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Book Review: From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture

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From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture. 2012. Saba Soomekh. Albany: State University of New York Press. Hardcover (\$67.50) ISBN 978-1-4384-4383-6

Reviewed by Catherine Ogunmefun¹

In her book, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture*, Saba Soomekh tells a story of the collective history and experience of three generations of Iranian women living in an American Jewish community in Los Angeles, USA. The goal of the book was to present an ethnographic portrait of life for three generations of Iranian Jewish women, who migrated to America before and after the 1979 Iranian revolution. The book examines the ritual practices and beliefs of these Iranian Jewish women, their attitude towards Judaism and ritual observances, and the impact of modernisation, immigration and demographic change on religious observances and rituals.

In the first chapter, Soomekh introduces the subject discussed in the book by providing the objectives of the study. She also gives an overview of the Iranian migration to the United States of America (USA) in the 1970s. She emphasizes the fact that Los Angeles has had the highest concentration of Iranians in the USA since 1965, and has therefore become the Iranian center, with a population of between 30,000 and 40,000 Iranians in 2007.

The author also gives an overview of the history of Iran in the first chapter. She describes how Iran went through major political and religious changes in the twentieth century, and how these changes impacted on the status and condition of the Iranian Jews. Some of the changes that occurred in Iran included an opposition in the country against the acceptance of foreign loans; the establishment of national bank to provide relief from foreign national restrictions; a new constitution; and the reduction of the influence of the clergy in governmental influence. These changes made the Iranian Jews to gain some form of freedom, such as the freedom to work and be educated; the establishment of the Jewish-Iranian newspaper '*Shalom*'; the sanitation of the Jewish *mahaleh* (ghetto); the freedom for Jews to move and live in the other parts of the city instead of being restricted in the *mahalehs*.

The period between the early 1940s and 1970s was considered to be the zenith of Jewish Iranian well-being and prosperity, as education opportunities increased for Iranian Jews and Jewish schools, and summer camps and seminars for training teachers were opened. In addition, hundreds of Jewish students went to Europe and America to pursue advanced studies. However, in the fall of 1977, a revolutionary upheaval began which turned Iranian Jewish assets to liabilities. For instance, their socio-economic status, their identification with the shah (the former ruler of Iran), their attachment to Israel, Zionism and America, were all held against them by the new government of Iran. As a result, by 1978 about seventy thousand Iranians fled Iran and many of whom immigrated to the USA. The author considers this as an important move, as it was the first time for the Iranian Jews to find themselves in a secular society, where they are faced with the challenges of retaining their Judeo-Persian identity.

In chapter two, Soomekh focuses on the first generation of Iranian Jewish women, who have lived through the Constitutional Revolution, the Pahlavi dynasty, the Iranian Revolution,

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and have re-established their lives in Los Angeles, USA. She explores the extensive ritual and social structures of Iranian Jewish women with regard to women's ritual practices; the relationship between husband and wife; the influence of non-Jewish culture; life under the shah and life in Los Angeles. The author describes how Iranian Jewish women upheld the chain of Jewish tradition by watching "assiduously over the observance of Jewish rituals", and were involved in ritual activities revolving around the Sabbath, Rosh Kippur, Passover and Yom Kippur. For the Iranian Jewish women, engagement in ritual practices was not only a way of communing with God, but also serves as a way for them to enact their role as spiritual guardians of their family and protectors of their loved ones. However, with regard to marital issues, the Iranian Jewish women play a very submissive role, as in other patriarchal and traditional societies. The head of the household, the father, has the ultimate authority over his wife and children. Iranian women are also expected to marry when they reached puberty or by the young age of fifteen or sixteen. As arranged marriages are more common in their society, the young brides usually feel overwhelmed, especially when they arrive at their matrimonial homes, only to discover that they have to forget the customs and rituals their mothers taught them and appropriate those of their mothers-in-law. It is also a taboo to for the Iranian Jewish women to opt for a divorce, especially due to economic reasons; hence, many women sometimes feel stuck in a relationship that they do not want to be in.

Life under the shah, however, gave the Iranian Jewish women more freedom, as the women in the study believed that the shah modernised Iran and gave the Jews freedom to flourish in the Iranian society. In reality, many of the Iranian Jewish women did not take advantage of the opportunities this freedom provided, due to the fear of assimilation and intermarriage, especially with the Iranian Muslims. The Iranian Jewish women also did not take advantage of the freedom they obtained with their immigration to the USA, as the women became more religiously observant: they light Shabbat candles weekly; they only eat kosher meat; and most observe all religious holidays. This shows that freedom is dependent on one's abilities to make use of available opportunities, as the first generation of Iranian Jewish women stuck to their culture and religious beliefs, despite the freedom they obtained under the shah and through their immigration to the USA.

Chapter three discusses the reasons why the strict religious rituals of the Iranian Jewish women were not passed on to their daughters, the second generation of women, who grew up under the secular regime of Mohammed Reza Shah. Soomekh shows how emphasis is placed on social rituals and acculturating into the dominant secular Iranian culture, while they placed less importance on religious rituals. Even though she is expected to follow the same rules as their mothers, there is a new definition of what constitutes a proper Jewish woman. She has to be *najeeb* (virginal and innocent) when she gets married and dedicates her life to her husband, children and extended family.

With regard to religious observance, the second generation of Iranian Jewish women did not light Shabbat candles, they kept kosher meat in the house but ate non-kosher meat in restaurants and they would only go to synagogue during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They did not want to be associated with the images they were raised with, of their mothers and grandmothers on their hands and knees scrubbing the floors and cleaning the house as a way of showing maternal devotion. They, however, clung to their *najeebness* like the first generation of women. However, *najeebness* was now used as a way to maintain a woman's Jewish identity in an assimilated culture and to protect her and her family from rumours of immorality and negative gossip. Education also played an important role in maintaining Jewish identity, as mothering

came to be defined as nurturing and educating among the Iranian Jews. A mother was no longer seen, as just the vessel for the growth of the fetus, but her educating and nurturing roles became more important and began to overshadow her function as a womb.

Soomekh, in chapter four, highlights the positive and negative experiences of Iranian Jewish women when they immigrated to Los Angeles. She explores how life is like for the second-generation of Iranian Jewish women in Los Angeles, and how immigration forced many women to start working and contributing to the family income. Even though some of them revelled in being working women, others felt a great deal of animosity and embarrassment for having to work. Many of the working Iranian Jewish women, who participated in the study, expressed their frustration regarding the lack of help they received from their husbands in the domestic sphere. The women worked all day and then were still responsible for the maintenance and nurturing of the home, while the husbands did not believe in sharing the responsibilities of housework, dinner, laundry, or other chores. Thus, immigration brought the Iranian Jewish women some form of freedom, such as increased access to education and gainful employment. It, however, caused a conflict between American idea of marriage and traditional family roles, as their men were not able to adapt to the changes in family responsibilities, brought about by their immigration to the USA.

Even though immigration placed additional burden on the Iranian Jewish women, who immigrated to Los Angeles, it gave them freedom to seek greater participation within the synagogue as well as greater access to positions of religious and communal leadership. Most of the women, who participated in the study, attended synagogue frequently, lit the Shabbat candles weekly and kept kosher meat in the home. As religiously committed women, they began to develop prayers and rituals that would give expression to women's spirituality and, some even pursued advanced degrees in Jewish history and thought. This shows the impact of feminism on the Iranian Jewish women. Although immigration to Los Angeles has reconnected the Iranian Jewish women to their religious traditions, cultural taboos and a woman's roles are still significant. Secrecy is one aspect of Iranian culture that is still dominant, even in the USA, as women are not supposed to discuss personal family problems or their own issues, out of fear of ruining the family's reputation. The cultural taboo associated with revealing one's innermost thoughts, difficulties, and feelings therefore caused a great deal of stress for most of the Iranian Jewish women.

In chapter five, the author focuses on the daughters of these women, the first generation of Iranian girls who have grown up in the Iranian Jewish community of Los Angeles. There is a clear disagreement between the two generations on the significance of the community, one's reputation, and the influence of parents. Unlike the older generations, many first-generation Iranian American girls refused to allow others to dictate their lives by challenging the amount of influence their parents have on their lives. They also believed that if a man is so heavily influenced by his mother and "does not have a mind of his own or a backbone to fight," he is not worth being with. Thus a lot of strife is caused within the family unit due to the raising of these children in the USA, where the sense of independence is enshrined in children from the early stage of their lives. Many of the mothers of the young women believe that the hardest aspects of raising children in the USA, is the lack of respect and reverence for parents, as their own parents had complete control over their lives and they never disrespected their rules and opinions. On the other hand, many of the first generation of Iranian women in Los Angeles feel that their mothers do not understand how difficult it is to be a young woman balancing two cultures in the USA. They also believe that their mother's advice about their lives is outdated – even ignorant. Thus,

many of the young women do not feel close to their mothers because of the perception that they are from different worlds.

Many of the young women who participated in the study also described a sense of a living a double life or myriad lives, and the characters that they appropriate in relationships with different people. They take the persona of a *najeeb* woman in from of their parents and within the community; however, they are hard-working business women, mothers and/or students in their personal and professional lives and for those who feel lucky enough to have friends they are close to, they take on their true personality when they are with these friends. Many of the young women do not agree with their mother's version of *najeebness*; thus, some of the women reclaimed the word and assigned a new and more culturally appropriate meaning to it. A *najeeb* woman is now considered to be a woman who is comfortable with her body and herself, and knows how to make men respect her.

Some of the more religiously observant young women define a *najeeb* woman has a good wife and mother, who also builds a strong Jewish foundation in the home, follow the rules of *niddah* (rules pertaining to menstruation) and observe all the Jewish laws that pertain to her. However, both Iranian Jewish men and women should possess these traits. Thus, young Iranian women are challenging the gendered hierarchy within the community and their family structure, by re-defining their own sexuality and instigating female independence as well as promoting an egalitarian society.

In the final chapter, Soomekh gives a summary of the various aspects of religion and culture explored with regard to the three generations of Iranian Jewish women. She also provides some intergenerational comparisons of the Iranian Jewish women. According to the author, the first generation of women were concerned about their daughters intermingling with non-Jewish men during the shah's time, fearing they would appropriate some of their lax social relations. While the second generation was more liberated under the shah than their mother's generation, they had to maintain the same purity codes and modesty. Under the shah, both generations appropriated Western culture, privatized religion and became a bit more accepting of socializing between men and women, but maintained their strict rules and beliefs with regard to sexual relations. However, it is different for the women of the third generation because their parents are immigrants in a new country. Their parents are resistant to change and want to uphold the same morals and lifestyle they had in Iran, which caused generational conflicts, thereby leading to a loss of bond between mothers and daughters.

The study shows some trends in the culture and religion of the Iranian Jewish women over three generations. Even though the older generations experienced some changes due to modernisation, they were more resistant to the changes seen in the younger generation. This is also common among other immigrant communities in various parts of the world, as the older generation is usually resistant to cultural changes, in comparison with the younger generation. Soomekh's research shows that the fear of the change that the older generation observes in the younger generation may be due to the need to maintain their cultural identity in a foreign country. Thus, the book is a good reading material for people interested in the impact of immigration on culture and religion of immigrant communities. It is also suitable for feminist scholars, who focus on the effect of modernisation on women's sexuality. Those who are interested in the Iranian Jewish culture would also benefit from the book.