

# JEWISH LIFE IN IRAN



JEWES ARE FREE TO PRACTICE JUDAISM  
THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY ARE FREE



# AFTER THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION



**W**hen Parvaneh Vahidmanesh was growing up in Tehran in the 1980s, a relative told her, in confidence, a family secret: Her paternal great-grandfather had been a Jew who was forced to convert to Islam around 1900. The subject was never discussed at home with her parents, strict Muslims. But Vahidmanesh never forgot her relative's words, and as a university student, she privately began to learn more about her great-grandfather's heritage. Later, while pursuing her master's degree in history, she asked to write her thesis on Iran's Jewish community but was told the topic was "too sensitive."

In 2007, she met Hasan Sarbakhshian, an Iranian photojournalist for the Associated Press. Also a Muslim, Sarbakhshian had grown up in Tabriz in northern Iran and had first heard about Jews from his grandmother. "When I was a small boy, she used to tell me not to go outside because the Jews would get me," he says. But after a decade working with Western reporters and crisscrossing the region—photographing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and his own country's tribulations, including Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's notorious

2006 Holocaust denial conference—he, too, was curious to learn more about Iran's minorities, especially its Jews. Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian decided to collaborate on a book.

After Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and the execution of the prominent Iranian Jewish businessman and community leader, Habib Elghanian, for ties with Israel, the vast majority of the nation's 150,000 Jews fled the country. Although an officially recognized and protected minority with a seat in the Iranian parliament, the 20,000 or so Jews who chose to stay behind retreated into their own separate world, keeping to themselves and, in many cases, becoming more religious. A low profile made sense in a country that had become virulently anti-Israel. But a family member of Vahidmanesh put her in touch with someone in the Jewish community who was willing to help scale these barriers. "It is a close-knit community," she says. "It's a chain once one person trusts you."

Gradually Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian were embraced by the community, visiting Tehran's 20 or so active synagogues for a variety of holidays and life cycle events. They also traveled by char-

Photographs by Hasan Sarbakhshian

Research by Parvaneh Vahidmanesh

ter bus with Jews from Tehran to visit the nation's Jewish holy places, meeting Jews who remained in Shiraz, Isfahan, Yazd and other cities. Wherever they went, they documented what it was like to be a Jew in the Islamic Republic, now home to the largest Jewish community in the Muslim world.

This sounds simple enough, and in a more open society with a freer press, it might have been. But for each visit, service and trip, Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian needed the permission of Iran's Ministry of Culture. That they were given this permission, event by event, was a result of Sarbakhshian's foreign press credentials; local media were not allowed access to the Jews. In 2008, they submitted the finished book to Minister of Culture Mohammed Hosein Saffar Harandi for approval to publish it and were told that there should be no problem. But a year went by, and they didn't hear back from the Ministry.

The trouble began when they visited Hadash Synagogue in the city of Yazd, 10 hours south of Tehran, to photograph Hanukkah celebrations in December of 2008. There they met a Jewish man who invited them to walk back to his house and meet his sister and her family. On the way, the man explained that his wife and children lived in Israel but that he had returned to attend to business. "Israel is beautiful," he told them. Later, as they drove back to Tehran, the man called Vahidmanesh on her cell phone to implore them to destroy the interview. "He said because you have Jewish blood, you understand," she recalls. They did as requested. Says Sarbakhshian: "The man hadn't said anything against Islam or the government but just the fact that he had done the interview scared him and his family.

"A couple of days later, the Minister of Culture called me to come to the foreign media office," says Sarbakhshian. "I didn't

know why. The lady who is responsible for the foreign media left the room, leaving me with a man from the intelligence agency. He had a fake name. It was a two-hour interrogation. They had monitored the man's cell phone call and the agent wanted the interview." The same interrogator later questioned Vahidmanesh, and in total, the two were interrogated four more times. Says Vahidmanesh: "They said that our project was propaganda for Israel, and asked which organization in Israel gave us money. It is a big crime in Iran to be associated with Israel. I said if I had received money from Israel, I would have published the book in Israel, not in Iran. But they didn't accept that answer."

During the interrogations, Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian realized that they had been monitored throughout their work on the project. "They knew about my great-grandfather," says Vahidmanesh. She was told that because her family had a Jewish background, she "was making propaganda for Judaism. They said the only reason to do this project was because I wanted to convert Muslims to Judaism. It is illegal to do this, and if someone converts from Islam they can be executed."

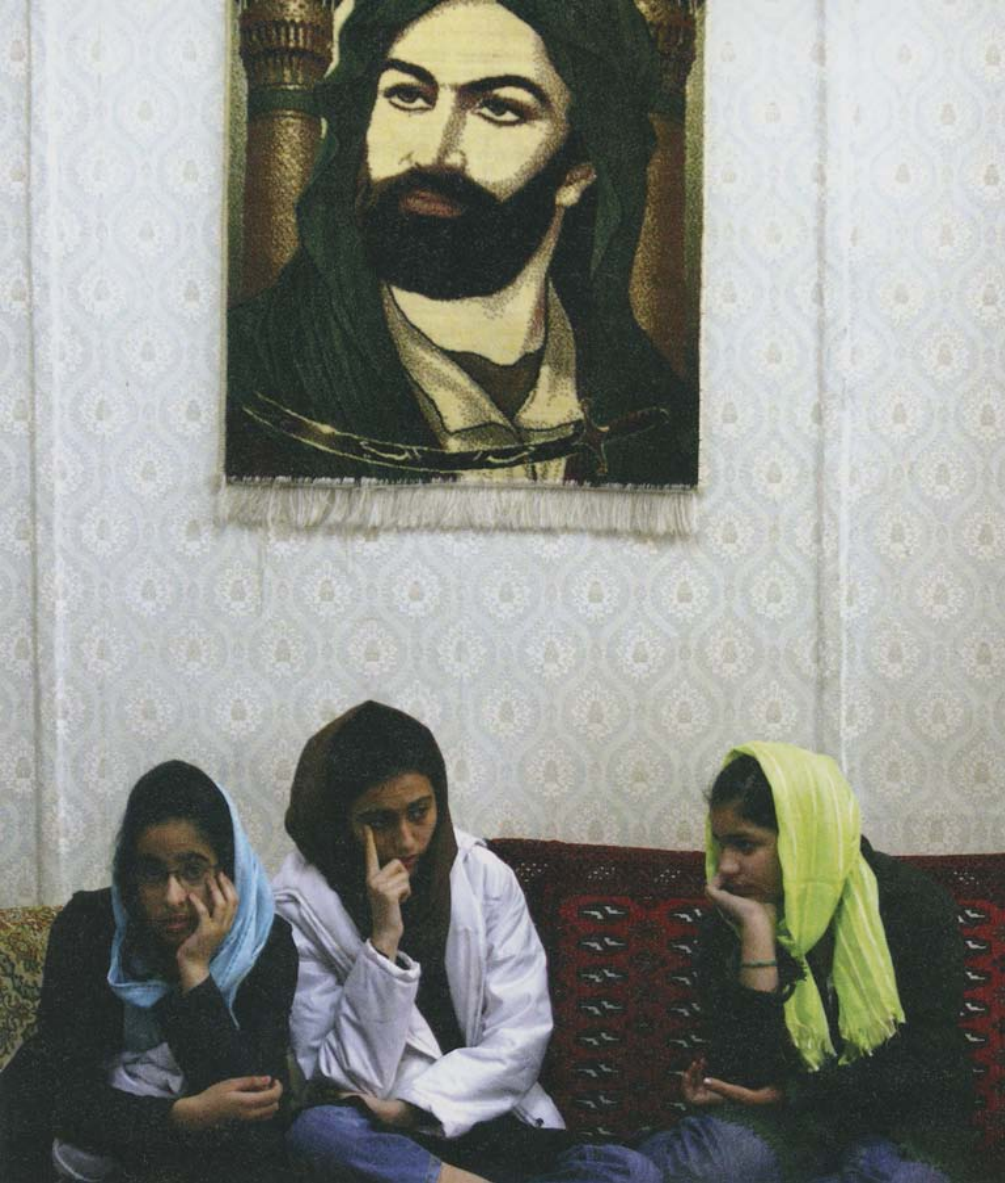
Vahidmanesh fled to the United States in April 2009, accepting an offer from the University of Virginia to give a lecture about women in Iran and eventually taking a job as a program officer with Freedom House, an organization that promotes the expansion of democratic rights worldwide. Sarbakhshian, who had a wife and two children and a full-time position with the Associated Press, remained in Iran, covering the lead-up to the June 2009 presidential campaign, traveling on assignment with government opposition candidates. In May, a few weeks before the presidential election, the Ministry of Culture banned Sarbakhshian, whose photographs had been published in *The New York Times*,

*Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Economist* and many other international publications, from working by rescinding his press pass. "They said they had received a letter from the Intelligence Ministry saying that I shouldn't work," he says.

Tensions were high in Iran at the time. Both during and after the elections, which Ahmadinejad won with 63 percent of the vote amid allegations of fraud, reporters from abroad and inside Iran, already accustomed to difficulties in obtaining press passes and occasional imprisonment, found their jobs harder than ever. When demonstrations broke out after the election, the government responded with arrests, beatings and killings. During the press crackdown, even reporters working for western news media, such as Sarbakhshian's friend, Maziar Bahari of *Newsweek*, were arrested and imprisoned. When Sarbakhshian's interrogators warned him "to think about the safety of his children," he decided to take action. On July 12, 2009, he flew to Dubai, where he was granted a visa to the U.S. He flew back to Tehran to take his wife and children to Malaysia, a country to which Iranians can travel without visas. After settling his family there, he headed to Washington, DC, to prepare the way for them to join him, which they did two years later.

Sarbakhshian and Vahidmanesh escaped Iran with the material they had collected for their book, including 2,000 photos, most of them never published before. "We didn't do anything illegal, we just told the story of the Jewish minority," says Sarbakhshian, who still seems shocked that he had to flee and uproot his family over such an innocuous project. The selection of their work that follows offers a rare inside look into the everyday existence of Iran's Jewish community today and provides insight into the 2,700-year Jewish presence in Persia.—*Nadine Epstein*





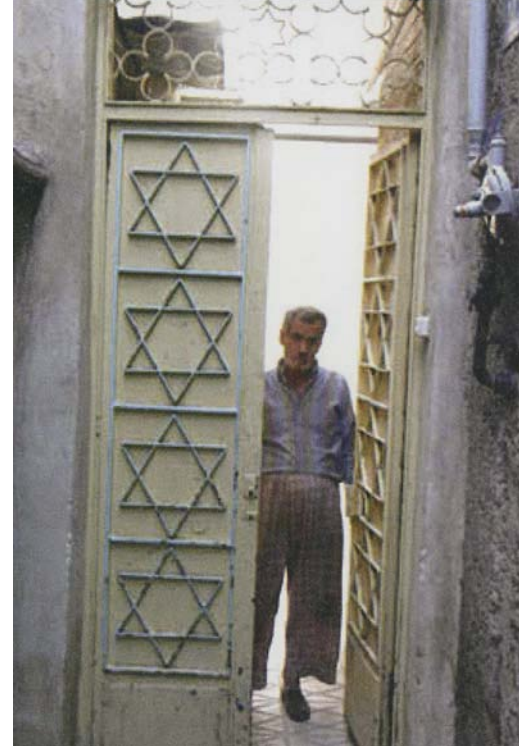
**Opening page:** Since the Islamic Revolution, Jews and Muslims have had less interaction. In this photograph, Jewish men and women talk in front of the Yusuf Abad Synagogue, a large congregation in downtown Tehran. A Muslim woman, clad in a chador, walks by. Synagogues play a crucial role in the lives of the city's approximately 15,000 Jews. "It's where they hang out, it's where they meet their wives and husbands," says Vahidmanesh. "There's no place else to go." *September 2007*

**Top right:** When Tehran became the country's capital in the 18th century, Jews were confined to a Jewish ghetto, known as Odlajan, near the central bazaar in the southern part of the city. Only in the 1930s were they allowed to move out of the ghetto and live in other neighborhoods. Today, only three Jews—a man, his wife and a friend—live in the old quarter. They watch over the Mulla Ezra Yaghoub Synagogue, the oldest in Tehran. Jews

from throughout the city take turns to ensure that there is a minyan every Shabbat. In this photograph, the *shamas*—his first name is Behnam—stands by the synagogue gate. *December 2007*

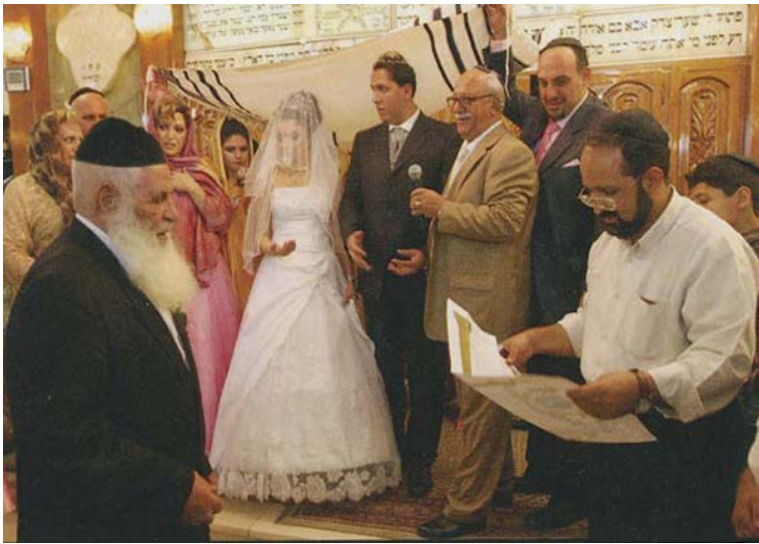
**Bottom right:** Zoleykha Aframian, a Jewish woman in the city of Isfahan, five hours south of Tehran, lights candles at what is believed to be the grave of Serah Bat Asher in Pir Bekran, a large Jewish cemetery. According to midrash, it was Serah, the daughter of Asher and granddaughter of Jacob, who first informed Jacob that Joseph was alive and the ruler of Egypt. Jews come to pray at the shrine, some staying for the entire Ten Days of Awe. Before Islam came to Iran 1,400 years ago, Isfahan was called the city of Yohood—the city of Jews. Isfahan was once home to one of the country's largest Jewish populations. Today, about 900 Jews live there. *October 2007*

**Top left:** Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian traveled with a group of Jews from Tehran



to visit Esther and Mordechai's shrine in Hamadan, four hours northwest of Tehran. On the way, the charter bus stopped at the city of Tooyserkan so they could visit the shrine of the Jewish prophet Habakkuk. The Jews rented a Muslim prayer room for their morning prayers. While their fathers wrap tefillin and pray, these teenage girls pass the time beneath a tapestry of Ali ibn Abu Talib, the first Shi'a Imam and Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. The girls are wearing headscarves: Six months after the Islamic Revolution, the government decreed that all women—Muslim as well as those who belong to the recognized minorities—Jewish, Armenian and Zoroastrian—wear headscarves in public. It is common practice for Jews to charter buses to visit other Jewish communities to augment numbers for ceremonies and events. These trips are also a way for parents to identify prospective spouses for their children. *March 2008*





**Top left:** This wedding was the first event Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian were invited to attend in the Jewish community. It was held at the Abdullah Zadeh Synagogue in downtown Tehran. The synagogue is on Palestine Street, called Kakh Street before the revolution. A short walk down Palestine Street is the old Israeli Embassy, which is now the Palestinian Embassy. Says Vahidmanesh: “The Palestinians occupy the embassy, furniture, rugs and all.” *August 2007*



**Center and bottom left:** The wedding reception took place at a Jewish community hall known as Great Kurush Cyrus. In the photograph, a group of men are doing traditional dances surrounded by women. Although forbidden in Iran, mixed dancing is permitted in the Jewish-owned hall. Only Jews, Armenians and Zoroastrians are allowed to have mixed dancing at their celebrations. *August 2007*

**Top opposite page:** Carpet dealer Herzl Giddayan was one of the first Jews Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian met, and he was very excited about their project, and invited them into his home. Giddayan lights the Hanukkah candles in his home as his wife, children and sister watch. *December 2007.*

**Bottom right opposite page:** In traditional Iranian custom, the Giddayan family celebrates holiday feasts such as this Passover seder on a tablecloth spread on the floor. *April 2009*

**Bottom left opposite page:** Giddayan owns a shop in Tehran’s central bazaar. Forty Jewish families have stores in the bazaar, mostly specializing in carpets and antiques. It is common for Iranian Jews to own carpets, antiques and fabric businesses because of laws that once prohibited them from selling food and other items. Today many Jews are highly educated professionals such as doctors and engineers. *December 2007*













**Top right opposite page:** In Hamadan, Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian visited the tomb of Esther and Mordechai, popular pilgrimage sites. As told in the *Book of Esther*, Esther—the Jewish woman married to the Persian King Ahasuerus—saved the Jewish people from destruction, an event celebrated during Purim. She was aided by her cousin Mordechai, an advisor to the king. According to tradition, Esther hears prayers from women seeking husbands and wishing to have children. The women pray toward a well that is hidden under a carpet. “Normally when you go there, you can’t see it,” says Sarbakhshian. “People who are really religious, they know to uncover the carpet.” *March 2008*

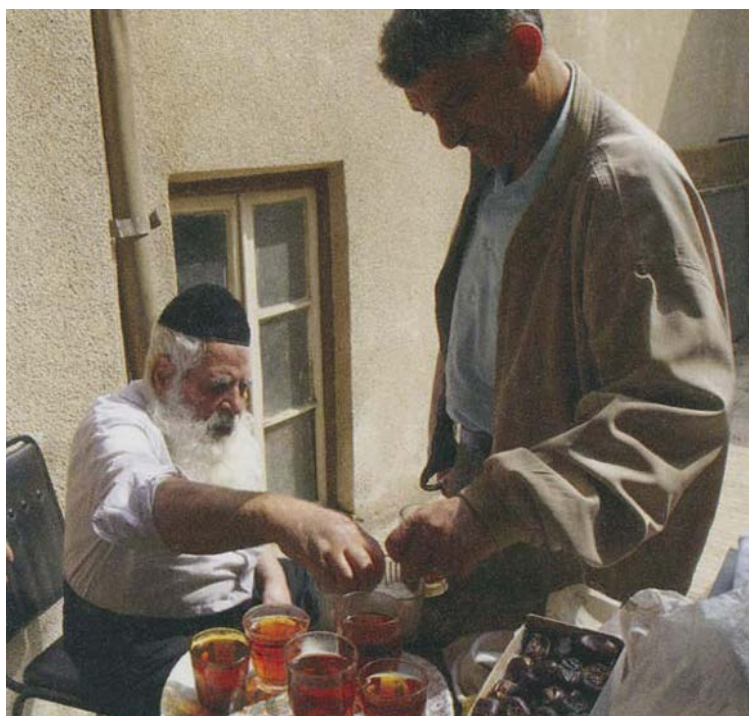


**Bottom opposite page:** They also traveled to Susa, 20 hours south of Tehran, on a charter bus with a group of Jews from Tehran. Both the prophets Daniel and Nehemiah are said to have lived in Susa during the Babylonian captivity of the 6th century BCE. It was here that Esther is believed to have become queen and saved the Jews. In this photo, Jews from Tehran visit Daniel’s tomb, known as the Shrine of the Prophet Daniel. Traditionally, they gather at the shrine to pray for the well-being of Iranians and their own community. The tomb is also a holy place for Muslims and is decorated with verses from the Koran. Daniel’s gravestone is inscribed in Arabic, not Hebrew. There are no longer any Jews living in Susa. *February 2008*



**Top left opposite page:** Daniel’s tomb is located inside this building. *February 2008*

**This page:** For Passover **each year**, the Mashadi Synagogue in south Tehran ritually slaughters a bull and distributes the meat to the poor. Above, the chief rabbi of Iran at the time, Cohan Sedgh Hamedani, sits at far right. Center, the rabbi ensures the slaughter is performed according to the laws of kashrut. Bottom, he rests after his labors; refreshments include tea and dates. The synagogue is named for Jews from Mashadi, a town in the eastern part of Iran. Forced to convert to Islam, they continued to practice Judaism at home. In the mid-19th century, 100 were killed by Muslims. To this day, Mashadi Jews maintain their unique practices. Most reside in New York. “They couldn’t be with either Jews or Muslims,” says Vahidmanesh. “Friday they prayed as Muslims, Saturday they prayed as Jews.” *April 2008*











**Top right opposite page:** Dr. Sapir Hospital and Charity Center near the central bazaar in the old Jewish ghetto in south Tehran was founded by Jews in 1941. The staff there treats anyone in need of medical attention. The hospital is still funded and maintained by the Tehran Jewish Association. In this photograph, a Jewish obstetrician, Dr. Azari, examines Muslim infants he has delivered. *February 2008*

**Bottom opposite page:** Jewish elementary school students demonstrate for peace immediately after Israel's incursion into Gaza on December 31, 2008. Iran's Jewish com-

munity survives by disassociating itself with Israel. "Iran's Jews are free to follow their religion but not free to express their support of Israel," says Vahidmanesh. "They try to stay out of the political conversation about Israel even though many of them have relatives there. They have to say they are against the occupation and that they support Palestinian rights." *December 2008*

**Top left opposite page:** Iranian Jewish homes look similar to those of other Iranians: Carpets are one of the main adornments. Herzl Giddayan's sister and one of his sons sit on the couch in the living room

of his home. *December 2007*

**Above:** On the eve of Passover in 1999, 13 Jews from Shiraz were arrested and accused of spying for Israel and the United States. One of them was Shahrokh Paknahad (right), who was convicted by the Islamic Revolutionary Court of spying, and jailed for seven years. In this photograph, he is in the shoe store he owns in Shiraz's central bazaar. "He told me when he was in the cell, he kept on reciting the Torah in his head," says Vahidmanesh. Shiraz was once one of Iran's largest Jewish cities. Around 5,000 Jews remain. *January 2008*





**Above:** On December 24th, 2008 Vahidmanesh and Sarbakhshian traveled to Yazd—six hours south of Tehran—to attend a national photographic exhibit. Later, they stopped by the city’s Hadash Synagogue. “It was Hanukkah, and even though we had photographs of the Giddayan family during Hanukkah, I thought we should take more.” There, they met the man (left) in the photo above, seen at home with members of his family. They realize now that because he had traveled to Israel, where his wife and children lived, he was being monitored by Iranian intelligence. Although Iranian Muslims are

forbidden to go to Israel, Jewish Iranians can visit Israel and return. The government, however, closely watches those who do. But once a Jew has an Israeli passport, they can never come back. Says Vahidmanesh: “Since Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, Jews feel more threatened. More and more are leaving.” *December 2008*

**Bottom right:** Sarbakhshian shot this photograph at the Holocaust denial conference, a year before he began working with Vahidmanesh. In it, Ahmadinejad is embraced by members of the Jewish anti-Zionist sect, Neturei Karta. *December 2006*

**Bottom left:** Every year on the last Friday of Ramadan, representatives of the Jewish community are required to participate in a Muslim prayer service. During the service, a senior imam traditionally makes a speech denouncing Israel. The Jewish community selects who it would like to attend, in this case, Haroun Yashayae, then head of the Jewish community (center) and Arash Abaie, a well-known Jewish scholar. “If you are a Jew, imagine sitting there while Muslims are praying for the destruction of Israel,” says Sarbakhshian. *November 2004.* ☞

