from the participation of Jews in Sufi brotherhoods meanwhile seem to have retreated. There is but one example of a manuscript, written by the scribe Eliayu ben Eliah fourteen years after the Allahdad, in 1853. It is a copy of “Yusuf and Zulaikha,” a medieval Islamic version of the story of the biblical prophet Joseph, written in Judeo-Persian. It points to the fact that Qur’anic and Sufi poetry remained a meaningful aspect of Mashhadi culture.⁴⁹

Individuals did rely on different religious sources in their search for truth and ways to break with what they perceived as outdated traditions. In several accounts written by converts, the authors mention that they carried a Qur’an and a Torah with them at all times, illustrating that both beliefs were equally important to a number of individuals at the time.

Secrecy

Historians of the Jews of Mashhad often frame the practice of Judaism in Mashhad as an “open secret.” Although in the surrounding Muslim environment there was an awareness that the Jadids still practiced Jewish traditions, the community narrative emphasizes that possible exposure was a constant threat and danger.

Joseph Wolff, who returned to Mashhad in 1844, just five years after the conversion, openly addresses the Jadids as “Jews” in a letter to the Imam Jum’ah, and sees no need to hide the Jewish identity of his

⁴⁴Kaganovich, *Mashhadi Jews*. The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought back all Jewish residents on the Russian side of the border to Mashhad.

⁴⁵Wolff, *Researches*, 136–52. Being Jewish was an advantage for the Mashhadis when dealing with the Turkmen tribes, since the latter were adversaries of Iranian Shi’is.

⁴⁶Dilmanian, *History*, 34; Interview with Mr. Alizadeh, 25 October 2019, .

⁴⁷Memoirs of Farajullah Nasrullayoff Livian (1874–1951), summarized in Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*, ch. 12.

⁴⁸Jews who had fled from Mashhad to Herat in 1839 practiced Judaism openly. After their forced return to Mashhad in 1854, according to Dilmanian, they allied with the zealous among the Mashhadi community, thereby strengthening this group. This development might eventually have influenced Mashhadis living outside of Mashhad.

⁴⁹Manuscript (MS 1534) courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. There also is a picture from the “Youth Club of Mashhad” from the year 1944, in which members of the club performed the play “Yusuf and Zulaikha”; Kaboli, *Du Qarni Muqavamat*.

protégés.⁵⁰ Several other sources confirm that the Jadids were referred to as "Jews", "Jadids", or "Muhammedan Jews" after the conversion.⁵¹ Ephraim Neumark confirms that people knew that the "New Muslims" secretly kept their Jewish religion but that they tolerated it because the Jadids were a crucial element of the economy. He mentions that the police patrolled the city of Mashhad each night and "would detain anyone they found on the street, except for the Jadidis. Also, many of the municipal positions are assigned to the trustworthy Jadidis."⁵²

Neumark mentions that some Jadids were in charge of the financial affairs of the shrine of Imam Reza. Assuming such central positions in the administration of a mosque would be difficult for converts for whom Islam was just a facade. Moreover, wealthy Jadids donated generously to the shrine's foundation, the Astan Quds Razavi, and poor Jadidi families received financial support from the Imam Reza shrine.⁵³ Mashhadi Jewish life thus was closely intertwined with the central authorities of the city, to a degree of mutual support. Many Jadids had good relations with the local governors, buttressing their position as trusted and influential members of the religious and political establishment in Mashhad.⁵⁴

When these elements come up in community history, they tend to be framed as pretense, actions taken for the sole purpose of protecting the community. The proximity of Jadidi and Muslim lives, however, also was evident in the spatial configuration of the former Jewish quarter, the Eid Gah: central buildings such as one of the former synagogues, the bathhouse, the bank run by Jadids (now demolished), as well as a famous shopping arcade (Saray Azizollahoff) were all in the immediate vicinity of the shrine of Imam Reza.

Although particularly the first generations of Jadids experienced strong pressure to hide their Jewish identity, many over time integrated into the wider Persian society and in this process were able to acquire considerable social standing. Practices of private and public religiosity varied accordingly. For about thirty years after the conversion, Jewish practice in general was almost nonexistent. Ephraim Neumark, who was in Mashhad about forty-five years after the Allahdad, writes:

Those who remained slowly forgot the religion of their forefathers, except a very few that withdrew from the ways of the world and isolated themselves in their homes where they could do as they pleased. Under these circumstances thirty years passed by, but during the last fifteen years the spirit of G-d began to awaken in the souls of the children of the notable personages.⁵⁵

From the 1870s onward, groups of individuals resumed Jewish practices, starting to celebrate Shabbat, Passover, and Yom Kippur. However, it is rather unlikely that from one day to the next "the community

⁵⁰Wolff, *Narrative*, 396. A recurrent theme in the history of Iranian Jews in the 19th century is convincing authorities in Iran to protect the Jews, so as not to fall out of favor with a foreign power. This form of intervention introduced new aspects of alienation between Jews (as well as other minorities) and their Muslim compatriots; Tsadik, *Foreigners and Shi'is*, 41. In 1902, the British consul in Mashhad repeatedly refers to them in his diary as Jews, or "Jews, known as Jadids"; A. Levy, cited in Nissimi, "Memory," 103.

⁵¹Political Diaries, Meshed Consular June 1940; Khorassan Fortnightly Reports. British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers. The letter referring to "Muhammedan Jews" is from 1944. IOR/L/PS/12/3407

⁵²Neumark, *Masa be Erets ha Qedem*, 92. The Mashhadi Jews are thought to be among the most affluent Jews of Iran, and perhaps the only ones involved in long-distance trade; Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 49. Henry Field describes them as constituting one-quarter of the "more important" merchants of Mashhad in *Contributions to the Anthropology of Iran* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1939), 254.

⁵³Zahra Kohandel, "A Tour of the Historic Houses in the Former Jewish Neighborhood of Mashhad," *Hamshahri* [in Farsi], 19 April 2018, <http://newspaper.hamshahronline.ir/id/12739/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AE%D9%81%DB%8C-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85%DB%8C.html>.

⁵⁴Baha'i historiography provides some details of Jewish life in Mashhad. One example describes how the elders of the Jewish community partnered with the Kadkhoda (head of the district assigned by the government) against a Jewish convert to the Baha'i faith; Hassan M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Baha'is in the Time of Baha'u'llah: With Some Historical Background* (Oxford: G. Ronald, 1985), 182. The episode conveys that the fact that the Jadids practiced Judaism could be used against them in conflict situations (in this case by a former member of the community itself). Yet it also illustrates a fabric of different positions and shifting allegiances: although the Jadids did not succeed in disciplining the new convert, they consulted a non-Jewish authority for assistance, pointing to a different role of the latter than being a threat.

⁵⁵Neumark, *Masa be Erets ha Qedem*, 89–91.

was united and faithful to its secret religion,” the revitalization of Jewish traditions began small, with improvisation, and expanded to more people over time.⁵⁶

The imposition of Islam as an alien practice held true for part the Jewish community, but the Mashhadis consisted of various groups. Those known as the *Talebin al-Islam*, or students of Islam, who had fostered close connections with Muslims before the Allahdad, advocated conversion. They took Muslim names, went to the mosque frequently, and traveled on pilgrimage to Mecca, some stopping in Jerusalem or Karbala on the way back.⁵⁷ They would invite Shi'i dignitaries into their homes for celebrations. Yaghoub Dilmanian writes that other groups among the Jewish community “mistrusted them and considered them less observant,” pointing to considerable diversity within.

According to Sara Koplik, the Jews who remained in Mashhad after the conversion were the more wealthy members of the community. They were more prone to assimilate to their Muslim environment for pragmatic reasons, lack of piety, or genuine acceptance of Islam. The second group, the Mitasebin (sic), the “dissenters” or “zealous ones,” who performed the minimum of Islamic rituals necessary to avoid the suspicion of their Muslim neighbors, were poorer and very devout.⁵⁸ Dilmanian ascribes their poverty to the fact that they refused any interaction with the Muslim environment. In addition to the “zealots” and the aforementioned “advocates” (Talebin), he introduces a third group of “moderates,” who actually were the majority and chose a middle way between wholehearted conversion and opposition to it. As they were “more or less inactive in the social sense,” Dilmanian does not elaborate on them in his book. He states that the zealots eventually prevailed.⁵⁹ Although many Jadids actively participated in Mashhad's daily public life, purchasing and donating land, building communal spaces such as a *tekkieh* (a theater for Islamic passion plays) or a water reservoir, the zealots opposed these actions to a degree that they isolated themselves from the rest of the community and “for 30 years would not even marry with them.”⁶⁰ This nucleus of people was adamant in drawing a line between what they strictly understood as Jewish and all other identities, including other Jadids. I will return to the role of the zealots again toward the end of this paper.

There were different responses to the forced conversion, resulting in various blends of a public Muslim and a private Jewish identity. One should read the following examples of Mashhadi practices with the above differences in mind, rather than assume that all members of one homogenous community employed them equally.

Underground Religion

Histories of the community during their time as converts describe practices such as observing Passover shortly before or after its assigned date, or eating only rice for the entire holiday. Some of these customs disappeared over time, whereas other customs, such as lighting Hanukkah candles separately instead of on a menorah, endured longer.⁶¹

Regarding dietary laws, many stories relate that the Jadids bought meat from local (non-kosher) stores to avoid appearing suspicious in the eyes of their neighbors. Then they gave the meat to the poor or fed it to the dogs, clearly something only the well-to-do could afford. After some time, the men of the community learned the practice of ritual slaughter and distributed the kosher meat to family and friends.

⁵⁶Nissimi, “Memory,” 86.

⁵⁷This is a common narrative, brought up by many of my informants. Although the Muslim pilgrimage now tends to be framed as forced, or even as a pretext to get to Jerusalem, we should also consider the possibility that the Jadids considered both sites of pilgrimage holy.

⁵⁸Sara Koplik, *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 24. Muta'assibin translates as “the devout” or “zealous ones.”

⁵⁹Dilmanian, *History*, 46–50. The Mashhadi narrative states that except for a very few individual exceptions, all Mashhadis returned to Judaism. There are several stories relating that those who remained Muslims did not have any offspring or died in tragic accidents. Patai cites a source that refers to a sole “apostate” who had become a Baha'i and died in a plane crash. In one of my group interviews, two women were in disagreement about whether any Mashhadi Jews had become Muslims. One of them asserted that many of those who converted became very prosperous in Mashhad. Dilmanian confirms this latter statement in his book, as does my fieldwork in Iran.

⁶⁰Dilmanian, *History*.

⁶¹Nissimi, “Memory,” 84.



Figure 3. Marriage Contract from Mashhad, 1869 (Source: National Library of Israel)

There also are accounts of accusations against the Jadids for not eating the same food as Muslims and not working on Shabbat, which allegedly proved that they were not real Muslims.

Usually, periods of social and political conflict brought about these accusations of tainted religiosity. In the year 1900, for example, there was a famine in Mashhad and food prices were very high. Some people accused the Jadids of hoarding wheat and other foodstuffs in their cellars, while “we were starving to death.”⁶² The incited people then attacked the “bakeries which belonged to Muslims” and the house of the biggest landowner of the city (a Muslim). Before they reached the Jewish houses, “a grocer called Mirza Davood” was able to stop the rioters; later the authorities also sent soldiers to contain the riot.⁶³ This episode shows that the looters were motivated by socioeconomic disparities, which led them to attack wealthy Muslims and Jews alike.

Other popular stories relate to the difficulties of keeping the Shabbat while staying open for business.⁶⁴ There were varieties of ways used to avert customers: asking for unreasonably high prices or sending young boys to the shops, who would tell potential customers to come back another day because the owner was not there. Surely, the Muslims understood that the Jadids did not engage in business because of Shabbat. There also were individuals who wanted to keep their businesses open and did not share the commandment of Shabbat as a day of rest. One of my interview partners told me that the Mashhadis had a group of elders who controlled adherence to Jewish laws and punished individuals for violations. He related that this also could include beatings, repeated until the person complied. A distinct community structure had evolved, resembling other crypto-Jewish communities such as the Dönme.⁶⁵

The Jadids had their own neighborhood, cemetery, and bathhouses. Among themselves, the converts referred to their community as Jadids, too: “When my parents talked about ‘the Jews’ they always meant other people. We were Jadids.”⁶⁶ They were a distinct community due to the evolution of their identities and practices, and although they had close ties to both Muslim and Jewish communities they somehow remained apart.

The marriage contracts of the *Jadid al-Islam* further illustrate the difficulty of drawing clear borders between Muslim and Jewish identities (Fig. 3). The Muslim marriage contract, the *‘aqd nāmah*, begins

⁶²Memoirs of Mulla Yosef Dilmani, cited in Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*, 82.

⁶³Dilmanian, *History*.

⁶⁴Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*; Pirnazar, *The Anusim of Mashhad*; Nissimi, *Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis*.

⁶⁵Marc David Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁶Interview with Mr. Alizadeh, 16 June 2019, location of interview anonymized.

with Qur'anic verses and prayers. However, this tradition was not limited to Muslim families. There are several examples of Jewish marriage contracts with the incorporation of Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic as the holy languages of the contract, or the sole use of Qur'anic lines in addition to the Persian text.⁶⁷ The Mashhadis had Muslim wedding contracts in addition to a Jewish one for private use. Some marriage contracts had two identical pages, one in Hebrew and Aramaic and the other in Arabic and Persian. Shalom Sabar discusses a typical Shi'i *'aqd nāmāh*, where the appellation *Jadid al-Islam* stands next to the names of the bridegroom, the bride, and their parents. Like many Iranian Jews, Jadids usually bore two names, a typical Muslim name and a Jewish name used only by members of the community. However, on some marriage contracts of the Jadids, Jewish names do appear:

The witnesses required to sign these contracts would often write their Jewish names in cursive Hebrew script instead of Arabic. These signatures were written in such minuscule cursive handwriting that obviously only members of the community could decipher them. In fact, if a Muslim asked the Jadidim for the meaning of their peculiar writing, they would usually answer that it was a secret script inherited from their fathers.⁶⁸

Rather than acknowledging the simultaneity of Hebrew and Persian elements in the marriage contract that pointed to a multilayered identity, Sabar incorporated this example into the dichotomy of secrecy and public deceit. It is unlikely that the Muslims of Mashhad were unable to detect that “the script of the forefathers” was Hebrew.⁶⁹

Sabar elucidates the character of the decorations and the selection of motifs and designs in the marriage contracts of the Jadids, which changed dramatically in the period after the forced conversion. Instead of the characteristic Jewish elements, the decoration resembled typical designs of Shi'i marriage contracts. Toward the end of the 19th century, when a small book-form marriage contract became the norm, the Jadids immediately adopted it for both types of marriage contracts, Jewish and Muslim. Rather than upholding a strict public-versus-private identity, the marriage contracts illustrate how closely the Jadids were intertwined with Persian culture.⁷⁰

Constriction and Continuity

At the turn of the 20th century, those who had advocated conversion to Islam had either merged with the majority Shi'i society or left Mashhad. Leadership of the Jadidi community shifted to the “zealots.” Dilmanian states: “Any advocates of Islam found it necessary to put aside differences of opinion and join the others. Whenever they faced trouble they always united, and everyone was brought closer to the ancestral faith.”⁷¹

Dilmanian mentions that in 1856 the first copies of a Persian Bible translation arrived in Mashhad, prepared by the Christian Bible society in London. He suggests that this was an important factor in

⁶⁷Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “Marriage Contracts and the Mashhadi Jewish Community: Art as a Second Identity in the Nineteenth Century,” *Jadaliyya*, 12 August 2013, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29271/Marriage-Contracts-and-the-Mashhadi-Jewish-Community-Art-as-a-Second-Identity-in-the-Nineteenth-Century>.

⁶⁸Patai, *Jadid al-Islam*; Shalom Sabar, *Ketubbah: The Art of the Jewish Marriage Contract* (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 25.

⁶⁹Patai states, “In the 1880s, most of the Jadidi boys attended the *maktab* (Muslim school) of Mulla Hasan. . . . He even learned from a Jew the Jadidi alphabet, the specific Hebrew script used by the Jews of Meshed. In return, he taught that Jew the Persian alphabet. Mullah Hasan *did not know that the Jadidim faithfully adhered to the Jewish religion*, and he considered the Hebrew script merely a kind of historical relic from their past. Until the years of World War II, whenever a Muslim asked about it, the Jadidim always gave this explanation for their interest in knowing the Hebrew script” (*Jadid al-Islam*, 210; emphasis mine). Rather than believing that the Jadids' interest in Hebrew was merely a “relic from the past,” the teacher, who daily interacted with Jadidi youth and had studied the Hebrew script himself with a member of the community, was probably aware of its usage in the community.

⁷⁰One of my interview partners pointed out that although immediately after the conversion the Shi'i marriage contract accompanying the Hebrew one was very simple and formal, this changed in the following years, leading to the emergence of highly elaborated and artfully ornamented Shi'i marriage contracts among the Mashhadi Jews. Interview with Mr. Pourrahimi, 17 December 2020, Israel.

⁷¹Dilmanian, *History*, 62.

strengthening Jewish identity. After the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1906–11), the government established public schools in Mashhad and the Jadids used this development to request their own school. The school did not differ in its curriculum from other schools, and included Qur'an lessons and prayers. In addition to public school, over time more Jadidi boys attended the *beit midrash*, where they studied Hebrew and received religious instruction.⁷² In this way the period saw the manifestation of more institutionalized Jewish practice.

In the course of time, some of the Jadids became Muslims, without a trace of their Jewish roots remaining. Others became pious Muslims, but retained elements of Jewish religion and culture at home. They considered themselves true believers of Islam, but their practice was syncretic. Those who chose a Jewish identity engaged in the production of a new communal identity.⁷³

From the 1920s onward, when Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41) came to power, the Mashhadis practiced Judaism more openly. In 1933, the Jadids amounted to 3,000 people and had several synagogues. After 1941, when Reza Shah was deposed, prohibitions against political activism such as Zionism initially loosened. This led to new forms of contact between the Mashhadi Jews and Jews in Palestine, mainly mediated by the Jewish Agency office that had opened in Tehran in 1942.

Many Mashhadi memoirs from the 1940s refer to a happy childhood, especially in connection with increasing prosperity. There are references to big mansions with (Muslim) housekeepers. Some Jadidi families were among the first who owned a car or a telephone in all of Mashhad. Jadidi children went to school with Muslim children, who were their friends. They accompanied their parents to synagogue and went to the bathhouse every Friday that they shared with the local Muslims.⁷⁴

From 1941–46, the Russian army occupied Mashhad. When the army left the city, crowds from the street attacked the Jewish neighborhood despite attempts of civil and religious officials to protect the Jadids. This event prompted a visit by a representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine from Tehran who called for the “rescue of our brethren,” in the form of their emigration to Palestine.

The diminishing economic opportunities after the war also spurred the emigration of Mashhadis, mainly to Tehran. In 1953, there were about one hundred Jewish families in Mashhad, and the last individuals left in the late 1990s. Today the largest communities of Mashhadis live in Israel and in Great Neck, New York, with some smaller offshoots in the United Kingdom and Italy. Altogether, the community comprises about 20,000 individuals, and they maintain close connections across borders.⁷⁵

According to Dilmajian's proposition that the zealots shaped the self-understanding of Mashhadis from the 1900s onward, they provided strong exclusive identifications and boundaries for the community, which over time aligned their history with the tenets of normative Judaism and exclusive belonging as encapsulated in modern nationalism. Dalia Kandiyoti has pointed out that the desire to recuperate buried histories of crypto-Jewish communities can be both productive and problematic. Their productivity lies in the potential of personal narratives to assert what hegemonic religious, political, and economic powers have long suppressed. At the same time, there is the possibility of essentializing identities “by reaching back to supposedly authentic and fixed definitions, including those interpretations in which certain looks, behaviors, talents, and choices are marked as ‘Jewish’ and serve as evidence.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

Muslim and Jewish identifications in 19th-century Iran could be complementary rather than antagonistic. Categorizations as distinctly Muslim or Jewish do not reflect the array of practices, beliefs, and affiliations that the Mashhadis employed. By pointing out these convergences, I hope it has become clear that this

⁷²Patai remarks that in the beginning the “Talmud Tora” school did not possess any books.

⁷³By “production” I do not suggest falsification. Every communal history is characterized by the selection of certain aspects and the omission of others. When recovering crypto-Jewish pasts, Kandiyoti has pointed out that new or preexisting affiliations (such as Jewishness), emotions, and political ideas about large-scale traumatic events become intertwined with filiation and perceptions of descent; Dalia Kandiyoti, *The Converso's Return: Conversion and Sephardi History in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2020), 7.

⁷⁴Interview with Mrs. Asher, 30 December 2020, UK.

⁷⁵Ariane Sadjed, “Belonging from Afar: The Mashhadi Jews in Milan,” under review.

⁷⁶Kandiyoti, *Converso's Return*, 7.

article is not interested in determining whether the Mashhadis were or were not “real” Jews. The interest rather lies in the question of how it came about that their particular way of being Jewish, including its manifold and at times indeterminate expressions, was channelled into a contemporary narrative in which hardly any of these variations and interlinkages have a place.

A reading in which categories of religious belonging need not be oppositional but rather articulated with each other, supplementing and engendering each other, entails some Mashhadis who may not have made a clear distinction between what they privately believed in and what they practiced publicly. This is not to say that what one believed or how one identified was meaningless. Rather, there was considerable diversity among the Jadids regarding the extent to which they accepted Islam or opposed conversion. The respective practices transformed over time, rather than representing a singular and invariable Judaism. It was thus not the act of conversion itself that created the communal boundary, but the continual transmission of its narrative.

Imposing a historical trajectory of Jewish exclusivity on heterogeneous and interrelated cultural practices is a product of processes internal to various Jewish contexts but also of the wider world’s discourses on equality and civilization, in which figures who build lives, identities, and communities by hiding, mixing, masquerading, and moving have no place.⁷⁷ When we look beyond the narrow confines of these boundaries, a wide field of known and unknown ties between Jewish history and other histories emerges.

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⁷⁷Ibid.