Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith

Mehrdad Amanat
New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011. 279 pages.

In *Jewish Identities in Iran*, Mehrdad Amanat tries to unearth the roots of Iranian Jews converting to both Islam and the Baha'i faith starting with the Safavid period in the sixteenth century. Admitting a personal interest in the project (his family converted from Judaism to the Baha'i faith), Amanat searches for answers in, among many other resources, autobiographies written by members of all faiths. Included are the memoirs of Mash'allah Farivar, son of the chief rabbi and *dayan* (judge) of the Jewish community of Shiraz, and Fazel Mazandarani's multi-volume history of the Babi–Baha'is. Missing from the extensive fourteen-page bibliography, however, is the field research conducted by Laurence Loeb in Shiraz, *Outcast: Jewish Life in Southern Iran*, and multiple volumes of *The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews*, edited by Homa and Human Sarshar.

Relatively short for a research of this magnitude (210 pages), the reader might feel rushed through the historical events. The first chapter, "The Jewish Presence in Pre-Islamic and Medieval Iran," covers centuries of Iranian Jewish life in just twenty pages. Under such headings as "Jews in the pre-Islamic Period," "Economic and Cultural Spheres," "Encounters with Other Religions," "The Early Islamic Period," "The Militant Jews of Isfahan," "Early Conversions to Islam," "Religious Diversity under Mongol Rule," and "The Emergence of Jewish Notables," the author barely touches the surface of each issue. Amanat's research is nevertheless meticulous and often cites multiple examples to reveal a cause for conversion in the later chapters.

Most Jewish researchers have blamed poverty, discrimination, and hopelessness as the main reasons for Iranian Jews crossing over to other faiths, es-

pecially Islam. Stating that a great "sense of distrust and shame [was] attached to Jewish converts to Islam" (p. 5), in chapter 3, "Emergence of the Baha'i Alternative," Amanat asserts that Baha'ism's innovative vision of equality for all could have been an impetus for the Jews to convert to another minority religion. Additionally, there were few alternatives for Jews since the Zionist movement had not been fully "developed" in Iran in the early decades of the twentieth century (p. 74).

Chapter 5, "Uncertainty and Conviction: Early Examples of Conversion," is probably the book's most fascinating section, a testimony to the author's diligence in finding and translating rare memoirs. According to him, the physician Hakim Masih and his brothers converted to the Baha'i faith in early 1861 after direct contact with sick Babi prisoners. This physician must have converted at some earlier point to Christianity, since his family name is often a reference to the Christian messiah. However, it is not clear why a man of his position would be so inclined to repeatedly change religions.

The author states that as the Baha'is accepted "multiple identities," a Jewish convert could potentially observe the Jewish law, attend Yom Kippur and Shabbat services, and keep his/her connection with the Jewish community (p. 92), whereas those who converted to Islam, as in the case of forced conversion of Mashhadi Jews, were labeled *jadīd al-Islām* (new to Islam) for years, sometimes even after their death (p. 89). These converts lost their Jewish identity but were never fully accepted as true Muslims. Perhaps this alone could be the impetus for Hakim Masih's conversion to the Baha'i faith.

Chapter 6, "Rayhan Rayhani: A Peddler Living Through Critical Times," is a rare account of Jewish life in the early 1800s. Written in Judeo-Persian, this memoir illuminates the travails of Jewish life from a personal point of view, a rarity in Iranian literary history. The chapter chronicles his slow shift of allegiance from orthodox Jewish observance to understanding the new faith and eventual conversion. In "Merchants and Notables," a subchapter, Amanat scrutinizes the social and financial advantages of leaving Judaism. The Baha'i faith enabled many disadvantaged Jews to leave the ghetto's insular confines and thus socialize with and be part of a community that promised a broader sense of community and protection.

In the following chapter, the author tackles another rare memoir, that of Aqajan Shakeri (1884-1964). He believes that Shakeri's account of the miseries of life in Hamedan's Jewish quarter could have been exaggerated, although many other sources attest to the difficulties of the period. Shakeri

remembers his and his family's suffering from scalp ringworm, typhoid, lip blisters that would not heal, and the lack of medicine and food (p. 149), as well as his disillusionment with some traditional beliefs. One particular memory is of a fire that broke out in the synagogue during Yom Kippur. The congregation's leader, who discouraged them from trying to put out the fire because doing so would violate the law, seems to have had a profound effect upon him: "36 great Torahs were burned, each worth 700 tomans at the time" (p. 158). When he was about twenty-six years old, frustrated and despondent, he converted to the Baha'i faith and was subsequently excommunicated (p. 159).

In "Sufis, Philosophers, and Physicians," Amanat uses the example of another Hakim's (physician) conversion. The theme that emerges in this last chapter is one of the centuries-long hopelessness and misery of Jewish life in Iran. The poverty, discrimination, isolation, and humiliation of many Jews led to desperate attempts to find a way out – out of the situation they feared was created by their Jewish faith. So often subdued by the majority religion, sometimes even forced to convert into it, they chose a new religion, another minority religion that promised a better, a more inclusive future. Overall, the book is a sad commentary on the reality of centuries of religious discrimination in Iran, especially from the Safavid period (1509-1722) until today.

Although Amanat, similar to many Iranian Jewish scholars such as Amnon Netzer, acknowledges that the "Miseries of a Jewish Life" (chapter 7) in Iran forced many Jews to step out of their traditional faith, unlike these scholars he views such conversions as a source of personal pride, not as a stain on his family history that has to be explained away. In that sense, his approach is quite innovative and adds a new vein to this relatively new field of research.

In a final note, the book's middle section contains eight pages of glossy photographs. With the inclusion of the two photographs on the front and back covers, there are a total of nineteen rarely seen photographs from 1884-1940. It is hard to distinguish any features, facial expressions, color of skin, and clothing that would indicate their religious affiliation. They could be Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, Christians, or even Zoroastrians. They simply look Iranian, which is the book's most poignant message.

Farideh Goldin
Department of English
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
faridehgoldin@gmail.com