

ONE

WOMEN OF CHANGE

Los Angeles is home to the largest concentration of Iranians outside of Iran.¹ With the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the consequent fall of Mohammad Reza Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty, seventy thousand Iranian Jews fled the newly forming Islamic fundamentalist country and flocked to the United States. Iranian Jews knew that with the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the new regime of the Islamic Republic, there would be not only a change of government but also a revolution, during which they would most likely be stripped of their religious rights. Iranian Jews felt that due to their prominent socioeconomic status; their identification with the shah and his policies; and their attachment to Israel, Zionism, and America, they would not be tolerated under Ayatollah Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini's new regime. Khomeini accused Jews of distorting Islam and the Qur'an; he believed they had taken over Iran's economy, and he depicted them as imperialist spies; he even emphasized the Shi'i doctrine of the unbelievers' ritual impurity (*nejasat*).² As David Menashri wrote: "Iranian Jews' previous assets turned into their liabilities."³ Iranian Jews knew that they were now viewed as an inferior minority in Iran and must depart the country in order to escape religious persecution, so many moved to America.

The Iranian migration to America arrived in two back-to-back waves—before and after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Before the revolution, most Iranian immigrants were college students majoring in technical fields who had come to the United States in order to meet the needs of the rapidly industrializing oil-based Iranian economy. In the late 1970s, Iran surpassed all other countries in the number of foreign students in the United States.⁴ Originally, many of these students had planned on returning to Iran after their studies but had chosen to remain after the 1979 revolution. After the revolution, Iranian migration consisted of exiles, political refugees, and those seeking asylum. These exiles were mostly religious minorities, such as Armenian Christians and Jews, who had experienced or feared persecution

in the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵ Many fled to America, specifically to Los Angeles, California.

Since 1965, Los Angeles has had the highest concentration of Iranians in the United States and has become the Iranian center after the Iranian Revolution. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2000, some 75,491 Iranians were living in Los Angeles County.⁶ According to *The Association of Religion Data Archives*, there are currently 202 Jewish congregations and 564,700 Jews living in Los Angeles County.⁷ After the revolution, many Iranian Jews opted to settle in Los Angeles County because they knew about the already well-established large Iranian community thriving there. In 2007, the Iranian Jewish community numbered roughly 30,000 to 40,000 in Los Angeles alone. Most people came to be near their family and friends and, thus, formed the largest community of its kind in the United States.

Although Iranians are heavily concentrated in Los Angeles County, they are dispersed within the county itself. Iranian Jews and Muslims are highly concentrated in Beverly Hills, as well as in affluent parts of the west side and the San Fernando Valley. Armenians from Iran have mostly settled in Glendale,⁸ and a newly emerging Orthodox Iranian Jewish community has settled in traditionally Jewish neighborhoods such as Fairfax and the Pico/Robertson area. Because Iranian Jews have dealt with prejudice and discrimination in Iran, they identify more strongly with their ethnoreligious background than with their nationality. This ethnoreligious background identification was further emphasized when the majority of Iranian Jews immigrated to America around the time of the "Iranian hostage crisis," where tensions between Iran and the United States ran high. In order to avert prejudice and discrimination from Americans, Iranian Jews stressed their Jewishness over their Persian identity.

Religion is an important distinguishing identity factor within religiously diverse nationality groups.⁹ Studies of minorities within nationality groups such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Iranian minorities, such as Armenian, Baha'i, and Jewish Iranians, found that these minorities typically have a highly developed sense of ethnic identity even before migration to America.¹⁰ Mehdi Bozorgmehr wrote that unlike the dominant religious group, minorities in the country of origin form solidarity groups as a result of hostility from the majority and years or centuries of minority status. This has prompted ethnoreligious minorities to develop ethnic self-identity, religiosity, family unity, endogamy, social ties with co-ethnics, organizational activity, and occupational clustering, often in self-employment.¹¹ As a result of the discrimination Jews suffered in Iran, they formed the type of solidarity groups discussed by Bozorgmehr. They were adamant about observing Jewish holidays; they mainly socialized and worked with fellow coreligionists; family unity was stressed in Iranian Jewish homes; and Jewish organizations

developed in order to serve the community. This insularity and religious cohesion of the Iranian Jewish community is also evident in America.

The Iranian Jewish identity can be characterized by its symbolic ethnicity. Symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in numerous ways, especially by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation or that of the old country. Symbolic ethnicity is a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without being incorporated into everyday behavior.¹² However, for Iranian Jews, pride in their Iranian Jewish identity is expressed in many aspects of their daily life. The daily traditions they practice are characterized both by their Iranian culture and by their Jewish beliefs. Symbolic ethnicity can be directed toward the desire for a cohesive extended immigrant family, the obedience of children to their parents, or the unambiguous orthodoxy of immigrant religion.¹³ Iranian Jews have a cohesive extended family: Everyone from great-aunts and uncles to second cousins are included in the most intimate family affairs. There is a strict sense of familial hierarchy and devotion to Judaism, where even the most religiously lax family respects Jewish beliefs.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, Iranian Jews have become major players in the economic, social, and political life of Angelenos and have become one of the most well-established immigrant communities in Los Angeles. Their mark is felt not only in the secular sphere, but it is also strongly felt in the religiously dominant Ashkenazi community of Los Angeles. Iranian Jews attend and are involved in Ashkenazi synagogues and day schools; they have formed their own Jewish Federation, synagogues, and Jewish charity and social organizations. Slowly, with the integration of the Iranian Jewish community, Iranian Jewish scholars, and religious leaders, the Jewish communities in Los Angeles and around the world are becoming more aware of the influence that Persia¹⁴ has had on Jewish history.

This is best exemplified with the Persian Achaemenid king, Cyrus the Great, who freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity and granted them religious pluralism. Cyrus is referred to as "God's anointed" in Isaiah 45; his "spirit" is discussed in Ezra 1; and the ecstatic joy he caused by freeing the Jews from the Babylonians is the topic of Psalm 126. His successor and great-grandson, Darius I, was responsible for the building of the Second Temple, while Iranian Jewish characters such as Zerubabel, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah all played important roles in Jewish history.

GOALS AND FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

The first objective of this book is to present an ethnographic portrait of life for three generations of Iranian Jewish women who lived in Iran and now live in America, exploring the political and social changes that have

affected these women in regards to their rituals and religious observances, and their self-concept as Iranian Jewish women in Iran and now in America. The three focal incidents in terms of their effect on Iran and, consequently, the Jewish community, are the Constitutionalist Revolution in 1906 and the granting of the throne to Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941); Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi taking the throne (1941–1979); and, finally, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the immigration to Los Angeles.

Throughout, this book examines historical events and how they have affected the religious and social lives of these Iranian Jewish women and the manifestation of the sacred within the lives of these women. Sacrality can be found in different ways for each generation of women: for the first generation of women, it is found through sacralizing the domestic sphere and having a numinous relationship with God;¹⁵ for the later generations, sacrality can be found in the numerous social events the community has to attend, within a woman maintaining and redefining her *najeebness* (virginity and innocence), and through the way some of the *hozrei bi'tshuvah* (those who return to repentance) women observe Jewish *halakhah* (Hebrew term for Jewish law).

The comparative works demonstrate the similarities and uniqueness of Iranian Jewish women, both in their home country and in America. The lives of Iranian Jewish women are not monolithic; they vary depending on the cities in which the women were raised, their socioeconomic class, and their level of assimilation into the dominant society.

Comparisons are made among three generations of Iranian Jewish women—grandmothers, mothers, and daughters—exploring these different generations to understand how history, political change, social change, assimilation, financial mobility, and immigration have affected their religiosity, their concepts of womanhood, their intergenerational relationships, and their identity.

In particular, this volume looks at the concept of sacrality throughout these three generations and how it has changed over time. Although different generations of women have different interpretations of sacrality, one overarching theme is the emphasis placed on women's religious and social rituals and maintaining their *najeebness*—all of which uphold the community's Jewish beliefs and distinguish them from other Iranians, Americans, and Jews. The emphasis on religious tradition and *najeebness* among Iranian Jewish women allows them to create meaning in their lives, establish authoritative figures within the community, and most importantly, reinforce the collective morals and social norms held within the community.

Research shows that Judaism not only provides social control and cohesion and reaffirms social norms for the community, but more importantly, it provides a way for the women to maintain their identity in times when

they are confronted with anti-Semitism, gender segregation, assimilation, and immigration.¹⁶ Throughout generations and across borders, it has been their identification as Iranian Jewish women, whether through following the community's moral, social, and religious norms or transforming and reinterpreting them, that has enabled these women to connect with their history in Iran while embracing their present life in America.

Researchers have placed importance on rituals by asserting that women should be perceived as ritual experts; this book approaches Iranian Jewish women in the same manner, primarily focusing on the use of ritual innovation by Persian Jewish women in order to define their piety and establish their identity. With three generations of women issues are explored for each generation relating directly to the social and political climate of their time. The first generation of women (chapter 2) includes those who were raised under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. The second generation of women (chapter 3) includes those who were raised under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his secular and Western regime. Finally, chapters 4 and 5 examine the lives of the American-raised daughters of these immigrant mothers and how they establish their multiple identities in their native country.

In the traditional Iranian Jewish context, women were excluded from public religious life. When Iranian Jewish women came to America, specifically to Los Angeles, they found themselves in a situation of public observance. The women who were born and raised in Iran and immigrated to Los Angeles later in their life, meaning women who were raised under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mohammad Reza Shah, felt this change most severely. This book focuses on the issue of change in the patterns of religious observances and religious rituals among the first two generations of Iranian Jewish women and on their self-concept as Iranian Jewish women in Iran and now in America.

This book examines the ritual practices and beliefs of Iranian Jewish women, their attitude toward Judaism and ritual observances, the importance of religious activities for them and their community, the changes in the patterns of religious observances and religious rituals that have taken place due to modernization and immigration, and finally, how modernization and demographic change affected religious change and ritual observance.

Within these issues, we explore the status of women in the family and in public life, asking how much influence rabbinical law, Muslim society, and the location of their home had on placing women in the domestic sphere; examine how influential Jewish *halakhah* was in dictating the relationship between husband and wife (i.e., attending the *mikveh*,¹⁷ sleeping in separate beds, and other menstruating laws); and look at the rituals of sociability within the first two generations, exploring the rituals of Persian Jewish social

activities, a woman's role in these events, and the connection between Persian Jewish social activities and religion. Finally, we examine how women perceive themselves and their role as Jewish women in the Persian community, exploring how their self-perception has changed throughout the years while living first in Iran and now in America.

RECENT HISTORY OF IRAN

Iran has gone through major political and religious changes in the twentieth century, changes that have greatly affected the status and condition of Iranian Jews. It would be gravely erroneous to imagine Iran as a stagnant political and social climate or to describe Iranian women's piety, rituals, and identity as unchanging within that climate. Numerous Judeo-Persian scholars have written about the changes that have occurred in the Iranian community during the twentieth century.¹⁸ The Constitutionalist Revolution of 1906 has been described as the beginning of the Iranian people's struggle for freedom,¹⁹ with many important measures adopted at this time, such as the Assembly, which allowed each religious minority, except the Baha'is, to elect a delegate to the government body. Other changes in the country included less influence from the clergy in governmental affairs, an opposition in Iran against the acceptance of new foreign loans, a national bank established to provide relief from foreign financial restrictions, and a new constitution. It was during this time that Jews finally felt some form of freedom, what Levi calls the "Jewish Emancipation." Jews gained the freedom to work and be educated; the Jewish *mahaleh* (ghetto) was sanitized; Jews were no longer considered to be "unclean" by Muslims; a Jewish-Iranian newspaper, *Shalom*, was published; and finally, Jews were no longer restricted to living in the *mahalehs* and could move to other parts of the city.²⁰

As a result of the First World War and inner conflicts in Iran, all military, fiscal, and customs-related affairs had come under the exclusive control of British advisors by 1921. It was during this period that Reza Khan entered the arena of Iranian politics, staging a successful coup, seizing command of the Iranian armed forces, and taking over the throne in 1925.²¹ The most effective reform Reza Shah Pahlavi established was the expulsion of even the most senior clerics from government administration; he did not permit them to meddle in state affairs. For the first time since the Safavid dynasty, religion was separated from politics in Iran. During Reza Shah's reign, many Jews prospered financially. One of the great accomplishments of the Jews during his reign was the establishment in Tehran of the Kurosh elementary school and high school. However, Reza Shah's extending a hand of friendship to Hitler brought about his compulsory abdication and exile after the Second World War.

The coronation of his son Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941 brought about a resurgence of the Jewish people of Iran. Habib Levi wrote that “the years of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign may be considered the zenith of Jewish Iranian well-being and prosperity.”²² Under his rule, Jews were prominent figures in economics, industry, commerce, higher education, administration, and the arts and sciences. Educational opportunities for Iranian Jews increased when the second shah came into power. Jewish schools, summer camps, and seminars for training teachers were opened. Hundreds of Jewish students went to Europe and America to pursue advanced studies. Jewish girls, who until a few generations earlier had received no education at all, were now on equal footing with boys and studied at all levels.²³ Levi identifies Israeli independence as the most important historical event of this period for Iranian Jews. In 1960, the shah recognized Israel and repeatedly affirmed Israel’s right to exist, publicly declaring that Iran and Israel should maintain economic ties; with the implementation of various treaties, as a result, Israeli organizations engaged in a wide range of activities in Iran.²⁴

In the fall of 1977, a revolutionary upheaval began with the outbreak of open opposition movements, and Jews in Iran once again found themselves threatened by their Muslim neighbors. Iranian Jews realized that their previous assets had turned into liabilities: Their prominent socioeconomic status; their identification with the shah and his policies; and their attachment to Israel, Zionism, and America were all held against them by Khomeini and his followers.²⁵ It is estimated that by 1978, some seventy thousand Iranian Jews had fled Iran, many of whom immigrated to the United States. This immigration to the United States is important in a religious sense because, for the first time, Iranian Jews found themselves in a secular society where they faced the challenges of retaining their Judeo–Persian identity.

Iranian Jews have chosen to maintain their Jewish identity in Los Angeles and have taken the opportunity to give their children what many of them lacked in Iran—a Jewish education. The majority of Jewish Iranian boys and girls in Los Angeles attend Jewish day schools or after-school programs. Most have a *bnai mitzvot* or *bat mitzvot*,²⁶ attend synagogue regularly, and are actively involved in Jewish organizations and social events. For the first time, Jewish Iranian girls have equal status with boys in regards to religion. Because many Iranians in Los Angeles attend Reform and Conservative synagogues, Iranian girls are receiving a Jewish education on par with boys. They read from the Torah, get called for up for *aliya*,²⁷ recite the blessings before and after meals and during holidays, and many are taking leadership positions within the synagogue (i.e., as cantors or as temple president). In doing so, they are practicing a form of Judaism that is influenced by the Ashkenazi American Jewish movements. The question is, in this context, what happens to the female Jewish rituals their mothers and grandmothers

practiced in their native Iran? Have these rituals been replaced or have they incorporated with Ashkenazi ones?

WOMEN RAISED IN LOS ANGELES

Initially, the author planned to use the same five questions posed for the women of chapters 2 and 3 for the women of chapter 4, the daughters of immigrant parents who were and are raised in America. However, it soon became apparent that this is a very different generation from those who came before, and the theme of rituals does not really apply to them because they were raised with very few religious rituals outside of the traditional Jewish ones, such as attending synagogue and going to their parents' home for Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner. This generation did not grow up in Iran experiencing the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty; they only know the Iran of their grandmothers and mothers through the memories of their matriarchs.

However, the Iranian Jewish culture is still a dominant aspect of their lives, and at times, it does not blend well with American values and cultural norms. These young women, like most children of immigrant parents, struggle to meld the culture of their parents with the American culture they live in. Thus, a more appropriate theme to investigate for this generation was the issue of identity—how these young women establish and juggle their multiple identities in their native land. How have they incorporated womanhood, Judaism, and the rules and expectations placed on them by their family and the Iranian Jewish community into their life as young Americans? The three important subjects of chapter 4 are being *najeeb* (virginal and innocent), pressures placed on young women, and mother-daughter relationships.

Today, immigrant children have constructed their own cultural world, where they are in the process of mixing different cultures in order to form their own hybrid identity. Hybridity is described as cultural creativity, the making of something new through the combination of existing things and patterns.²⁸ One cannot assume that one's ethnic or cultural traits are set in tradition and do not change, but rather, these traits go through an on-going negotiation that emerges when one is going through historical transformations.²⁹ The hybridity model describes how young Iranian Jewish women are constantly negotiating their identity as they live in a world where they respect the rules, values, and cultural norms of their parents' generation, while appropriating the American culture in which they have grown up.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUALS

This book places priority on examining the Jewish rituals Iranian women participated in when living in Iran and the religious rituals they practice now

in Los Angeles. Catherine Bell, in her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, traces the scholarly endeavor to use *ritual* as a term of analysis for human experience.³⁰ Bell wrote that many theorists of myth and ritual have looked to ritual in order to describe “religion,” while social functionalists explored ritual actions and values in order to analyze “society” and the nature of social phenomena, and symbolic anthropologists have found ritual to be fundamental to the dynamics of “culture.” Thus, the notion of ritual studies is meaningful not only because it is an analytical tool, but also because it has been integral to the mutual construction of both an object for and a method of analysis.³¹ Rituals demonstrate the influence of religious ideas, and religious ideas are the basis of religion.³²

In *To Take Place*, Jonathan Z. Smith describes the “gnostic” dimension of ritual, asserting that rituals are fulfilled as a means of gaining knowledge and performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are.³³ The power of ritual lies in the fact that it is concerned with ordinary activities placed within extraordinary settings; thus, rituals provide an occasion for reflection and rationalization on the incongruence of the world and ways to rectify it.³⁴ Smith uses the example of Christians in Jerusalem during the fourth century to demonstrate that through the conjoining of myth to ritual, one is able to turn the profane into the sacred.³⁵ In an earlier book, Smith wrote that one of the basic building blocks of religion is ritual repetition and routinization.³⁶ He believes that “ritual is an exercise in the strategy of choice.”³⁷ One has to decide what to include, what to hear, what to exclude, and so on; therefore, through ritual, one is establishing what kind of knowledge one chooses to learn and appropriate in one’s ritual performances and routines.

Emile Durkheim also discusses the importance of rituals in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, writing that religious phenomena fall into two categories: belief and rites.³⁸ He asserts that “rites are not purely manual operations but they bring into play the spiritual and their primary function is to act upon moral life.”³⁹ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss demonstrate how ritual activities effectively sacralize things, people, or events.⁴⁰ They believe that religious phenomena and ideas derived from social activities and that, therefore, “ritual is a sociological concept and a universal category of social life.”⁴¹

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1

This first chapter serves as an introduction to the various focuses of this study, emphasizing the importance of ritual and its place in religion for the first two generations of Iranian Jewish women in the study, and on the

distinct rituals they perform as an expression of religious piety and as a system of gaining knowledge. The argument for the first two generations of women is about how they partake in ritual innovation in order to express their piety. For the last generation, the discussion centers on how these young women have appropriated both the Iranian Jewish and American culture into their lives, thus forming a hybrid identity.

The women profiled in chapters 2 through 4 discuss the following: their attitude towards Judaism and ritual observations, their ritual practices and what they believe, the importance of religious activities/rituals for them and their community, changes that have occurred in their pattern of religious observances and religious rituals, and how demographic change and modernization have affected religious change, specifically in regards to rituals.

In chapter 5, different topics are addressed in light of the changing influences on the women's lives compared to the previous generations: their understanding of being *najeeb* and whether or not they appropriate that belief into their lives, the social and cultural pressures they feel as young Iranian Jewish women raised in America, and their relationships with their mothers and what aspects of their mothers' beliefs they have appropriated and what they have changed.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 revolves around the first generation of women, those who grew up under the Constitutional Revolution (1906) and Reza Shah (1921–1941). Because of the dearth of archival materials accessible on the subject of Iranian Jewish women, interviews were conducted, in Persian, with women from this generation. Therefore, information came almost entirely from women's voices and through oral histories of Iranian Jewish women now residing in Los Angeles.

In her book *Change within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya*, Rachel Simon wrote that the status of Jewish women in Libya was influenced by three main sets of factors: Jewish law and tradition; Muslim law and customs; and environmental conditions in the urban and rural areas.⁴² However, in her analysis, Simon does not offer an alternative women's history, because she accepts the male history based on rabbinic law, which constitutes Jewish culture. This book takes Simon's framework for analysis a step further to examine how women developed their own Jewish rituals and responded to social and political change in ways significantly different than did Iranian Jewish men.

Chapter 2 also examines Jewish customs in the home, participation in ceremonies, and the Muslim code of modesty (veiling) that Jewish women

were obligated to follow and later were forced, by the secularist Reza Shah, to disregard. The chapter includes a discussion of how Susan Sered's theory of domestication of religion is linked with Iranian Jewish women: how these women received their religious education; their perceived role in Judaism and how they expressed their religiosity when they could neither read Hebrew nor attend synagogue; and finally, the Jewish rituals in which they partook, how they interpreted these rituals, and the influences of Zoroastrianism and Islam on their ritual practice.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 focuses on interviews conducted with women who grew up in Iran under the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah, immigrated to the United States, and currently reside in Los Angeles. These women directly benefited from the secularization and modernization of the Pahlavi dynasty. Under this program of modernization, women were required to attend schools, and many Iranian Jewish women continued their higher education at vocational schools or universities. This period in Iranian Jewish society is characterized by both assimilation into the mainstream Muslim society and the insularity of the Iranian Jewish community.

Topics of this chapter include the changes that were brought about by, and the influence of, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Western modernization efforts, new educational and vocational opportunities, and the shah's attempt to secularize Iran; how this new generation of women practice Judaism and their participation in public and religious life; their assimilation of or disregard for their mother's Jewish rituals; their memories of life under the Pahlavi regime and now in Los Angeles; their idea of what constitutes a "good Jewish woman" and what social responsibilities they must attend to in order to live up to the community's expectations of them; and finally, how they preserved their Iranian Jewish identity while appropriating the secular ideology of the shah.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 looks at how women who were raised under the Pahlavi dynasty and immigrated to Los Angeles preserve and pass on their identity while still appropriating certain aspects of the dominant Ashkenazi Jewish culture in Los Angeles. While Iranians do attend the few Iranian and Sephardic synagogues in Los Angeles, an overwhelming majority of Iranians attend either Conservative Ashkenazi or Reform Ashkenazi temple and day schools. Thus, Iranian Jewish immigrants are experiencing a notably different Judaic environment than that which was practiced in Iran. The Judaism with which

they are now familiar in Los Angeles is an egalitarian one rather than the male-dominated Judaism practiced in Iran.

The move to egalitarianism has altered the household roles of Jewish men and women, forcing Jewish institutions to redefine the role of a woman and include her in the community of Jews. Women have joined the religious elite, and, thus, the Judaism that was family based has had to adapt to new patterns of women's involvement, either by incorporating changes and developing new religious expressions or by rejecting the need for adaptation and reinforcing traditional gender-based religious barriers.⁴³ This chapter examines how the religious roles of women in the Iranian Jewish community have changed with this move toward egalitarianism. Does egalitarianism within the Iranian Jewish context mean a woman has equality in the synagogue, but that she must still appropriate a traditional gender-based role in the home and within the family?

In *Women as Ritual Experts*, Susan Starr Sered conducted fieldwork among a group of women who frequent a senior citizens' day center in Jerusalem in 1984 and 1985. The women are of several ethnic groups: the majority is Kurdish; there is a sizable minority from Turkey; and several are Yemenite, Iranian, Iraqi, and Moroccan. They have lived in the same part of Jerusalem for fifty years. Sered chose these elderly women for her study because they have already experienced most or all of the religious events that are connected to the life cycle. Illiterate and functionally illiterate women were chosen in hope of learning what women really believe and do, not what rabbinic authorities and books have told them they are supposed to tell strangers. Sered's book is an important model for this study because she wrote about the meaning of religion and religiosity for a group of women whose religious life is conducted for the most part in the female domain, among other women, and is not a part of "official Judaism." Like the women in Sered's study, the religious lives of Iranian Jewish women are mostly revealed through nonverbal gestures, rituals, daily experiences, and life stories.⁴⁴

Sered wrote that the daughters and granddaughters of the day center women who were born and raised in Israel have embraced a completely secular form of Judaism. They do not participate in any religious rituals, though many of the older women say they use the cooking of traditional dishes in order to preserve the Jewish identity of their children and grandchildren.⁴⁵ One would assume that members of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles would face the same problem of secularization now that they live in a pluralistic country, yet the opposite is true. A majority of the Iranian Jewish interviewees in this study believe that Judaism is one of the most important aspects of their lives, and attending synagogue, observing Shabbat, and partaking in the Jewish holidays is given top priority.

When looking at modern pluralistic societies, two questions must be untangled if one is to understand the changing characteristics of the Jewish

community: (1) How are changes in religion linked to other processes of transformation? and (2) What are the implications of the new emerging Judaisms for the cohesion of the community?⁴⁶ For the first time in Iranian Jewish history, the community has a choice of partaking in “new emerging Judaisms” which did not exist in Iran (i.e., the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements in America). It is important to look at the effects that the dominant Ashkenazi community has had on these women’s attitudes toward Judaism and the way they observe and partake in Jewish rituals. How have the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements affected the religious and social cohesion of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles? Are these women performing the same rituals as those of Iranian Jewish men, and how do they view the Jewish rituals practiced by their matriarchs? Chapters 3 and 4 will look at the newly emerging Iranian Orthodox community and how this deep sense of religiosity is seen among the rest of the community. This discussion continues to examine the processes of the *domestication of religion* as Iranian Jewish women experience political, social, and demographic change.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 explores how demographic change has affected first-generation young Iranian American Jewish women and how they establish and juggle their multiple identities (Iranian, Jewish, and American). The voices of this generation provide a summary of the events that led to the immigration of Iranian Jews to Los Angeles and a discussion of the community’s social, economic, and religious lives. The discussion focuses on several questions in regards to being *najeeb*, social and cultural expectations placed on young women, and their relationship with their mothers: How have womanhood, Judaism, and the rules and expectations placed on them by their family and the community fit into their life as young Americans? Because a mother holds great significance and influence in a Middle-Eastern household, what is the relationship of these young women with their mothers? What aspects of their mother’s lives do they choose to emulate, and what do they choose to reinterpret in order to fit into what they see as a more modernized American society? And finally, how have these women embraced American society without compromising their Iranian Jewish traditions and beliefs?

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 summarizes the lives of these three generations of women and discusses how Iranian Jewish women in present-day Los Angeles have responded to the forces of social and political change that dramatically affected Iranian Jewish society and, thus, women’s identity. Ultimately, this

book concludes with insight into the affect modernization and demographic changes have had on the *domestication of religion* and the establishment of one's identity.

THE WOMEN OF THIS STUDY

The women interviewed for chapters 2 and 3 were from two major cities in Iran—Hamadan and Tehran. Hamadan was selected for numerous reasons. It holds great importance in Judeo-Persian history because the Esther/Mordecai story takes place there,⁴⁷ and, thus, Iranian Jews, believe their history in Iran grew in this city. Also, unlike other Jews in Iran, Iranian Jews of Hamadan did not live in Jewish ghettos,⁴⁸ and, thus, the Jews of Hamadan were more integrated in the community. The Alliance school and numerous missionaries settled in Hamadan and, therefore, Hamadanian Jews developed solid knowledge of their Jewish traditions and were exposed to other religious traditions.

The second group was women from Tehran because it is the capital of Iran and, unlike Hamadanian Jews, Tehrani Jews lived in ghettos and were less integrated into Iranian society. This difference allowed juxtaposition of the two communities. In addition, both communities are highly accessible in Los Angeles, making it convenient to conduct multiple interviews. The first generation of women was born in the 1920s and 1930s; these women are included in the "Generation of the Constitutional Monarchy." The second generation of women was born between 1948 and 1963, and is featured in chapter 3, "All the Shah's Women." The women interviewed in chapter 4, all born between 1973 and 1990, were raised in Los Angeles and live in Beverly Hills, West Los Angeles, or the San Fernando Valley. They are also featured in chapter 5, titled "Jewish American AND Persian." Thus, the voices represented come from people who are both positional and representational, with the dynamic of the narrative coming from the oral stories of the women.

The author is a member of the community being studied. Born in 1976 in Tehran, Iran, she and her family escaped to Los Angeles in 1978; thus, she falls within the third generation of Iranian Jewish women. As a woman in the community, she came to realize that the voices, life stories, happiness, and traumas of Iranian Jewish women are never openly discussed. This book strives to correct that oversight and looks at the history, rituals, and everyday lives of Iranian Jews from a woman's perspective.

Initially, it was difficult to convince women of each generation to agree to be interviewed. Because the community is very secretive, and the threat of gossip is a major issue, they demanded promises that their actual names would never be revealed. The women from the first generation were, at first,

the most reluctant—and then gradually, as the interview took place, became the most open. When initially approached, the first-generation women were shocked. Many responded by saying, “I have nothing to talk about; my life was so boring,” or, “It is too bad my husband isn’t alive; he has more to say than I do.” They were not accustomed to anyone showing an interest in their lives. But in their houses, often talking over numerous cups of tea and Persian pastries and fruits—typically forced onto the author’s plate whether she wanted them or not—the women would open up and talk for hours and hours. (Some interviews lasted up to four hours.)

Perhaps the reason the first-generation women were so open and told such personal stories—often involving their sexual encounters or disputes they had with their parents, husbands, or in-laws—was that most of the people they mentioned in their life stories were deceased; thus, perhaps the women felt liberated in being able to talk about their lives without having to worry that anything they said would cause family drama. They were so excited to talk about their childhood and life in Iran that, many times, the women would quickly run around their homes, showing family pictures, jewelry they had received from their in-laws, their *ketubahs* (Jewish marriage contracts), and even their wedding dresses.

Often, their daughters or granddaughters would call to request a copy of the interview tape or a transcription because they wanted to learn about their mothers’ and grandmothers’ lives. It became quite evident that it was rare for later generations to sit down with their matriarchs and ask them what their lives were like in Iran.

The women in the second generation were also very open and honest and enjoyed discussing their memories and experiences in Iran. They were delighted about the opportunity for Iranian Jewish women’s voices to be heard. Often, they got personal in regard to the difficulties they had experienced with immigration or with pressures placed on them by their families, in-laws, extended families, and the community. There were times when the author had to turn off her tape recorder and comfort the woman being interviewed as she cried uncontrollably over past regrets, pressures to maintain her status, or feelings of sadness. This further demonstrated how much pressure these women experience; having to be a “super mom” has taken an incredible emotional toll on them.

Women in the third generation were the most reluctant to open up about their lives and trust their stories to this book, also demanding that their actual names not be used and that they not be identifiable in any way. Perhaps it is because these women are young—some newly married, other single—they had to be more conscious of protecting their reputations and of not offending their families, friends, and in-laws. Thus, discussion about topics such as sexuality, being *najeeb*, and double standards in the

community were guarded. However, there were some women who were excited to voice their opinions and to have an outlet for many of the frustrations they experienced as members of the community.

Overall, the author found all the women to be very inviting, and she is grateful for the gift of their time. In a community where gossip can make or break a person, the author truly appreciated how forthright and honest these gracious women were with her. All of the first- and second-generation women expressed how proud they were of the author—an Iranian Jewish woman who was pursuing a PhD and choosing to write about her own community—and thus, they really wanted to support her research. Additionally, the author's family has an excellent reputation in the community, and many of the women were willing to be interviewed because they knew her grandmothers, mother, aunts, and others.

For the third-generation women, perhaps it helped that the author is a member of their community and of their generation, and not a random outsider coming into their lives, and, thus, they did not find the questions to be invasive. It likely helped that while she is a member of the community, she is also something of an outsider, having lived outside of the community for ten years while away at college and graduate school. Also, on a social level, she rarely attends Iranian Jewish functions, and the majority of her friends are not Iranian. Thus, the women believed they could talk to her openly because she could relate to them; at the same time, because she lacked a presence in the social aspects of the community, she would be unable to identify the people they discussed. They were able to maintain a level of anonymity and did not worry that she would go back to the community and gossip about them.