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“Us” and “Them” – The Formation of the Crypto-Jewish Community of Mashhad, Iran

The emergence of communal awareness among the crypto-Jewish community in Mashhad was wrought by Muslim hostility and communal idiosyncrasy resulting from the struggle to preserve a covert Jewish identity after their forced conversion to Islam. The prevalent animosity of the Muslim majority ensured their separate social existence characterised by the view of “us” against “them”. This was coupled by cultural individuality of the community consisted of a memorisation first of their Jewish identity and then the history and folklore of their community. Transmitting this culture of memory was based on strong familistic values, most obvious among them endogamy, and to some extent the empowerment of the women.

« Nous » et « Eux ». La formation de la communauté crypto-juive de Mashad (Iran)

L'émergence d'une conscience communautaire parmi les crypto-juifs de Mashhad fut influencée par l'hostilité musulmane et par l'idiosyncrasie forgée dans la lutte pour la préservation de leur identité juive occultée après leur conversion forcée. L'animosité généralisée de la majorité musulmane leur assura une vie sociale distincte, caractérisée par une optique du « nous » contre « eux » alliée à un particularisme culturel communautaire. Ce dernier comprenait la mémorisation de l'identité juive, suivie par celle de l'histoire et du folklore de la communauté. La transmission de cette culture mémorisée se basait sur de solides idéaux familiaux : l'endogamie y occupait une place de premier plan et l'on observe le renforcement du rôle joué par les femmes.

INTRODUCTION

Some theories of nationalism as a modern phenomenon emphasise the appearance of nationalism as a reaction to external pressure for greater cultural homogeneity brought about by new opportunities and technological needs. Others pay greater attention to the internal crisis of former social identities while new means for creating larger and less tangible, less concrete identities appeared. Although these theories claim universality they are seldom applied to sub-groups within larger – ethnic or national entities. The different crypto-faith communities are a sub-group well worth the notice of the researcher of nationalism and ethnicity. I'm particularly thinking of groups like the Iberian crypto-Jews, and Moriscos, and France's Protestants. In those cases as in the general theory of nationalism the resistance to the pressure for (religious) homogeneity created communities unified by blood ties as well as by cultural, religious and ethnic ones. These communities' common characteristics have already attracted academic attention. Reference was made especially between the French Protestants and Iberian Judeo-conversos, but also between the Judeo-conversos and the Moriscos.¹ The continued and prolonged hostility of the majority society against the converted groups combined with their covert fidelity to their former religion contributed to form a sense of "us" against "the others".²

The recognition that external pressure is important for the preservation of social identity is of long standing. Spinoza tried to explain the survival of the Portuguese conversos by stating simply: "That they are preserved largely through the hatred of other nations

1. Herbert Lüthy, Variations on Theme by Max Weber, *International Calvinism 1541-1715*, Menna Prestwitch (ed.), Oxford, 1985, pp. 377-378, Patrick Cabanel, *Les Protestants et la République, de 1870 à nos jours*, Bruxelles, 2000, p. 26; Walter P. Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle. A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, Albany, 1991, pp. 124-125, Claude B. Stuczynski, Two Minorities Facing the Iberian Inquisition, *Hispanic Judaica*, III (2000), p. 140; and also, Renée Levine Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel? The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castile*, New York and Oxford, 1999, pp. 166-167.

2. Nathan Wachtel, *La foi du souvenir. Labyrinthes marranes*, Paris, 2001, p. 340.

is demonstrated by historical fact".³ Likewise, Jewish survival and economic success in the face of persecution has been explained by Max Weber, by the pariah group model.⁴ Similarly, the very existence of the Protestant community in France is *ipso facto* attributed to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.⁵

Basically, this argument is not far removed from Gellner's model of the emergence of nationalism. As Gellner generalises, two principles will set off the emergence of new units. One is the principle of communication blockage; when in the encounter with early industrialisation, communication impasses occur, based on earlier, pre-industrial cultures, the culture in which a person has learned to communicate becomes the nucleus of his identity. The second principle is that of entropy resistant differences. Religion cum culture, cum ethnicity is one such entropy-resistant case where assimilation in the dominant group is impossible.⁶

Although Gellner speaks specifically of early industrialisation, the impulse for religious homogeneity that brought about forced conversion on groups, where they chose to defy the conversion covertly had a similar influence. Not only did the conversion fail to erase differences between groups but the resistance to it brought forth cultural and social mechanisms that turned some of the groups into fully recognisable and self sustaining units. In early modern, pre-industrial communities, faithfulness to a covert religion created a barrier to full absorption of and by the dominant culture, which was also largely religious. On the other hand, covert faithfulness and non-acceptance by majority society were mutually enhancing,

3. Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, *Theological-Political Treatise*, [1670] Gebhardt edition 1925, S. Shirley (trans.), (1991) Cambridge, 1998, p. 47.

4. Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, trans. By E. Fischhoff, Boston, 1963, pp. 109-110, and G. Roth and C. Wittich (eds.), *Economy and Society*, New York, 1968, p. 493, in Zenner, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

5. Philippe Joutard, The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in Menna Prestwich (ed.), *International Calvinism*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

6. Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), in Hebrew trans., Tel Aviv, 1994, pp. 90, bluishness 100-101.

thus creating entropy resistant differences. Even while being in all outward appearance completely identical to the dominant group, between the crypto-faith community and the surrounding society a transparent yet tangible phalanx is pointed – not allowing the mixing up of the groups. Individuals might escape through the gaps, but not so the group.⁷

The formation of the Mashhadi community can exemplify the model. Although this article deals specifically with the making of this community, it will be within the conceptual framework of a comparative direction.⁸ The other groups will provide points of departure, methods of analysis, as well as checks and balances. By far the smallest crypto-faith community, enduring forced conversion for a shorter duration than most, the Mashhadis are a most tempting case for the testing of the applicability of these theories to a crypto-faith group.⁹ In 1839, the Jewish settlement in Mashhad (Iran), one of Shi'ite Islam's most sacred sites, was forced to convert. Despite the danger, some of the Jews left the city soon afterwards for what seemed to them then a safe haven in Herat, Afghanistan. The people left behind in Mashhad, and only those, struggled under the burden of forced conversion, while holding tenaciously onto their former faith. They evolved social characteristics which separated them from their co-religionist – real, or ostensible. It is a community that survives to this day, with most its historically acquired characteristics intact.

7. On the importance of the *limpieza de sangre* on the evolution of a new ethnic of New Christians: Charles Amiel, La "pureté de sang" en Espagne, *Études inter-ethniques*, VI (1983), pp. 28-38.

8. See for instance, Mitchell Cohen, Preface to the study of Jewish Nationalism, *Jewish Social Studies*, I, pt. 1 (1994), esp. pp. 74-78.

9. In spite of the relatively short duration of their forced conversion they still conform to Amiel's definition of "optimal model of Marranism": a community, 40 years of "deep" underground period, and the rest in a lighter form. Charles Amiel, Les cent voix de Quintanar. Le modèle castillan du marranisme (I), *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CCXVIII (2001), p. 200.

UP AGAINST "THE OTHERS"

The prevalent animosity of the Muslim majority against the Mashhadi covert Jews was an important factor in creating unsurpassable entropy. Rapahel Patai, the anthropologist, believes it was natural for Mashhadis to keep separate because ethnic separatism was well accepted as it was all-prevalent.¹⁰ Yet this explanation leaves out too much: In fact, it was the animosity of the enveloping Muslim society more than its supposed tolerance that ensured the continuance of the Jadids ("new Muslims") existence as such. A story well known among Mashhadis will provide a nice illustration. It is about an older Jew who sincerely accepted Islam. He kept all of its commandments with love and devotion until one day he overheard one Muslim saying to the other: "Look at this *Jahud* [Jew as a term of insult] with what devotion he prays our prayers." Realizing that he would still be considered a Jew no matter what he did, the old man decided to go back to his people and his religion.¹¹

The hostility of the Muslim environment to the separateness of the "converted" community burst out time and again in response to pressures on Iranian nascent modern nationalism. Although it is hard to reconstruct what brought on the forced conversion it seems to be closely connected to a web of economic envy, religious fanaticism, and political tension.¹² According to most Mashhadi versions the entire Jewish community was unexpectedly accused of an act of mockery and of contempt for Islam. The libel was followed by incitement and public religious denunciation, and it soon developed into an assault on the Jews, resulting in the killing of some 36 and the forced conversion of the rest. The attack and the forced conversion

10. Raphael Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam. The Jewish "New Muslims" of Mashed*, Detroit, 1997, p. 64.

11. Menashe Haqlai, *Hayei ha-Yehudim anusei ha-'ir Mashhad be-Iran* [Life of the Crypto-Jews of the City of Mashhad – in Hebrew], Mitspe Ramon, 1982, p. 5.

12. Joseph P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journey and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan, with Historical Notices of the Countries lying between Russia and Persia*, London, [1857] 1971, pp. 121-123.

that ensued took place at a time of heightened political and military tension in the city's vicinity. In their competition for political influence through commercial concessions, Britain and Russia made Iran suspicious of both but determined to use them to further its own interests in the enlargement of its territory to the north.¹³ In 1939 it was Russian encouragement that led a politically torn Iran to war and British involvement that led it to defeat. The army retreated and camped near Mashhad in February 1839. On March 25, two days before the religious upheaval against the Jewish Mashhadi community that ended in their conversion, renewed British pressure forced the Iranian army to retreat farther from the Afghani border to the vicinity of Mashhad. The proximity of a religious festival, the Ashura, together with an encampment of embittered, frustrated soldiers defeated by the English, may have taken its toll. During the entire period of Qajar rule, hostility to the West was associated in the public mind with the defense of Islam. Opposition to and intrigue against rivals frequently took the form of accusations of unorthodoxy or disloyalty to Islam. As Jews they were infidels and as commercial rivals, in league with the British, they could easily be presented as active enemies of Islam.¹⁴ Later, as Jadids they were even more vulnerable: their commercial ties could be but a reflection of religious infidelity.

Four years later Muhammad Shah permitted the Jews of Mashhad to return to Judaism, but in reality they could not do so.¹⁵ As the holiest Muslim city in Iran, Mashhad during the 19th century was more influenced by its religious leadership than by political authority

13. Ann K. S. Lambton, *Persian Trade under the Early Qājārs*, *Qājār Persia. Eleven Studies*, London, 1987, pp. 109, 120.

14. Although claiming that fanaticism was not a marked feature of Persian life under the Qajars, the use of Islamic cover for other rivalries is propounded by Ann K. S. Lambton, *Persian Society under the Qājārs*, *Qājār Persia...*, pp. 104-5.

15. Letter by Zvulun Ben Baba Halevi presented to Sir Moses Montefiore while visiting Jerusalem in 1849 cit. in Yitshaq Ben-Zvi, *Mehqarim u-meqorot*, [*Researches and Sources* – in Hebrew] Zalman Shazar and Me-ir Benayahu (eds.), Jerusalem, 1966, pp. 324, 328.

in Tehran.¹⁶ Sociopolitical factors that originated in Safavid policies and intensified under the Qajars, as well as doctrinal developments, made the Shi'i religious leadership in Iran especially strong and largely independent of and even opposed to the central political authority in Tehran.¹⁷

The Anglo-Persian war of 1856-7 brought the Persian army to Herat, and in their consequent defeat and retreat, they took ex-Persian Jews back imprisoning them in Baba Qodrat, a fortress near Mashhad. They survived, thanks to the help of the Mashhadi secret Jews, and after a very bad year they were released. Some returned to Herat, others stayed. This incident along with the execution of the *shohhet* (ritual slaughterer) and his accomplices during the same decade built up the feeling of siege of the community: revealing the fact that secret identity had a death penalty to it, and leaving the city was useless.¹⁸

After a few decades of relative calm, the turn of the century was again a time of political upheaval within Iran and replete of pressures from without. As in the past, political instability boded ill for the Mashhadis especially, since Mashhad was one of the centers of the agitation for constitutional reform that finally culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.¹⁹ It involved religious ideas about the rule of Shari'a, but foreign powers were also involved, at least in a roundabout way, as the reformers posed as defenders against those who were selling the lands of Islam to infidels. The Mashhadis were identified with the English, their business connections.²⁰ Three

16. Gene R. Garthwaite, Khans and Kings: The Dialectics of Power in Bakhtiyari History, in *Modern Iran. The Dialectics of Community and Change*, Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie (eds.), Albany, 1981, p. 160.

17. Nikkie R. Keddie, Religion, Society, and Revolution in Modern Iran, in *Modern Iran...*, pp. 24-25.

18. Walter J. Fischel, Qehilat ha-anusim be-Faras – Mehqar le-toldot ha-Yehudim be-Asia ha-Tikhona ba-mea ha-19 [The Crypto-Faith Community in Persia – Research of the History of the Jews in Central Asia in the 19th Century – in Hebrew], *Zion*, I (New Series) first year (1935), p. 9 quoting Benjamin II, *Acht Jahre in Asien & Afrika*, Hannover, 1858, p. 190.

19. On one particular incident – Shaul Bakash, The Failure of Reform. The Prime Ministership of Amin al-Dawla 1897-8, in *Modern Iran...*, pp. 28-30.

20. Frank R. C. Bagley, New Light on the Iranian Constitutional Movement, in *Modern Iran...*, p. 61; Lambton, *Persian Society...*, p. 105.

incidents in 1892 (or 1890), 1904 (or 1903), and 1907 clearly show the precarious state of the community. The first two ended without casualties and only some material damage. In both cases, the accusation against the community was that they were not real Muslims.²¹ In 1907 a blood libel about a young Persian boy allegedly beaten up by Jews brought forth a declaration by the Kargozar (the Persian official in charge of minorities in the country) that the Jadids were pretending to be Muslims but were not real believers. The libel failed as Tehran did not endorse his view and claimed that the Jews were true Muslims and, therefore, out of his jurisdiction.²²

And again flight was not a very good option: at the same time Turkistan that became an important haven and economic opening was becoming less welcoming by the day. By 1900 the Russians began a process that by 1910 would result in the expulsion of the “Jadids”. The Russians were a little confused by the community that acted like Jews but was Muslim by name, but didn’t really care; either faith was ground enough for hatred and expulsion. Their contacts with the Imperial bank, founded by Baron Reuters, were no recommendation in their favour.²³

21. Different sources – different dates, different details, the essence is the same; the dates given outside the parentheses are those brought by the source nearest to the event. Farjullah Nasrulayoff in Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-81. Account given in 1939 by Samad Aqa son of Yosef Dilmani edited by Aqa Mulla Yosef son of Aqa Abdul Samad Dilmani Central Zionist Archive S25/5291 cit. in Ben-Zion D. Yehoshu’a-Raz, *Mi-nidhei Yisrael be-Afganistan le-anusei Mashhad* [From the Lost Tribes in Afghanistan to the Mashhad Jewish Converts of Iran – in Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 114-115. A song composed in 1905, ergo the nearest source, Shlomo Mashiah, *Shira le-meora’ot anusei Moshe* in *Sidur ’olat ha-shabat* [Prayer book, *The Sabbath Offering*], by Ha-rav Mordekhai Aqlar, Jerusalem, 1910, no p. after p. 247. Also, Yaghoub Dilmanian, *History of the Jews of Mashhad 1746-1946. From Their Entrance to Mashhad at the Time of Nader Shah Afshar until Their Migration from Mashhad to Tehran*, translated from Persian, private publication, New York, 2000, pp. 60-62. Yet another version, a British contemporary source, on 4 July 1904, Meshed confidential diary no. 78, F[oreign] O[ffice] 248/821 N[ational] A[rchives] UK.

22. ’Azaria Levi, *Yehudei Mashhad be-reshit ha-mea ha-’esrim*, in *Yehudei Mashhad*, [The Jews of Mashhad at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, in *The Jews of Mashhad* – in Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1989, pp. d/1-2.

23. Albert Kaganovich, On Moslem Jews in Turkestan region (according to archive data), *Central Asia Jews in Past and Present, Expeditions, Researches*,

Another near escape was in 1925 when a Muslim businessman fell into disagreement with some members of the community and in retaliation was to expose the entire community as Jewish on Passover eve. Only his murder by a fellow-Muslim competitor allowed the community a narrow escape. In the 1940s two more attacks on the community finally brought about the beginning of a serious exodus from Mashhad.

However, one is not to disregard the importance of the opportunities their conversion within Mashhad's geopolitical situation brought them. Two factors determined their position: the political instability in the area and their economic situation, the former fraught with precariousness yet opportunity, the latter promising wealth and with it envy. The economic well-being of the community derived from Mashhad's being an important intermediary centre of trade. In the early 19th century, the prosperity of the town depended on trade from Tehran and northern Iran with Europe on the one hand and Central Asia on the other.²⁴ The Jews of Mashhad engaged in this traffic of goods and had outposts of commercial colonies all over the north of Iran, as well as in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan.²⁵ Before the conversion it was an important factor in the attraction of Jews from other cities to Mashhad. Within a century of its inception until the early 1800s, the Jewish population is reported to have grown to between one hundred and three hundred families in the city.²⁶ Later in the century, after the conversion, they were allowed to continue their trade, and economically they enjoyed more favourable conditions than the families that left Mashhad to Herat, not to speak of other Jewish communities in Iran itself. In addition, it may have allowed easier traffic in areas notoriously intolerant of non-Muslims, and perhaps even in Anti-Semitic Russia.²⁷

Publications, Collected Articles, Ilya Dvorkin (ed.), St. Petersburg, 1995, p. 128 [in Russian. I'm very grateful to Ms. Victoria Melichson for the translation] Levi, *Yehudei Mashhad be-reshit ha-mea ...*, pp. a/4-6.

24. Lambton, *Persian Trade...*, p. 111.

25. Joseph Wolff, *Researches and Missionary Labours among the Jews, Mohammedans, and other Sects*, London, 1835, p. 136.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

27. Kaganovich, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-132. Ferrier, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

The political turmoil of the region that ensured their continued persecution also ensured their endurance. Whether the powers were the local people of Iran and Turkmenistan or the Russians and the British, the Mashhadi crypto Jews knew of the mutual animosities and could use them to slip through. The Turkmen preferred the Mashhadi merchants over the Armenians, and when about to be expelled from Russia because of their (not very covert) Jewish identity, they asked and received an affirmation from the Iranian authorities of their Muslim identity. All through the century there were contacts with the British secret service in the north of Iran, and some Mashhadi Jews sacrificed their lives in the service of His or Her Majesty, according to existing reports.²⁸

However, the appearance of a community was not a preordained outcome, even though some would claim that the double game never really could be a matter of choice. The conversion was obviously compulsory. But faithfulness to the former religion might also have been compelling. Carlos Carrete Parrondo, in exploring the prevalence of popular tradition with simple Judeo-conversos who lived far from the cultural centres, suggests that this prevalence might be outward expression of uncontrollable emotions. The statement of a Castilian Judeo-converso, Pedro López de Ayala, best represents the entire argument: "I'll have you know that I will never forget the milk that I suckled".²⁹ Indeed, the one who changed religion was asked to change overnight no less than all the age-old tendencies and memories that were hard to get rid of, even when one wanted to. Even in the case of sincere conversion with full intention at cultural assimilation it was hard to wean oneself abruptly from all the social ties and relationships. At least at the first stage after assimilation, converts continued consciously or unconsciously to invoke the sense of community.³⁰

28. James Basset, *Persia, the Land of Imams. A Narrative of Travel and Residence, 1871-1885*, New York, 1886, pp. 231-232.

29. Carlos C. Parrondo, Nostalgia among Castilian Judeoconversos, in *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Mediterranean World after 1492*, Alisa Meyuhas Ginio (ed.), London, 1992, pp. 25-6 cit. on p. 30.

30. Kenneth E. Moore, *The Catholic Jews of Spain*, Ph. D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1973, p. 161.

In turn, the ongoing state of conflict the community was living in, by defying the forced religion and staying loyal to the covert one, had its influence on and was reflected by gender relations. In conflict and war a woman's body can become the symbol of conquest, and subjugation. Rape can be a weapon used to destruct the whole symbolic existence of a national or ethnic community.³¹ On the other hand, many have noted that the masculinisation of war and of citizenship are closely connected, one being the precursor of the other.³² In the case of the Mashhadis, as so often, the forcing of the community received its expression in forcing some of the women, on the very day of the forced conversion to marry some of the Muslims.

However, it is well worth considering if in cases where the conflict, isn't and cannot be physical, women might not benefit from their partnership in the struggle. People partaking in double religions have been described as having their mind turned into a battle "upon which beliefs, disbeliefs and unbeliefs contend".³³ Women can partake in this kind of battle side by side with men, even more easily at times. This perhaps can provide one explanation for the prominence women play in the building of crypto-faith communities.

Renée Levine-Melamed starts her paper on women in the crypto-faith community in Spain, in the late 16th century stating that: "the fact has already been recognized that the woman's role in the crypto-faith community was materially different from her counterpart in the traditional Jewish community. Different scholars have long agreed by now that women in the crypto-faith community have fulfilled an outstanding role in passing on tradition and the faithfulness to the Jewish religious precepts."³⁴ Similar judgment

31. Catherine Hall, Gender, Nations and Nationalisms, *People, Nation and State. The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, E. Mortimer and R. Fine (eds.), London, New York, 1999, pp. 51-53

32. *Loc. cit.*

33. Cit. from Pruyser in N. Griffiths, The best of Both Faiths: The Boundaries of religious allegiance and Opportunism in Early Eighteenth-century Cuenca, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, LXXVII, no. 2 (April 2000), p. 18.

34. Renée Levine-Melammed, *Nashim anusot bi-Sfarad be-shilhei ha-mea ha-16, Eshnav le-hayeihen shel nashim be-hevrot Yehudiyot* [Women in Post 1492 Spanish Crypto Jewish Society, *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies*], Yael 'Azmon (ed.), Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 209-222, quotation on p. 209.

has been forwarded on the change in gender-relations and on woman's role in the survival of the Moriscos and the French Protestants.³⁵ The same phenomenon appeared also at the inception of non-orthodox Christian groups, who accorded a larger and sometimes prominent role to women.³⁶

The part women played in the preservation of the community is best exemplified by one of most repeated stories:

At first, Jews did not gather during week days for prayer, only on Shabbat and holidays. They would gather in three or four places, basements that could hold ten to fifteen men. They locked the doors and placed a guard outside so no one would suspect that they were praying inside. As guard they placed a woman who let her hair show freely and sat in the court or in the hallway to make sure no stranger would approach the place.

If a stranger had stumbled on a woman with her head uncovered in the courtyard, prevalent modesty customs would have prevented him from going further.³⁷

This image of heroic contribution by the women to the building and survival of the community was utterly nonconforming to customary gender roles in Iran. Remembering the women's part in retrospect depicting them as part of the community's heroic past, made that past all the more heroic and inspirational.³⁸ Putting "lion-hearted women and fearless men" side by side made the community into a combating unit, all the more strengthening the view of "us" versus "the others".³⁹ The process by which such prominence might be transferred into a more enduring re-gendering

35. Mary Elisabeth Perry, *Behind the Veil: Moriscos and the Politics of Resistance and Survival*, *Spanish Women in the Golden Age: Images and Realities*, Magdalens S. Sánchez & A. Saint Saëns (eds.) Westport, Copnn., 1996, pp. 40, 44, 47; Raymond A. Menzer, *Blood and Belief. Family Survival and Confessional Identity among Provincial Huguenot Nobility*, West Lafayette Ind., 1994, p. 170; Joutard, *op.cit.*, pp. 343, 362-363.

36. Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, (1995) Cambridge, reprinted 1997, pp. 12-18, 242-264.

37. Dilmani cit. in Yehoshu'a-Raz, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117. One of the latest versions to the story appeared in *Hazofeh*, 22 Sept. 2002.

38. Behrouz Dilmanian, A Fruit-rich Branch Bows Down, *Megillah*, no. 46 (October 1994), p. 2.

39. Editorial, *Megillah*, (Feb. 1985), p. 5.

of roles will be followed below. Suffice it to say here that the reforming of gender roles was part and parcel of the state of conflict which the community had to endure.

The best expression for the world view of “us” and the mostly hostile “others” is the fact that enemies were left nameless. The Mashhadis did not remember the names of their Muslim persecutors very well, either they have no name at all or the different versions do not agree on the name. Just as they were not very careful about recording their oppressors’ “subjective” reasons for persecution: They were persecuted because they adhered to Judaism – this much at least recurs in every version.

However, the juxtaposing of the community versus the enveloping society did not preclude cultural contacts, quite the contrary. Some Mashhadis found it easiest to point out the similarities between Islam and Judaism, facilitating the assimilation/dissimulation of Islamic learning and behavior. But even for the most faithful to their covert religion there was no escape from Muslim schooling, and it seems they liked to boast of their profusion in Koranic verse, if only as children. Could they have entirely forgotten it in later life?⁴⁰ For others, Persian culture was a means for cultural assimilation with minimal religious commitment. Even before the forced conversion, Mashhadi Jews had a predisposition to read Persian literature and poetry, especially the *Shah Nameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi, and the poetry of Hafez, to an extent that earned them a negative reputation among more conservatively minded Jews. After the conversion, this inclination served as a means of circumventing proper Islamic teachings through the use of “authentic” Persian texts, providing a vehicle for assimilation within Persian society without need to refer to religious Islamic culture.⁴¹ Yet others, according to communal tradition, for a short period, showed amenability to Baha’ism, that spread in Iran around the mid Nineteenth century.

40. Shlomo Zvouloni, Ha-’atslanim yeha-harutsim [The Lazy-bodies and the Precocious], *Qhilat Mashhad*, II, (Nov. 2000), p. 11 [in Hebrew].

41. Wolff, *Researches...*, p. 162, Joseph Wolff, *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara, in the Years 1843-1845, to Ascertain the Fate of Colonel Stoddart and Captain Connolly*, London, second edition – revised, 1845, II, p. 172.

Many Persian Jews looked upon the Bahai faith as a form of secularism. It could have been the precept of the essential unity of all religions that was attractive to people living in a double jeopardy relationship with the majority religion. On a number of the principles to which Enlightenment modernity was committed, Baha'ism declared itself in essential agreement: for example, on the question of the separation of "church" and state, the primacy of the individual conscience, gender equality, and the rule of law.⁴² It is possible that this is the closest some Mashhadi Jews got to the model claimed for the conversos: modernism and secularism as outcomes of the crypto-faith situation.⁴³

The choice of names is another instance of a double culture, preferably "Iranian", not Muslim. Most Mashhadis received double names: one Persian and the other Hebrew. The Persian names were mostly devoid of particular Muslim meaning and often were merely the Persian version of a Hebrew name. Many came from the Persian pre-Islamic period.⁴⁴ Daily usage of the Persian names did not erase the Jewish names, and nearly all are still remembered to this very day. Clear evidence can be witnessed in the old burial ground of the Mashhadi community in Israel, where many are recorded by their Jewish names. In a Muslim environment, to bear a Persian name that was ostensibly parallel to a Jewish name was like moving around with an imperceptible flag of religious, and communal identity rolled into one. Those Persian names that came particularly from pre-Muslim history also had the effect of creating a closer attachment for the bearer than those names with Islamic, religious meaning that would have connoted alienation and suppression.

42. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-78. on Baha'ism's equivocal relationship with modernity see: Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*, New York, 1998. Also, Avraham Z. Melamed, *Ha-Yehudim be-Faras lifnei shishim shana* (1880) [The Jews in Persia Sixty Years Ago – in Hebrew], *Sinai*, XXIX (1951), pp. 360-362.

43. Wachtel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

44. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-204. He does not note the high percentage of pre-Islamic names among them.

Did the living within two faiths, two cultures give birth to hybridity? It is hard to tell, the Mashhadis were and still are a community of merchants and businessmen, with very few written works, which are of an Orthodox Jewish religious nature. There is no sign of religious syncretism like those we know from other cases of long duration crypto-faith communities.⁴⁵ The Mashhadis went through a hundred years of keeping up a covert religion in face of a hostile environment but they did not face the breaking up effects of the Inquisition, and their isolation was never as thorough. The Mashhadis never knew such deep isolation of the individual, filtering into even conjugal relations, as did Iberian conversos. Though disagreement between husband and wife are remembered, it lacks the sense of danger known from the Iberian context.⁴⁶ Through their business trips they had continual contact with Jewish communities. The eased conditions at the end of the century ensured that the period of complete lack of communal schooling, had lasted no longer than three to four decades. Yet, the well acclaimed familiarity with religious and secular texts of Iranian culture could not have been entirely lost. One intriguing expression of such a blend is the name of those who visited the Land of Israel while on their way to fulfil one of the major Islamic precepts – the visit to Mecca: "Pilgrims ('Olei) to Mecca and Zion." The pilgrimage to Mecca was either for social and economic motives or as a cover to a visit to the Land of Israel. The fact remains that the two destinations, one anathema of the other, were coupled in one name.⁴⁷

45. R. de Lera García, *Survie de l'Islam dans la ville de Grenade au début du dix-huitième siècle*, *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* [Tunisia] (1986), XIII (43-44), pp. 74-82.

46. David L. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute. Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580-1700*, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 94-96, and see also, Jacqueline Genot, *Recherche sur les fonctions de la prière individuelle en milieu marrane aux alentours de 1492 : prière et salut*, *Prière, Mystique et Judaïsme, Colloque de Strasbourg*, Goetschel Roland, Paris, 1984, pp. 164-170.

47. 'Azaria Levi, *Yehudei Paras v'eha-'alia la-regel le-Mecca* [Persian Jews and the Pilgrimage to Mecca – in Hebrew], *Davar*, 4 Jan. 1973, republished in *Yehudei Paras*, Jerusalem 1979, Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op.cit.*, pp. 28, 57; Patai, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Even if, as some suggest that crypto-faith brings the “other” within the individual, it does not follow that cultural mix can tone down societal tension. Further more, living in two cultural worlds does not necessarily mean an internalisation of the “other”; the fuller the internalisation of the cultural blend the less conscious the individual can become of the ‘other’ within himself. In a way, the use of Persian cultural components provided a vehicle of assimilation, without the loss of communal and religious identity. It also put their Jewish identity in a wider cultural context. Yet, the double culture also created a double divider, defining the community from both Jews and non-Jews. By forcing them to make continual comparisons, they were also made more consciously aware of their particularity.

The importance of the phalanx of the surrounding society in the creation of a new community can be tested as relief of oppression set in. Relief did not break up the Mashhadi community. After 1870 the Mashhadi religious practices returned as closely as possible to those of other Jewish communities. During the last decade or two of the 19th century the traditional, institutionalised way of transferring Judaism in schools and synagogues returned.⁴⁸ Those who studied for the Rabbinate went outside of Mashhad to Marv, where they studied *Shulhḥan ’Arukh* (the Jewish traditional law code) and *Sh’ḥḥita* (traditional slaughter). After the turn of the century, however, there were Rabbis in Mashhad who taught both subjects.⁴⁹

This was still coupled with an outward conformity with Islam. Around 1880, James Basset, a missionary of the Presbyterian Board who was in Mashhad, attested to the fact that “since that time [the conversion] the Jews of Mashhad have been ostensibly Mohammedans, and dared not profess any other faith.”⁵⁰ It was a fluid situation, in which one could not foresee fully the outcome of

48. A list of synagogues that existed in Mashhad at the ascendancy of the Pahlavi in Reuven Nissimi, *Zikhron yemei qedem, Yahadut Mashhad – mishpeḥot ha-Nissimi* [Memory of days of Old, Jews of Mashhad – The Nissimi Families], unpublished, privately distributed, Ra’anana, 1999, p. c-13, Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-222.

49. Evidence by Reuven Nissimi citing his grandfather, Rabbi Levi Nissim.

50. Basset, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

ones actions. The ambiguity of their situation finds an echo in the condition of the former Jewish conversos in Southern France in the 16th through the 18th centuries.⁵¹

THE IDIOSYNCRATIC "WE"

The fact that the community survived relief as well as oppression would suggest the necessity for additional factors for creating an enduring new identity of a new community. Underground life created both social and cultural divergence between the Mashhadi community and surrounding communities. Family and gender relations constitute the social difference. The memory practices – the cultural one.

*"A Community that can be considered a Virtual Family"*⁵²

What was the process that turned individuals from lonely, non-integrated persons into cohesive communities? It is highly questionable if persecution alone could properly explain why the Mashhadis turned into a cohesive community with ethnic ties. The pressures from without the community have brought the Jewish settlement into being, have forced them to stay underground, and have even provided them with the necessary means for economic success. But too many factors point to the necessity for further explanation. The settlement existed through religious persecution for nearly a hundred years without becoming an integrated community. This should point to the fact that persecution alone can not be enough to forge new ties which are overriding the existing ties between

51. Gérard Nahon, Ha-anusim be-TSarfat be-meot 16-18, *Tarbut vye-historia le-zichro shel Prof. Ino Sciaky* [The Conversos in France in the 16th to the 18th Centuries, *Culture and History. Ino Sciaky Memorial Volume*], Joseph Dan (ed.), Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 185-198. The parallel goes so far as to include a host of informal social economic contacts with the Jewish metropolises of Venice and Amsterdam. Graizbord, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-75.

52. Hooman Dilmanian, Why an Ebb in Espousals?, *Youth Supplement, Megillah*, no. 38 (October 1992), p. 26

various Jewish communities. Otherwise, Iranian Jewry, and in fact, nearly every Jewish community that ever existed, would abound with “Mashhadi-like” ties, which it does not. However, most enigmatic, is the community’s survival past its persecution. More than half a century (so far) for some, more than a century for others, after leaving Mashhad, their cohesiveness withstands globe-wide dispersion, and the alluring power of open, democratic societies inviting assimilation, in the wider Jewish community, as well as in the general society.

The cohesiveness is best exemplified by the glaringly high percentage of intra-communal marriages that cross countries, and sometimes even languages. Researchers on the Iberian Judeo conversos, the Moriscos and the French Protestants pointed the deep connection between their survival as a community and their familistic values.⁵³ Endogamy among Judeo-Convertos consolidated a brotherhood of believers in a conspiracy of suffering, a fraternity of danger likened to that of an underground movement. Likewise, among Moriscos it provided the most important insurance for their continued endurance, and turned the French Protestants’ close net of intermarriage into “a symbiosis of blood and belief”, as resistance became a family tradition.⁵⁴

Mashhadis likewise, expounded on familistic values, in all versions of the communal past, present, and future imagined by them. These familistic values sprang up from the forced conversion that was being secretly withstood but in due course came to play a part of its own in the formation of a new culture and eventually a new community. It is a trait that holds fast even in cases of voluntary conversion when the surrounding society shows little enthusiasm at

53. Joutard, *op. cit.*, pp. 367-8; Wachtel, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 321, 328

54. David Nirenberg, Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jew and Christians in Fifteenth-Century Spain, *Past and Present*, CLXXIV pt. 1, 2002, pp. 3-41; Wachtel, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-342. The same phenomenon with the Moriscos: Jose Abu-Tarbush, The Presence of Islam in the Canaries: A Historical Overview, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, XXI, no. 1 (2001), p. 80; R. Carraso, Morisques et Inquisition dans les Iles Canaries, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, vol. CCII pt. 4, 1985, p. 382. Menzer, *op. cit.*, p. 103, the idiom on p. 193; Joutard, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

assimilation.⁵⁵ Although, intra-group marriages are a characteristic of all religious communities, for crypto-faith communities it is essential to their continued existence.

Mashhadi reluctance at inter-faith marriages goes beyond that inherent in Jewish Law. As forced converts they could not marry their new co-religionists for fear of exposure as well as their wish to transmit the faith to the next generation. As in other similar communities, the outcome was that marriage became a means to increase group solidarity. The interwoven families formed a small and closely integrated group. Through the mutual exchange of children in marriage, they forged a tight protective network among themselves. A sense of an enlarged family envelopes the whole Mashhadi community to this day.⁵⁶ Mashhadis feel very special in this, but Claude Lévi-Strauss has already emphasised the role of marriage in the cementing of communities and fostering a social identity.⁵⁷

The closely knit marriage system was an important factor in dividing the world between "us" and the "others", quite besides religious or cultural differences. Thus, the Mashhadi crypto-Jews were transformed from a settlement of Jewish families originating from different Iranian cities, with mutual dislike, into one cohesive unit.⁵⁸ In fact, although many young Mashhadis, today would be hard pressed to define "Mashhadi culture", they are deeply imbued with a sense of closed ranks against anything and anyone, or as a young Mashhadi put it: as a Mashhadi you are part of 'a community that can be considered a virtual family'.⁵⁹

As a result of the closely knit marriage set, every Mashhadi wishing to preserve his family ties had also to keep up a minimal

55. Todd M. Edelman, *Memories of Jewishness, Jewish History and Jewish Memory. Essays in honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, Elisheva Carlebach, J. M. Efron, and D. N. Myers (eds.), Hanover, 1998, pp. 312-317, dealing with Jewish converts in France and Germany.

56. Farahnaz Sarah Ghassabian, *Growing up Mashadi, Megillah*, (July 2000), p. 34

57. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, (1949), London, 1970, cit. on p. 480

58. Before that they remembered their city of origin, Yazdees, Qazweens, etc. Joseph Wolff, *Researches...*, pp. 135, 162.

59. Hooman Dilmanian, op. cit., p. 26.

adherence to Judaism. As family ties were in due course of time to read as communal ties adherence to Judaism became an entrance card to the community. Mashhadis worked and operated in family businesses, gathered in communal “colonies” even when outside Mashhad, thus via the familial and social connections came also business relations.⁶⁰ Always moving in groups, a Mashhadi, was never alone, and never a stranger. He always travelled with his community virtually accompanying him.⁶¹ It meant every Mashhadi was carrying communal support in his virtual suitcase, but also its implicit supervision.⁶² This does not detract from the devotion of those who, in the face of danger, kept up their religion. It does mean that this devotion was twofold: celebration of adherence to the Jewish religion and of communal ties. The relative importance of each component varied, and was of necessity an individual choice.

Familistic values provided the Mashhadi community with a cohesion that continued after they have left Mashhad as it was with other crypto-faith communities before them.⁶³ In time, as they shared similar social experiences and practiced similar social rules, it became a matter of convenience to continue marrying within the group and keep themselves separate from those of their former co-religionists who might not have been aware of their secret struggle to keep up the “true” faith. In 1946 an onlooker was so impressed by the close contacts among the different communities in Palestine, London, New York and Iran that he saw them as “colonies” of the original.⁶⁴

60. Zenner, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125. Ghassabian, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

61. To this day: William B. Helmreich, Planning for the Future, with a Focus on the Past, *Megillah*, no. 45 (July 1994), p. 18, Allan Helmreich, Stability amidst Change, in *Megillah*, no. 63, (Jan. 1999), p. 21. It is a reaction I have also often encountered.

62. How pressing such supervision could be like, has not been told by a Mashhadi, but returnee Conversos, have done so: Graizbord, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-98.

63. Thomas F. Glick, On Converso and Marrano Ethnicity, *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World 1391-1648*, Benjamin R. Gampel (ed.), New York, 1997, pp. 74-75. They did not even check the Jewish origin of a party to marriage by the Halachic laws: Wachtel, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

64. Report by commission made up of Yoseph Kleinbaum and his wife representing the Jewish Agency, and A. Landstein of the central office of the Jewish National Fund, 24 May 1946, S6/4576 Central Zionist Archive.

A young onlooker on the Mashhadi community in New York a hundred and fifty years later still sensed "a sort of permanent siege mentality".⁶⁵

Even when a group's self-segregation was an accepted practice within the majority's culture it still was a means of preservation of cultural boundaries, inculcating a perception of a self-constituted nobility.⁶⁶ Preserving the memory of one's ancestors became part and parcel of remaining faithful to the covert religion. Genealogical preoccupation is thus a common feature among such groups.⁶⁷ The profuseness of the memory of family descent in the Mashhadi community is truly outstanding. At least 6 of the 12 families that had originally immigrated to Mashhad from Qazvin have detailed family trees from the time of the conversion to this day, namely, the Aminoffs, Bassalis, Dilmanis, Hakimis, Levys, and Nissimis.⁶⁸ This exceptional commemoration of family ties can be explained only in view of what must have been a constant worry by people dedicated to preserving the exclusivity of marital ties within the fold of the Jewish religion. This anxiety tells more about those who worried than about any real danger. Indeed, few Muslims would have asked for the hand of a Jewish girl in marriage. In their particular condition, it was enough that the danger was ever present for them to find a means of preventing it from happening.⁶⁹

65. Allan Helmreich, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

66. Yoseph Kaplan, Self-Definition of Sephardic Jews of Western Europe and Their Relation to the Alien and the Strange, in *Crisis and Creativity...*, pp. 125, 140-144.

67. This is expressed by French Naturalisation Law that up till 1945 recognised descendants of French nationals who had gone into exile because of religious persecution as natural Frenchmen G. Picarda, The Evolution of the French Law of Nationality Relating to Returning Huguenots, *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, XXII pt. 5, 1975, p. 451.

68. Four out of those were presented in the Community's exhibition. See *Congregation Sha'are Tova Youth Committee Newsletter* (October 1983), p. 6. Watching my husband, Reuven Nissimi, grandson of Rabi Levi Nissimi, compile the extensive genealogical list of his family provided the impetus for my interest in the Mashhadi community and crypto-faith communities in general.

69. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 56.

The full transformation from individuals through family to community was fulfilled with the materialization of a new communal organization. From the little we know of the first decades it is clear that what they kept of Jewish precepts required cooperation among community members. Ritual slaughter was too dangerous and complicated to be carried out by any single family. When animals were slaughtered the meat was distributed among community members before outsiders could detect any unusual occurrence. Thus was created a partnership not only of meat but of danger as well.⁷⁰ The secret prayer places, the secret teaching, baking *Mastzot* (unleavened bread) for Passover, acquiring the *Lulav* (ceremonial palm frond) and *Etrog* (citron) on *Sukkot* – all were communal feats, not individual achievements.⁷¹

Underground life brought to the fore a new kind of leadership. Before the conversion, the Jews in Mashhad claimed to have a formal hierarchy, which put religious leadership first: Foremost came the Cohens and Levis, who by tradition belong to the priestly tribe who served in the Temple, then the learned, the lay leaders, and the teachers, in that order.⁷² In reality, the relationship may have been more along the lines of a partnership between the rich and educated.⁷³ After the conversion the formal-former hierarchy disappeared, as many took their chances in exile to Herat. The new leadership sprang up from among individuals who rendered special services to the community, particularly the religiously more knowledgeable members. They offered a wide range of leadership on everything from religious matters to family affairs, from providing temporary hospitality for travelers to disseminating news of the community and outside world. They were communal leaders, religious teachers, and social workers, and their houses were hospitality centers and news headquarters all rolled in one. But the leadership

70. Tziyon Zabihi in Patai, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

71. Both Dilmani and Zabihi and many others even when they are not trying to make a point about communal life and co-operation, inadvertently stress this character of the Jewish life. See for instance: Dilmani cit. in Yehoshu'a-Raz, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

72. Wolff, *Researches...*, p. 162.

73. *Ibid*, pp. 128, 134, 162.

was not exclusively on a religious basis; no less important were those individuals who through their own initiative could perform some special service for the community. Among the prominent families and individuals were those Mashhadis who, while fulfilling important roles in Muslim religious life, used their position to help and protect their community.⁷⁴

Were the familistic habits the ultimate factor in building the community? The double game could create as in the case of the Judeo Conversos, a mind process leading to religious reformism, mysticism, and/or scepticism and finally, individualism.⁷⁵ However, a wish for conformity, even greater than among co-religionists, was no less a possible outcome. In reality, in the case of the French Protestants the reciprocity between endogamy and a communal faith was so high that the dilution of identity and disappearance of endogamy may well go hand in hand.⁷⁶

In case of the Mashhadi community, the fact that Iranian society is a collage of other subcultures also facilitated the process of endogamy and the making of communal identity. Their idiosyncrasies, like their use of a Hebrew letter-case a particular blending of the usual cursive Hebrew (most letters) with the so-called Rashi letters, could be explained away convincingly as it appears, as their own special language.⁷⁷ In retrospect, it is remembered that as a precaution, Mashhadis called these characters the “Jadidi” script rather than Hebrew, and referred to it as a kind of secret communication language.⁷⁸ In this way, it was safe enough even to sign one’s Muslim marriage contract in Hebrew letters.⁷⁹

74. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op.cit.*, pp. 39-40.

75. Yirmiyau Yovel, *Spinoza Ve-kofrim Aherim* [*Spinoza and other Heretics* – in Hebrew], Tel Aviv, 1988 reprint 1990, p. 77. However it is a central theme of the book. Similarly, Wachtel, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-324.

76. Gérard Chlovy, and Yves-Marie Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine 1930-1988*, Toulouse, 1988, pp. 445-446.

77. Patai (*op. cit.*, p. 216) provides a table of the different forms of the writing.

78. Ferrier, *op. cit.*, p. 123; Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

79. Michael C. Hillman, *Language and Social Distinction in Iran*, in *Modern Iran...*, pp. 327-329.

Familistic habits in convergence with underground conditions brought about one of the most significant social divergences between the community and its “others”. Gender differences in virtually every culture constitute a key to the way that actors identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolise meaningful social events and processes.⁸⁰ Gender relations are at the centre of cultural formations of social identities.⁸¹ In Iranian society a woman’s life was deeply influenced by what Caldwell called, the “patriarchal belt”.⁸² “Muslim culture”, encompassing a wider set of behavioural and social customs, influenced women’s lives in Iran, whatever their religious affiliation.⁸³ A Woman’s status was determined in great part by her relegation to a separate sphere and by the vero-local and patrilineal conventions of the society.⁸⁴ Even the outstanding contribution of women to the constitutional revolution had little actual effect on women’s status. New openings came with Shah Reza’s modernising regime, mostly associated with the mandatory unveiling of women in 1935, but also emphasising woman’s role as cultural disseminator, and therefore her need for education.⁸⁵ However, for Mashhadi Jews gender relations were as

80. Verta Taylor, Gender and Social Movements: Gender Processes in Women’s Self-Help Movements, *Gender and Society*, XIII, no. 1, Special Issue: Gender and Social Movements (1999), p. 23

81. Catherine Davies, Founding Fathers and Domestic Genealogies: Situating Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, XXII pt. 4, 2003, p. 24.

82. John Caldwell cit. in Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London, 1997, p. 7.

83. Ashghar Fathi, Introduction, *Women and the Family in Iran*, Ashghar Fathi (ed.), Leiden, 1985, pp. 3-5; Adele K. Ferdows, The Status and Rights of Women in *Ithna ‘Ashari Shi’i Islam*, *Women and the Family in Iran*, p. 16.

84. ‘Azaria Levi, Ha-isha ba-ḥevra ha-Yehudit be-Faras [The Women in the Jewish Society in Persia – in Hebrew], *Kivunim*, XXIV (1987), pp. 118-121, Hanina Mizrahi, *Yehudei Paras [Persian Jews – in Hebrew]*, Tel-Aviv, 1959, pp. 92-93. Mizrahi points to different ages for different communities.

85. Joanna de Groot, The Dialectics of Gender: Women, Men and Political Discourses in Iran c. 1890-1930, *Gender & History*, V, no. 2 (1993), p. 261-263; Guity Nashat, Women in Pre-Revolutionary Iran: A Historical Overview, *Women and Revolution in Iran*, Guity Nashat (ed.), Boulder Colorado, 1983, pp. 26-27.

much the result of their prolonged underground history as of their enveloping culture.

Our knowledge of gender relations in the Mashhadi community is prefigured by the fact that the history of the community is predominantly reconstructed from folklore, memoirs and traveller's accounts – almost entirely his-story. It has the advantage and disadvantage of being an inside voice. Although it means that we are practically devoid of an independent view of the community, it also means we have a very good tool for assessing self-perception. Indeed, travellers knew and saw what they were shown, but they also formed an opinion of their own. There also exist some references from the British Consul in Mashhad and some references from Turkmenistan.⁸⁶ Some double marriage contracts – Jewish and Muslim for the same couple also tell an important story. It is a glaring difference from the Iberian conversos: their story abounds in sources from outsiders – though the most hostile outsiders but very little of the inside voice.⁸⁷ Despite the dominantly male voice, woman's role in the formation and reproduction of the new community is presented as pivotal and acknowledged to this day.

The construction of the women's role in the community's formation and preservation by the Mashhadi mostly male version of the community's past constitutes a tradition in itself important enough to create a cultural boundary. As communal traditions "create a community of individuals sharing values and beliefs that

86. Travellers like Ferrier and Wolff (mentioned above) had also an independent opinion. A British sources for instance: 4 July 1904, Meshed confidential diary no. 78, FO 248/821 and the diary of the British Consul in Mashhad FO 248/764 NAUK. Kaganovich, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-132.

87. See for Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, Charles Amiel, *Inquisitions modernes : Le modèle portugais, Histoire du Portugal, Histoire européenne*, Paris 1986, p. 48. For the evaluation of their material as reasonably accurate, especially the Portuguese Inquisition, Charles Amiel, *Crypto-Judaïsme et Inquisition. La matière juive dans les édits de la Foi des Inquisitions ibériques*, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CCX pt. 2, 1993, pp. 145-168. The Moors have their own corpus of compositions, which can reflect their world, Mikel de Eplaza (Université d'Alicante-Espagne), *La vie intellectuelle en espagnol des Morisques au Maghreb (XVII^e siècle)*, *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* [Tunisia] (1990), XVII, (59-60), p. 73.

differ from those of other communities tradition about gender relations is particularly potent".⁸⁸

However, the social reality behind the cultural construction is equally important, if not more so. The women's empowerment sprang in fact from existing gender roles in their society: be it their responsibility for the education of the children, the functioning of the family, or their relegation to the private sphere. Obviously, as the house was the main arena for crypto-faith endeavour as well as a woman's space, the combination brought enhanced status. However, woman's centrality rose not just from the importance of the house in the physical sense, but it was even more related to the importance of familistic values. Whenever familial ties had become extra significant in the formation of political structures, women enjoyed enhanced status and influence: from the Lollards in England, through the Catholic women in Tudor England, to the French Protestants.⁸⁹

Endogamy awarded the women greater defence.⁹⁰ When the family of husband and wife was essentially the same family, both were restricted in their relationships with their spouse by the fact.⁹¹ The male had more to lose relatively to what was acceptable in the general culture. This might explain the low number of marriages with two women. Divorce is also difficult in families of relatives, as

88. Davies, *Founding Fathers*, p. 424.

89. Diane Willen, *Women and Religion in Early Modern England, Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe. Public and Private Worlds*, Sherrin Marshall (ed.), Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989, pp. 140-142, 150-152; Cabanel, *op. cit.*, p. 26, Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: the Essays of Joan Kelly*, Chicago, 1984, pp. 10-14. It could also have perverse results: in Tunisia Andalousse women received better treatment in their houses but were more restricted in their contacts with the outside world, Mohamed Turki, *Les Andalouses – Morisques en Tunisie à la recherche d'un univers mythique et religieux, Revue d'histoire maghrébine* [Tunisia] (1989), XVI, (55-56), pp. 59-74.

90. Referring to Bedouin women, Deniz Kandiyoti, *Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective, Women in Middle Eastern History*, p. 32.

91. Sarah Zilpa Cohen, *Be-shuvkha l-Zion. Yalduti be-Mashhad ya-'aliyati le-eretz Yisrael* [When You Return to Zion. My Childhood in Mashhad and my Immigration to the Land of Israel – in Hebrew], Tel-Aviv, private edition, 1999, p. 81.

the low rate of divorce in rural, endogamous Iran will exemplify. But the ban on divorce in the Mashhadi community had probably more to do with the difficulty to enforce divorce in accordance with Halachic law.⁹²

The women played a central part in the transmission of Jewish rites in their homes especially of the Sabbath and main holidays, the dietary laws, and the purity rituals.⁹³ It was the women who knew and followed the dietary rules for cleansing meat, including the removal of blood and the sciatic nerve, which is otherwise not considered woman's work. Mashhadi stories tell of the important role women played in the rejuvenation of the community after the first shock of conversion, and of their ability to use a "woman's way" of cajoling and nudging the husbands back into the fold, or convincing them to stay within it.⁹⁴

As the educators of the young generation, the women became the guardians of tradition. Like their forerunners in Spain and Portugal, the Mashhadi women played a particularly prominent part in the informal education and transmission of Jewishness during the first and hardest period after conversion.⁹⁵ Woman's role as educator is particularly noteworthy in a pre- or early modern society, where most of the education was expected to be conducted at home. However, in a covert religion, such education was not and could not be reinforced by the surrounding society or by any educational institution provided by the community. Quite often the religious schooling children partook in was diametrically opposed to the home practices, which under these circumstances took on enhanced importance. Women

92. Vida Nassehy, Female Role and Divorce in Iran, *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, XXI (1991), pp. 55-56; Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-261.

93. The unique community was rediscovered by Samuel Schwartz in 1917 who published his account. Bringing the story more up to date: David A. Canelo, *The Last Crypto-Jews of Portugal*, translated into English (1985), 1990, p. 67.

94. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 26, 47. Editorial, *Megillah*, no. 28 (June 1989), p. 42. See also: Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 198, 208-209, 276.

95. Renée C. Levine, Women in Spanish Crypto-Judaism, 1492-1520, unpublished Ph. D., Brandeis University, 1983, especially pp. 235-277, 338. She also cites a remarkable similarity in the role of Moriscos in the preservation of their sub-culture and religion: Renée Levine Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters...*, pp. 166-167.

continued transmission by creating role models, by teaching, and by outright command, even if it was not always fully explained to children before the age of 9 or so. The mother was responsible for the socialisation of her children – a most meaningful task for an underground community. The woman became the mother of the new community not only in a biological sense but also spiritually – the mould on which coming generations were fashioned.⁹⁶

In his memoirs, Farrajullah Nasrullayoff Livian (1874-1951), who emigrated to Palestine and became leader of the Mashhadi community in Jerusalem, claims that Jewish education was non-existent in the years prior to the 1880s. However, his tale of his own adherence to Jewish dietary laws defeats this assertion: As a child of 12 or 13, he tried to influence others, older than he, to observe the Sabbath. This can hardly be attributed to his Maktab (religious school), or to his six months with Mullah Abba. But it can be attributed to his mother, who was born after the conversion and brought up during the hardest years.⁹⁷ Her joyful reaction to his wish to study Judaism is quite telling.

In essence, the women were adopting to some extent the role of household spiritual leadership – even though they were living in a society extremely hostile to female prominence. In the void created by the disappearance of the established leadership into exile, the lesser emphasis put on learning facilitated the enhanced role of women.⁹⁸ Whereas men were typically, considered more learned in religious teachings and more reliable in executing them, in the

96. Yuval-Davis, *op. cit.*, ch. 2. The importance of the mother, “la gardienne vigilante de ceux qu’elle aime” in French Protestant communities even in the 19th century: Gérard Chlovy, Yves-Marie Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine 1800-1880* (Toulouse, 1985), p. 304.

97. Cit. in Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119, 120-121, 122-133.

98. Comparing the state of learning of the community before and after the conversion: Ephraim Nymark, *Mas’a be-erez ha-qedem, Suria, Kurdistan, Aram Naharaim, Paras ye-Asia ha-Merkazit* [Travels in the Land of the East, Syria, Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia – in Hebrew], introduced and ed. A. Ya’ari, Jerusalem, 1947, p. 89; Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-31, 45-46. See also, Haim Beinart, Anusei Chillón ye-Siruela, yehaneviot Mari Gómes ye-Inés bat Juan Esteban [Conversos of Chillón and Siruela and the Prophecies of Mari Gómez and Inés the Daughter of Juan

underground period, especially the first couple of decades, both sexes were equal in their inability to acquire deep learning. On the other hand, it was the woman who had the advantage of a wider range of activities, which allowed memorisation of ritual religious life and through them of inculcating their former – now clandestine – religious identity.⁹⁹ Thus, the women were reported to have shown greater loyalty to their original faith, and where loyalty to faith defined hierarchy to some extent, the women could for once benefit from their inferior social position.

Partly, women profited by their position of seclusion from the public sphere. As men were expected to fill public offices, they in general had a harder time evading the public arena and hiding their religious life from it. It was the men who were expected to show in public their allegiance to their new religion, by taking Islamic schooling when young and participating in public ritual life when in mature life. The men were also having a much closer relationship with the Muslim population through their business connections – having to assume Muslim behaviour and mores, as well as opening a wider range of possibilities for influence – even if, sometimes – unconscious. Thereby the centrality of the woman for the success of the process was ensured.¹⁰⁰ Being house bound had its advantages, and women were better protected from Muslim influence.¹⁰¹

Esteban], *Zion*, XLVII pt. 3, 1983, pp. 241-247, *idem*, Tenuat ha-nevia Ines, be-Puebla de Alcocer uvve-Talarrubias [The Prophetess Inés and her Movement in Puebla de Alcocer and Talarrubia], *Tarbiz*, vol. 51 pt. 4, 1982, p. 642. Amiel found no confirmation to the phenomenon (cliché, to him) of women as "teachers", transmitters in the case of Quintanar, where 3 out of 4 people who "transmitted" were men not a woman. But he reaffirms the womens central contribution to the maintenance of the familial Marranism. Charles Amiel, Les cent voix de Quintanar. Le modèle castillan du Marranisme (II), *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CCXVIII (2001), p. 538.

99. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 26; Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209. Compare to the early modernisation and emancipation in Europe, Paula E. Hyman *Yehudiya bi-svakh ha-qidma* [Gender and assimilation in modern Jewish history], Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 43-46.

100. Levine-Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters...*, pp. 166-167; Perry, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-53.

101. Hyman, *H-isha...*, pp. 23-31.

Certainly, in the last decades of the 19th century underground conditions improved to the extent that the community dared establish underground schooling for the young. As a rule these teachings were afforded only for the male offspring in a family, although there existed some learned ladies who taught girls to read the prayers. The men who could leave Mashhad, ostensibly on business trips, also had access to learning centres outside Mashhad – in particular Marv and Herat. Very few indeed would take that path, and the expertise one could achieve by using only the community schooling was not very deep. Even so, with the reappearance of rabbis and a learned elite men's prominence in communal leadership was reassured as men regained their traditional advantage over the women, with a greater accessibility to learning. Withal, the importance of the women status was not entirely eroded. Underground life, which was a persistent characteristic of the community life even in its eased form, continued to guarantee it. Furthermore, the long periods of absence of the males of the family, away on business trips, sometimes for several years, assured the women certain independence.

The difference in gender roles can partly be perceived by the fact that when a school was built by a Mashhadi (crypto) Jew for girls in the mid 1930s, though it was meant for Muslim as well as crypto-Jewish girls, it was predominantly Jewish. To the extent that it kept Yom Kipur as a holiday, and taught the Hebrew letters.¹⁰² Small wonder, religious objection to girls' education could be expected to be stronger in Mashhad than in other cities, less given to the influence of Muslim religious leadership.

The move to Tehran and later to Israel and other open, Western societies brought change to gender relations in the community. Some feel nowadays that the changes are too fast and the move for

102. Raphael Patai, *Haḥinukh ha-'ivri be-'adat ha-anusim be-Mashad, 'Edot* [Jewish Education in the Community of Crypto Jews in Meshed, *Jewish Communities in the World* – in Hebrew], I (1946), pp. 213-226; Sarah Zilpa Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122; Ben-Zion Yehoshu'a, *Dyoqana shel qehilat ha-anusim b-Mashad shebe-Iran* [The Portrait of the Community of Crypto Jews in Mashad – in Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1980, p. 35.

equal rights for women is detrimental for the survival of the community. The change in the roles constitutes a danger to one of the main characteristics of the community – the family. Others, feel that the move is so frustratingly slow that the community is still left deeply immersed in the patriarchal belt. Some women feel they have to move out of the community to find the equality they seek. Either way, it is gender roles – too fast for some, too slow for others – that may prove the doing or undoing of the community.¹⁰³

The Mashhadi Way

Religion is an important factor in the determination of ethnicity. Adrian Hastings argues that "religion is an integral element of many cultures, most ethnicities and some states"¹⁰⁴ Jewish religious practices are maintained as commemorations or reenactments of sacred historical events, compressed in a yearly cycle. That is partly so because it involves collective, social memory. This argument is doubly true in environments that are not fully modernized, not yet secularised, and where national identity is yet to crystallise in full. In such a context any social identity will be more dependent on the religious component. Of even greater importance is the fact that idiosyncratic religious practices define a group directly by creating a sub-culture that demarcates it.

Any group of people living together as a community for a long period tends to develop its own individual version of religious practices. For example, all religious practices involve selection. Therefore any group's common religious practice constitutes a form

103. Editorial, *Megillah*, (Feb. 1985); Hooman Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, p. 15; Nancy Hakimian, Female Evolution, *Megillah*, 4.93, no. 40, p. 20; William Helmreich, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

104. Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge and New York, 1997, p. 4. Anthony D. Smith cites J. Armstrong's study of medieval Christian and Islamic ethnic identities regarding myth, symbol, and historical memory. Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Historians* (International studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology, LX, dedicated to), *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Anthony D. Smith (ed.), Leiden, New York, 1992, p. 74.

of selection that becomes part of the group's collective religious memory and one of its defining factors. A group's variation of religious practices, together with the community's celebration and commemoration of its past faithfulness produces a fusion between sacred history and communal memory. Religious practice is particularised by the communal memory transmission while communal memory of communal past is sanctified in its turn.¹⁰⁵

The special circumstances of the Mashhadis as a crypto-faith community strengthened such a tendency even further. Their adherence to the commandments was of necessity a selection dictated by the need for covert faithfulness, and by the failings of memory, that can hardly be reinforced by learning. Thus, religious faithfulness was no less than a manifesto of an independent identity. Endogamy, both cause and result of the "communal" faith, ensured that the new religious culture became a communal choice and therefore a communal tradition.¹⁰⁶

For several decades, in some cases for a full century, some practices assumed a distinct character among the Mashhadis. Passover posed a major problem for players of the double game whether in Spain, Portugal or Iran. Its centrality demanded acknowledgment, yet there was always the danger of detection. Like others before them, the Mashhadis tried to avert danger by observing the holiday before or after its assigned date. Even when celebrated on time, Passover was marked only by the avoidance of leavened food and the consumption of rice for the entire holiday. The Chanukah candles presented a similar challenge. They were kept apart instead of on a

105. Lucette Valensi, *From Sacred History to Historical Memory and Back: The Jewish Past*, vol. II pt. 2, dedicated to: *Between Memory and History*, Marie Noëlle Bourguet, Lucette Valensi, Nathan Wachtel (eds.), 1986, pp. 284-289; Yoseph H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle and London, 1981, pp. 5-26 and particularly pp. 44-45; Thomas Butler, *Memory: A Mixed Blessing*, in *Memory. History, Culture and the Mind*, Thomas Butler (ed.), Oxford, 1989, p. 23.

106. For the Judeoconversos the selection was felt to have created "a new religion" Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain. A History of Sephardic Experience*, New York, 1992, pp. 143-144. The French Protestants had different emphases in their preaching Myriam Yardeni, *Huguenots and Jews* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1998, esp. pp. 113-118.

menorah (candelabrum) as is customary. Thus, if an unwanted stranger came in, the candles were easily distributed around the room, thereby losing their Jewish character.¹⁰⁷ By one particular account, the Mashhadis replaced the building of the *Sukka* (tabernacle) with a Zekhira, a commemorative act: Symbolic greenery inside the house had to suffice, since obviously, the building could not be constructed.¹⁰⁸ Mourning was particularly intricate: one can change the dates of a holiday, or mark it symbolically to avoid detection, yet it is impossible to hide a time of mourning. Small wonder then, that mourning practices formed the most extensive knowledge the Inquisition acquired about the Judeo-conversos. The Mashhadis conformed in external behaviour to Muslim practices, in the Mosque, while hiding their Jewish burial practices, as best they could, and mostly performed them secretly at home, before putting the dead in the coffin. And yet one of the most impressive stories on the near escape of the community was on the threat to open up a coffin and thereby reveal the Jewish burial customs of the community.¹⁰⁹

The Mashhadis' exceptional yearning for the Land of Israel can be seen as a more lasting particularity in their religious practices. For them, the connection to the Land of Israel constituted a bond with former generations and also a means of identification with the Jewish people. Their sufferings might be comforted by the very

107. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49; the account of Farrajullah Nasrullayoff Livian in Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam...*, p. 212; see also special burial customs – a combination of Jewish and Muslim customs, as they changed with the circumstances of the Jews: Patai, *ibid*, pp. 268-272.

108. Yitshaq Ben-Zvi, 'Edut ḥadasha 'al anusei Mashhad (kefi sherash'ami mi pi eḥad mi-tse-etsaeihem, shivtei Yisrael be-veit ha-nasi bi-Yrushalayim [A new Testimony on the Crypto-Jews of Mashhad, as I have written it down from one of their descendents, The tribes of Israel in the President's mansion in Jerusalem – in Hebrew], re-edited in Ben-Zvi, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-334. Similar problems beget similar solutions: symbolic greenery was the solution of the Judeo-conversos as well, Amiel, *Crypto-Judaïsme et Inquisition*, p. 152. For the full list of religious customs by the crypto-Jews of Quintanar, Amiel, *Les cent voix de Quintanar (I)...*, pp. 242-275.

109. Charles Amiel, La "mort juive" au regard des Inquisitions ibériques, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CCVII pt. 4, 1990, p. 392; see the story of Gohar, Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 57, 58, Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam*, pp. 182-188.

promise of redemption accorded to the entire Jewish people. The Land of Israel was the heart of this promise, and it was therefore the heart of the Jewish experience in the Mashhadi community.¹¹⁰ After the underground years were over, this yearning for the Land of Israel would receive much more overt expression, even less related to religious ritual. For example, Rabbi Levi Nissimi (1884-1959) had written inside his prayer book (*Sidur*) a list of dates in Jewish history, yet in spite of the place they are written in, the lists are not exclusively of religious events. In fact, the list brings Jewish history up to his own times, including the first stirrings of modern nationalism in the Land of Israel.¹¹¹

It does not necessarily follow that the entire community conformed to the same dedication to or had the same knowledge of their covert religion. As other groups before them, the covert community was made up of groups varying in the number of practices and in commitment.¹¹² Lack of contemporary documentation will not allow reconstruction to ascertain how many religious practices (of either religion) were performed, and by how many.¹¹³ By one account, only very few remained faithful until the 1870s when a sudden, unexplained religious revitalization overtook the community.¹¹⁴ Other accounts give a picture that conforms more closely to that of analogous converted communities. They hold that the Jewish secret devotion was varied and that the assimilationists constituted only a fraction in the community.¹¹⁵

110. Can the similarity in this zeal for the Land of Israel with the conversos in southern France strengthen this reading? Nahon, *Ha-anusim...*, pp. 185-198.

111. Lists in the handwriting of Rabbi Levi Nissimi in his prayer book of Livorno, *Tehila l-Moshe Ish ha-E-lohim* (1892). See a similar activity in European Jewry during the Middle Ages: Yerushalmi, *Zakhor...*, pp. 32, 46.

112. Joutard, *op.cit.*, p. 347-348.

113. Yoseph H. Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto. Isaac Cardoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics*, Seattle and London (1971), 1981, pp. 23, 32.

114. Nymark, *op. cit.*, p. 91; Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam*, p. 205; Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-33, 42, 46.

115. To the point of regarding them as a faction unto themselves. The main source to this perception: Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-58.

Traditional law as the Mashhadis preserved it was consciously segregating.¹¹⁶ After the 1870s at the latest, the community was, according to all recorded recollections, united and faithful to its secret religion.¹¹⁷ The holy days of Shabbat, Passover, and Yom Kippur were celebrated. All were careful to fully observe *Sh'hhita* and to a great extent the dietary rules (*Kashrut*). Circumcision, and burial customs were maintained, children received a Jewish name along with a Muslim name, and, of course, marriage with another Jew/ess was preserved within the Mashhadi community. According to communal memory, when the pogrom of 1902 was launched against the community, the Muslims attributed it to the fact that the *Jadidi* did not partake of their food and kept aloof.¹¹⁸

To this day, most community members show some adherence to Jewish religious customs even when they do not regard themselves religious. They call this faithfulness, "the Mashhadi way". The celebration of communal life and Jewish traditionalism that became an intricate combination during the first decades after the forced conversion became irrevocably intertwined in communal memory. The "way of the fathers" was a potent call for religious loyalty, though also a way for creating communal cohesion beyond religious diversion. With the Protestants in France and the Moriscos in Spain, with the "Nation" in Amsterdam, community and religion became so closely associated, that one could easily be exchanged for the other. A Morisco Hadith from 16th century Spain said it all: "he who moves himself even one step away from the community is no longer a Muslim".¹¹⁹

116. Dilmani cit. in Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam*..., p. 82.

117. Dilmani cit. in Yehoshu'a-Raz, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117. Ferrier estimated the number of Jews in Mashhad after the conversion at 600, Ferrier, *op. cit.*, p. 121, partial confirmation from earlier sources: Wolff, *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara*..., II, p. 173; Yisrael Ben Yossef Binyamin (Benjamin II), *Sefer Masey Yisrael* (Hebrew translation by D. G. Bialystok), 1859, p. 87. Rabbi Mattityahu Garji, *'Oneg Shabbat*, Jerusalem, 1913; Basset, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-233.

118. Dilmani cit. in Raphael Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam*..., p. 82.

119. Abdeljelil Temimi, Attachement des Morisques à leur religion et identité à travers la lecture des hadith dans deux manuscrits Morisques, *Revue d'histoire maghrébine*, [Tunisia] 1984, XI (35-36), pp. 186-187.

The network of secret customs with the organisation for their performance created cohesion within the group, while distinguishing it from others. Each and every time a religious practice was achieved by communal means, it was not only a feat of ritual strengthening of religious identity. It was even to a greater extent a ritual strengthening of social and communal identity.

The exceptional memory transmission among crypto faith communities, and its importance in the formation of group identity among them, has been commented upon. In the case of the Brazilian descendants of Judeo-conversos, Nathan Wachtel goes so far as to call their religious practices “La foi de souvenir”, meaning as much the memory of faith as the faith of/in memory. And Philippe Joutard has shown how peasants in the Cévennes have guarded the memory of the Camisards uprising against the forced conversion from the years 1702-1704 up to 1970 and 1980. In fact, the effect of memory practices among French Protestants turned them into an “ethnic” Protestantism, living on after religious practices have ceased to exist.¹²⁰

The tendency to utilise historicized memory as a means for strengthening communal identity is just as obvious among the Mashhadis. The conversion shaped their everyday life because of the danger brought into the community – physical and spiritual – and the means achieved to ward it off. At the same time the conversion factor was also providing a source for historicized memory: their particularized existence was creating new heroes, new memorial days.¹²¹ Yet, the main hero of Mashhadi folklore was the community as such. This is best demonstrated by the many versions of the forced conversion that provided no names of victims, no names of saints.¹²²

120. Cabanel, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

121. For the Judeoconversos, the victims of the Inquisition were authentic heroes, not for any of their respective religious communities, Yovel, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-6.

122. Consequently, even the exact number was forgotten. For the first commemoration, see Ben-Zvi, “Mi-divrei yemei anusei Mashhad (shtei te’udot)” [“Two Documents Concerning the Forced Converts in Meshed”], *Zion*, IV (1939), pp. 250-254, republished in Ben-Zvi, *op. cit.*, pp. 322, 326. The Conversion has many versions that differ as to the number of victims and the immediate reason for the attack on the community. For some of the versions: Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam...*, pp. 51-65.

When the first Mashhadis started recording their history in the 1930s, it was with the conscious intent of strengthening communal ties. In fact, it was a response to the amelioration of the state of the Mashhadi Jews brought about by the ascendance of the Pahlavi dynasty. For the first time, the Mashhadis could leave their city openly, going back to Judaism openly, wherever they may have chosen to live. Thus, the professed rationale – the persecution and continued stated of forced conversion – for the existence of the community was removed. The community's absorption in the wider Jewish community of Iran seemed a mere question of time. Resorting to the writing of history seemed a sensible step against forgetfulness as well as against erasure of communal boundaries. History writing is both an expression and perpetuation of communal particularity, advancing communal consciousness.¹²³ Other crypto-faith communities have undergone the same process of conciseness begetting history-writing, which in turn buttressed particularity and social identity.¹²⁴

Farrajullah Nassrullayoff Livian and Yaghuob Dilmanian were the first to write down a written history of the community and both started their writings about the same time. Both saw their works published many years later in New York, and both had their work distributed among community members long before having it published. Still, they were not alone in their task. In a sequence of meetings in Jerusalem in 1944, the elders of the community got together in a synagogue to tell the story/history of the community.¹²⁵ All of them would have identified with the words of Dilmanian:

It has occurred to me, Yaghoub Dilmanian, that unless this history is recorded, it shall be forgotten with the passage of time, and future

123. Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire*, Special Issue of *Representations on: Memory and Counter-Memory*, XXVI (spring 1989), pp. 12–14.

124. French Protestants: Joutard, *op. cit.*, pp. 367–368; Moriscos: F. Abdallah, *On the Social and Cultural History of the Moriscos*, *American Journal of Islamic Social Studies*, III, no. 1 (1986), pp. 152, 155. For an interpretation of *Celestina* and in particular the victims of the Inquisition as saints, see Yovel, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–117.

125. Haqlai, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

generations shall regret that no one took it upon himself to set it down in writing. Hence, [...] I set about collecting memoirs, by word of mouth...¹²⁶

History writing most often has accompanied a nascent nationalism. It propounded an awareness of a distinct identity and it constituted part of a communal-ethnic culture. In turn, it was a creation of memory – forming and formulating memory at the same time. It was buttressing an identity in danger of fading by giving it new rationale.

CONCLUSION

The Mashhadis were truly what Wachtel called a memory-faith (foi de souvenir) community. The memory of the forced conversion has shaped their lives from that day on March 1839 to this. First through their defiance, through the memory they kept alive of their former religion and their former identity. Later as that memory grew dimmer and as the hostility of the environment neither allowed assimilation, nor suffered open return to Judaism, devices were invented to live in a reality of constant conflict. It was mostly a conflict of the mind and soul, though it carried with it very tangible, physical danger.

The mental, spiritual nature of the clash brought forth new heroes and no fewer heroines. Memory of the Jewish past and religion was best transmitted within the privacy of the family therefore it was the family that had to be fortified. Thus endogamy was both a solution to a practical problem a group of people faced together and a cause to turning them into a community. Likewise new roles for women made them an important article of memory, but also a social characteristic setting the group apart. The new roles encouraged endogamy, and endogamy helped ingrain the new gendered view of the community.

The fact that a crucial number stayed on in Mashhad allowed them to organise as a group, thus enhancing the efforts of individuals.

126. Yaghoub Dilmanian, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The favourable economic conditions that encouraged the growth of the settlement in the hundred years before the forced conversion, was helped by the conversion. The social standing, the occupation of many Jews in Mashhad as merchants, both allowed them a life line to the outside world and served as umbilical cord to Jewish communities.

Thus underground years brought forward new social mechanisms for survival, and new memories. The two were irrevocably intertwined creating double borderlines: from the Muslims to whom they were forced to belong, but also from the Jews, to whom they wanted to belong. The double jeopardy was also a double culture of memory and of faith but also of a wish, even if subconscious, to find what could be common to both identities. The Mashhadi community came into being not merely by exterior pressure, but just as much, by inner forces, that internalised, re-worked the pressures and brought a new entity into being.

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