

# IRAN

**Population: 69,975,000 ~ Jewish Population: 25,000**

## Demography

The Jewish community of Persia, modern-day Iran, is one of the oldest in the Diaspora, and its historical roots reach back to the 6th century b.c.e., the time of the First Temple. Their history in the pre-Islamic period is intertwined with that of the Jews of neighboring Babylon. Cyrus, the first Achaemid emperor, conquered Babylon in 539 b.c.e. and permitted by special decree the return of the Jewish exiles to the Land of Israel; this brought the First Exile to an end. The Jewish colonies were scattered from centers in Babylon to Persian provinces and cities such as Hamadan and Susa. The books of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel give a favorable description of the relationship of the Jews to the court of the Achaemids at Susa. Under the Sassanid dynasty (226-642 c.e.), the Jewish population in Persia grew considerably and spread throughout the region, yet Jews nevertheless suffered intermittent oppression and persecution. The invasion by Arab Muslims in 642 c.e. terminated the independence of Persia, installed Islam as the state religion, and made a deep impact on the Jews by changing their sociopolitical status.

Throughout the 19th century, Jews were persecuted and discriminated against. Sometimes whole communities were forced to convert. During the 19th century, there was considerable emigration to the Land of Israel, and the Zionist movement spread throughout the community.

Under the Pahlavi Dynasty, established in 1925, the country was secularized and oriented towards the West. This greatly benefited the Jews who were emancipated and played an important role in the economy and in cultural life. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were 80,000 Jews in Iran, concentrated in Teheran (60,000), Shiraz (8,000), Kermanshah (4,000), Isfahan (3,000), and in the cities of Kuzistahn. In the wake of the upheaval, tens of thousands of Jews, especially the wealthy, left the country, leaving behind vast amounts of property.

## Community

The Council of the Jewish Community, which was established after World War II, is the representative body of the community, which also has in parliament a representative who is obligated by law to support Iranian foreign policy and its anti-Zionist position. Despite the official distinction between "Jews," "Zionists," and "Israel," the most common accusation the Jews encounter is that of maintaining contacts with Zionists. The Jewish community does enjoy a measure of religious freedom but is faced with constant suspicion of cooperating with the Zionist state and with "imperialistic America"-both such activities being punishable by death. Jews who apply for a passport to travel abroad must do so in a special bureau and are immediately put under surveillance. The Jews again live under the status of dhimmi, with the restrictions imposed on religious minorities.

## Culture and Education

The Islamization of the country has brought about strict control over Jewish educational institutions. Before the revolution, there were some 20 schools functioning throughout the country. In recent years, most of these have been closed down. In the remaining schools, Jewish principals have been replaced by Muslims. In Teheran there are still three schools in which Jewish pupils constitute a majority. The curriculum is Islamic, and the Bible is taught in Persian, not Hebrew. Special Hebrew lessons are conducted on Fridays by the Orthodox Otzar ha-Torah organization, which is responsible for Jewish religious education. Saturday is no longer officially recognized as the Jewish Sabbath, and Jewish pupils are compelled to attend school on that day.

## **Religious Life**

There are three synagogues in Teheran, but since 1994, there has been no rabbi in Iran, and the bet din does not function.

## **Israel**

Iran severed relations with Israel in 1979 and has subsequently supported many of the Islamic terrorist organizations, which target Jews and Israelis. Aliya: Since 1948, 76,244 Iranian Jews have emigrated to Israel.

## **Sites**

According to local Jewish tradition, the tombs of Queen Esther and Mordechai are located in Hamadan. Both Jews and Muslims venerate the tomb of Daniel in Shushan.