

Stevens Faculty Forum 2/18/04

The Jewish "New Muslims" of Meshhed

- I. Meshhed - Northeastern Iran: near Turkmenistan & Afghanistan borders, holiest city in Iran, burial place of Imam Riza
- II. Sources – “Jadid Al-Islam” (New One of Islam) by Raphael Patai & “Acts of Faith” by Dan Ross
- III. Shi’at ‘Ali (party of ‘Ali) or Shi’ites; only “Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and his descendents as legitimate Imams. Not Sunnis (majority)
 - A. Emphasis on self-sacrifice for faith
 - B. Concerned with ritual impurity
 - C. Jews (and other non-Muslims) unclean and polluting like a pig, contact with them shunned; touch render Muslim ritually impure
 - D. Lived as Dhimmis
- IV. Jews came to Meshhed in early 1700s: Situation of Jews prior to 1839 – [selection from Patai](#)
- V. The Incident- March 26, 1839
 - A. Shi’ite day of mourning – 10th of Muharram, holiest day of Shi’ite year
 - B. Day of fasting, self-flagellation, commemorating death of Hussein, second Imam.
 - C. Jewish woman asked Moslem doctor to treat her hand

- D. Advised to wash hand in the blood of a newly killed dog: standard medical science at time**
- E. She hired a local boy to kill the dog, had argument over price**
- F. Boy ran away, cried out Jews had killed dog and called it “Hussein” to mock Moslems on their holy day**
- G. Slander heard by thousands of fasting Moslems in Imam Riza mosque**
- H. Mourners poured out of mosque, stormed nearby Jewish quarter**
- I. Broke into homes, stole property, destroyed books and religious articles, burned synagogue**
- J. Killed 32 Jews, gave rest ultimatum: conversion or death**

VI. All chose to become Moslems

- A. Not accepted by neighbors, known as a Jadid al-Islam, “new Moslem”**
- B. Attended separate mosque**
- C. Continued to use Oriental Hebrew script even when writing Persian**
- D. At first too frightened to become underground Jews**
 - Some became converts**
 - Some prayed alone in secret**
 - Soon old men began gathering for Jewish prayers after finishing Moslem ones**
 - Soon were studying Torah and observing Jewish holidays**
 - Soon resumed “complete” Jewish lives**
 - If caught, penalty death**

E. Continued to live in old Jewish quarter

- **Houses with private courtyard in middle**
- **No windows face street, only inward**
- **Internal doors to go from one house to another**
- **Shi'ite law – improper for stranger to enter house where woman were present**
- **When met secretly, stationed women to sit by doors and forestall unexpected visitors**

F. Partial religious observance

- **Shops open on Shabbos, but sold nothing, quoted ridiculous prices, left small children in charge**
- **Bought extra wheat to bake matzos secretly for Passover, and bought bread in market place**
- **Yom Kippur observed, but not Succos**
- **Circumcised boys on 8th day. Told curious Moslems it was done for the health of the baby**
- **Secret Jewish names given, used only at home, otherwise used Moslem names**
- **Mezuzahs explained as protection from evil eye**
- **Kosher slaughtering at night, meat carried from house to house**
- **Women bought non-kosher meat in market. Fed to dogs. Jewish pets said to be fattest in Meshhed**
- **Women observed Jewish family purity laws, but did not go to Mikvah**

VII. Great Danger – “old Moslems” did not know what to make of the Jadidis

A. Spies – Fasting on Yom Kippur

B. Checked corpses for Jewish burial shrouds

C. Shortly after forced conversion, kosher slaughterer caught in act was himself slaughtered

D. Jadidis rarely forced to marry Moslems

- **Arranged marriages at very early age, even earlier than usual in Iran – girls 4 to 6, boys not much older**
- **First Moslem ceremony, then Jewish rite in secret**
- **Two marriage contracts – public Moslem and secret Jewish Kesuva**
- **Even on Moslem contract witnesses signed in Hebrew script – alphabet of “new Moslems”**
- **Wrote no Gitten**
- **Funerals also double – after time had own burial ground. Tombstones in Hebrew and Persian**

VIII. Behaved as “good” Moslems

A. Joined other Moslems in pilgrimages to Mecca and Karbala (Shi’ite shrine in Iraq) Received honorary titles on return, *hajji and karbalai*

B. Some Jewish hajjis honored with positions in Imam Riza Mosque

C. Stories of Mashhadis who brought *Talleisim and t’phillin* to Mecca

D. Detoured on way back from Mecca to Jerusalem, leaving other pilgrims in Alexandria and taking boat to Jaffa

E. Prayed at both Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall

IX. Education

A. No formal education of children for 20 years after forced conversion – expected to learn by watching elders

B. When entire generation grew up without knowing Hebrew started secret school

- C. **After studying Koran in Moslem school, boys came home to study Torah in a basement.**
- D. **Girls learn from older relatives**
- E. **Children under 11 not trusted and not educated or told anything about Judaism**
- F. **After 1910 when national education reform gave summer vacation, then small children enrolled in a secret Jewish “summer school.”**

X. Benefits of double life

- A. **Inside Iran Mashhadis passed as Moslems among Moslems and as Jews among Jews**
- B. **No subject to anti-Jewish restrictions became wealthiest Jews in Iran. Traveled as wished, no special clothes or taxes, trade in every marketplace – even one’s that banned Jews**
- C. **Outside Iran lived openly as Jews. Built own synagogues, remained separate from larger Jewish community**
- D. **Remained wary and lived in dread of being discovered**

XI. Immigration – over years to Russia, to India (Bombay), to Teheran, London, New York, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv

- A. **Around 1910 things improved in Iran. Moved school from basement, and began revealing secret to younger children**
- B. **Still did not return to Judaism publicly in Meshhed**
- C. **Power in hands of Shi’ite mullahs, in whose eyes it was crime for a Moslem to become a Jew**

D. Used bribes to keep their secret and stay alive.

XII. Blood libel in 1946

A. Jews use blood of a gentile no longer European obsession

B. Plaque since Middle Ages - Carried to East by Christian missionaries – First in 1144 in England [Blood Libel](#)

C. Passover coincided with Shi'ite day of mourning commemorating death of Imam Riza's sister Fatima

D. Meshhed's Jewish elders warned community not to provoke Muslims

E. Just before Passover Moslem boys caught harassing women on streets of Jewish quarter and scolded

F. Crowd gathered to defend boys, and rumor spread that their blood had been taken for baking matzos

G. Houses and synagogues were robbed and burned, Jews were beaten and stabbed on the street, and old women and children assaulted in their homes.

H. Wealthier Jews appealed through the Russian and British consulates until Moslem leaders were finally induced to help.

I. One Moslem leader announced to the mob: "These Jews are jadid al-Islam who have lived among us for years, and we never saw anything evil among them."

J. Over next few years more than 2000 left Meshhed going to Teheran and Tel Aviv. No more than a dozen families left by mid-1950s.

XIII. Blood libel still alive and well. [Saudi Government Daily: Jews Use Teenagers' Blood for 'Purim' Pastries](#) March 10, 2002. In the second part of the article (March 12), the columnist tells the story of the Book of Esther and concludes, "Since then, the Old Testament, the Jewish holy book, requires the Jews to glorify this holiday and show their joy. This joy can only be complete with the consumption of pastries mixed with human blood." (*Article published by the Saudi government daily Al-Riyadh, columnist Dr. Umayma Ahmad Al-Jalahma of King Faysal University in Al-Dammam*)

XIV. Jewishness

- A. Not in question like that of other groups**
- B. Never intermarried, no divorces**
- C. Fully accepted as Jews**
- D. Israel, immigrated as Moslems, then when allowed to stay, began openly practicing Judaism. Founded synagogues**
- E. Shocked other Jews and rabbis at first. Investigated and declared Jews with no questions.**

XV. Today

- A. Still tend to keep to themselves**
- B. Tend to only marry other Mashhadis, although slowing changing**
- C. Many in import business – rugs, other Oriental objects**
- D. Successfully withstood forced conversion and remained true to Judaism**
- E. Email about wife who is Mashadi.**

