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For Iranian Jews, Purim Is the Real Thing

BY KARMEL MELAMED

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By Karmel Melamed
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Historians may question whether events in the Book of Esther, which are celebrated at Purim, happened as described in the traditional tale. But to Persian Jews, the holiday resonates deeply.

Part of it is that the story unfolds in ancient Persia—now modern Iran—so the events commemorated have a local connection.

“Even though Purim is for all Jews around the world, we as Jews living in Iran feel particularly closer to Purim,” said Parviz Yeshaya, national chairman of the Jewish Council in Iran. “Especially since the tombs of Esther and Mordechai are here in Iran.”

Iran’s Islamic regime does not discourage the celebrating of Jewish holidays, including Purim, Yeshaya said. Still, the tone of the holiday is quite different than in other countries. The Jewish community in Iran has embraced the long-standing religious aspects of Purim rather than the light-hearted festivities that characterize American observance.

“The most important part of celebrating Purim in Iran starts with the fast, which is 24 hours, and the reading of the megillah in synagogues during the fast,” Yeshaya said. “We give gifts here, but not as many, and we don’t have carnivals like the Ashkenazim. But children in their Jewish school conduct their own plays of the Purim story.”

Within Iran, the traditional site of the tombs of Esther and Mordechai has become somewhat of a tourist attraction. They are located in the city of Hamadan, and they’ve recently been renovated and maintained by Iran’s Jewish community.

“Near the tomb there is a synagogue, but unfortunately due to the large migration of Jews out of Hamadan, there are problems with taking care of the synagogue,” Yeshaya said. “But we are working on resolving this.”

Although Persian Jews have long believed the tomb contains the burial sites of Esther and Mordechai, historians and archeologists note a lack of solid evidence.

“The great archeologist Ernst Hertzfeld, in his book, suspected that Esther and Mordechai were buried there, but later indicated that he believed Shushandokht, a Jewish woman who was the wife of Yazgerd I, an Iranian king, is buried there,” said Amnon Netzer, professor of Middle Eastern and Iranian studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

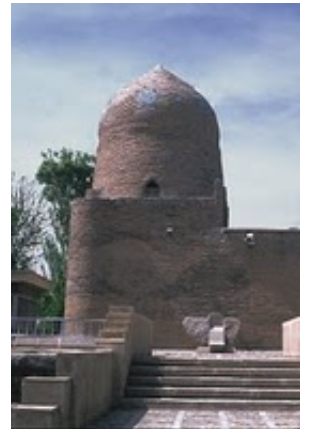
That’s not his only point of doubt.

“The tombs of Esther and Mordechai had not been mentioned in any Jewish sources,” Netzer added. “The first Jewish person who mentioned the existence of the tombs there was Rabbi Binyamin of Toodelah in 1167 [C.E.]. I wonder how come there are absolutely no mentions of these tombs in the Talmud or post-Talmud literature?”

Netzer did, however, have an explanation of the more subdued, religious nature of the holiday’s observance. Jews in Iran have always been cautious in their celebrations of Purim, he said, because the Book of Esther contains unflattering depictions of non-Jewish Persians and also includes the tale of a slaughter of non-Jews.

“If you read the book itself you will see that it says the Iranian Jews were permitted actually to massacre a lot of Iranians on a certain day and King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, is pictured as a stupid king,” Netzer said. “So these factors actually made Iranian Jews extremely careful not to have high-profile celebrations for Purim.”

Decades ago, he noted, Iran had close ties with Nazi Germany, and some of Iran’s more nationalistic papers labeled Purim



as anti-Iranian.

But the celebration of Purim has endured. And, ironically, its importance has even been enhanced by a non-Jewish holiday. Purim typically coincides with the festivities of No Ruz, the secular Persian New Year.

“Purim gets more focus in Iran from Jews,” said Nahid Pirnazar, an instructor of Iranian studies and Judeo-Persian literature at UCLA. “It’s like Chanukah in the United States, which coincides with Christmas,” she said. “A lot of the traditions of No Ruz are reflected in Purim, like the idea of exchanging gifts.”

Purim fasts are broken at the conclusion of megillah readings, she added. Jews traditionally eat special Purim cookies as well as halva, a dry or wet dessert made of flour or rice, sugar, oil and saffron.

And although some historians have their doubts regarding the Book of Esther, the experience of Jews in Iran embodies a consonance with events described in the tale. Over the centuries, Pirnazar said, Jews have narrowly escaped forced mass conversions to Islam by participating in communitywide days of prayer and fasting “similar to the fast carried out by Queen Esther in the Purim story.

One such Purim-like episode is identified in Vera Basch Moreen’s book, “Iranian Jewry’s Hour of Peril and Heroism” (American Academy for Jewish Research, 1987). In 1629, the Jews in the city of Isfahan were forced to convert to Islam with the succession of King Safi I of the Safavid Dynasty. Later, these Jews were permitted to return to Judaism after two Jewish leaders successfully interceded with the Iranian monarch “a scenario that parallels the Purim story.

As an often-oppressed minority, Iranian Jews have their own modern-day hardships to confront. And the Book of Esther, with its tale of triumph over hardship and evil, still conveys a message of hope.

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