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The Jews of Early Modern and Modern Persia: Exploring Identities Through the Lens of History

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of historical phenomena and identity formation in Persian Jewry during the Early Modern period and the nineteenth century. It draws attention to the fluidity and intricacies of Jewish identities, asserting that there is not a singular Jewish identity, but rather a multitude of identities shaped by both internal and external factors. Conversion, in particular, is highlighted as a significant factor in shaping these identities. The research mainly draws on secondary analyses of primary sources such as rare Judeo-Persian chronicles like *Ketab-e Anusi* as well as the oral traditions of Mashhadi Jews, a key case study of the thesis. Delving deeper into this unique case of Persian Jewry, it explores memory transmission and communal bonds as some of the mechanisms the Mashhadis employed to preserve their identities. It aims to reinforce that these mechanisms were made possible by the Jews' profound communal cohesion, which strengthened in spite and as a result of conversion and religious uniformity, a characteristic of the Safavid and Qajar periods.

Abstract in Italian

Questo studio esplora l'intersezione tra fenomeni storici e formazione dell'identità nella comunità ebraica persiana durante l'età moderna e il XIX secolo. Si concentra sulla fluidità e sulle complessità delle identità ebraiche, sostenendo che non esiste un'unica identità ebraica, bensì una moltitudine di identità plasmate da fattori sia interni che esterni. In particolare, un elemento significativo nella definizione di queste identità è rappresentato dai fenomeni di conversione, di cui si indagano le ragioni e le rappresentazioni. La ricerca si basa principalmente su analisi secondarie di fonti primarie, come rare cronache giudeo-persiane, tra cui il *Ketab-e Anusi*, e le tradizioni orali degli ebrei di Mashhad, uno studio di caso centrale nella tesi. Approfondendo questo caso unico nella storia degli ebrei persiani, lo studio indaga la trasmissione della memoria e i legami comunitari come alcuni dei meccanismi utilizzati dai Mashhadi per preservare le loro identità. L'obiettivo è dimostrare che tali meccanismi sono stati resi possibili dalla profonda coesione comunitaria degli ebrei, rafforzata nonostante (o forse proprio per) la conversione e l'uniformità religiosa, caratteristica dei periodi safavide e qajar.

Introduction

The Jewish community of Persia is one of the oldest Jewish diasporas. At its peak, this community made substantial contributions to the development of global Jewish civilisation in various ways. For a period of time, long before the span of the present research, Persia was among the places that served as a Jewish spiritual and cultural hub. Some of these influences, spanning more than 2,500 years, still remain among the pillars of contemporary Jewish religious, social, and historical identities. To a certain extent, Jewish presence in Persia even predates the region's cultural development and consolidation into a nation-state.

The end of the first millennium of the Christian era marks the beginning of a westward shift in regional cultural influence within the Jewish world. This shift continued into the second millennium and during the Early Modern period and the first century of the Modern Era—with Persia, among other communities, assuming a semiperipheral role in the face of the rise of new, European centres of Jewish intellectual and cultural life. Yet, despite these shifting dynamics, Jewish life endured in Persia. This persistence was not without its turbulence and challenges, as they navigated periods of religious, political, and social pressures; every calamity offered a new piece to the mosaic of their identities.

Although the Islamisation of Persia following the Muslim conquest (633-656) marks the beginning of the Jews' position as *dhimmis,*[1] it is the Safavids' rise to power at the dawn of the sixteenth century that can be seen as the critical turning point for the status of the religious minorities of Persia, including the Jews. It was during this period that the notion of Persia as a political entity began to actualise (Amanat, p.). The Safavids' establishment of Shi'ism as the official state religion laid the groundwork for religious uniformity as a way of embodying a unified identity of the realm, which served to distinguish Persia from its Sunni neighbour and main rival, the Ottoman Empire. This shift continued well into the Qajar period, the implications of which proved to be dire for the Jews at times. This period in particular saw them gradually lose their social, economic, and political status, as well as increasingly restrained patterns of integration.

While the process of modernisation and contacts with the Western Jewry during the second half of the nineteenth century gradually improved the Jews' situation, the Qajar period was not without its complications. At this time, Persia was in a social and political turmoil, to

[1] a historical term for non-Muslims living in an Islamic state.

say the least; the Russo-Persian war of 1826-1828 resulted in losing territory to the Russians, which was naturally accompanied by the economic liability of the war. The British involvement in the Herat campaign of 1838, which Persia lost, further demonstrated the region's vulnerability to even one remote Western power at their borders. Mehrdad Amanat, whose book will be thoroughly discussed later on, wrote: "At times, the humiliation of defeat by superior European powers found relegation of a fringe group to the position of an "Other " (Amanat, p. 45). Indeed, the recorded instances of religious persecution and mass conversion in the Qajar era indicate that religion remained one of the largest factors influencing the social and political position of religious minorities. Much like elsewhere in the world, there was often a religion-based barrier between the Shi'i majority and minorities such as the Jews—who may have already antagonised the general consensus due to their international connections with enemy territory. In fact, one of the reasons attributed to these waves of persecution is economic pressure, due to the turbulent period of the nineteenth century. The decline of the Qajars had taken a toll on the economic, social, and political dynamics of the state.

In the late nineteenth century, the conditions of the Jews gradually improved. They were officially deemed equal citizens of the state. This was partially the result of the efforts of Western Jewish organisations such as Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and the Anglo-jewish Association. Their persistence convinced Qajars to recognise their Jewish Diaspora as equal citizens of the state. Referring to a question posed in the introduction, the Jewish community of Persia, at least in the nineteenth century, were perhaps not quite as isolated from the centres of Jewish life as previously believed. Nevertheless, many of them did not quite manage to integrate into general society. The present research religious unification process was not entirely successful in integrating the New Muslims—*Jadid al-Islams*, as they were generally referred to—into broader Persian society.

During this period, it was not uncommon for the Jews to voluntarily convert to Shi'i Islam. Aside from genuine interest in Islam, voluntary conversions of this period are often attributed to social, political, and economic pressure. Being a religious minority deprived them of certain rights and ambitions, and subjected them to various taxes such as the *jizya*.[2] At the same time, they had to navigate the repercussions of society's perception of them as a religious minority. For the small group of ambitious Jews with affluent backgrounds,

[2] Taxations imposed on the non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state.

conversion was a means of economic, political, and social advancement. For the ordinary Jews, however, who comprised the majority of the Persian Jewish community, conversion to Islam, whether willingly or by coercion, was not quite as beneficial; the shame and stigma associated with being a *Jadid al-Islam* could not be easily erased. Conversion did not necessarily facilitate their integration into the larger Muslim Persian society.

The anticipated benefits of joining the majority Muslim community were often obscured by a deep sense of mistrust and contempt that followed the new converts who happened to be former Jews, even through several generations. This trend emphasises first and foremost the extent to which Early Modern Persia—and, subsequently, the dawn of Modern Persia— was an environment where social perception, as well as self-perception, were inconceivable outside of a religious perspective. Furthermore, it is indicative of the seemingly inescapable nature of Jewish identities. Aside from the occasional persecution and forced conversion, the increasing social and political pressure to conform to the majority faith raises some questions about the complexity and fluidity of identities among the Early Modern Persian Jews, especially in relation to their non-Jewish compatriots. It must be noted that throughout the present research, the plural form of identity is used because identity is inherently shifting rather than stagnant; it derives from the interaction of individual psychology and experience with prevailing social, religious, and cultural norms. Living in different political, class, and cultural contexts and functioning as individuals as well as members of a self-defined and other-defined group, the Jews constructed a variety of identities before the Modern period.

Attempting to define varieties of Jewish identities among the Jewish community of Persia requires confronting certain challenging questions:

- Did the Persian Jews have a singular identity, or were their identifications composed of various identities (e.g., religious identity, and cultural identity)?
- Are the identities of Persian Jews established solely by their self-perception, or does society's perception of them also factor in?
- How did religious conversion, a characteristic of the Safavid and Qajar periods, shape the development of Jewish identities?

The present research seeks to explore the historical circumstances that contributed to the development of Persian Jewish identities within the broader context of the social, political,

and religious history of the Safavids to late Qajar period. Through this historical context, the complex layers of Jewish identities are presented to determine the external and/or internal factors that maintain and shape them. Conversion is one of these factors. Examining conversion not as a tragic occurrence of persecution, but as a key phenomenon in identity formation raises questions of how these identities can and have been preserved in the face of intolerance and "Othering".

State of the Art

Despite being an ancient Jewish diaspora, the Persian Jews remain an understudied part of the Jewish Diaspora. Indeed, compared to their contemporaries in Europe, scholarship on Early Modern Persian Jewry is far more sparse. The statement that Persian Jews are the most researched religious minority in Persia (Sanasarian, p. 44) is therefore far from true, even for significant historical eras like the Early Modern period, and the nineteenth century. This is a crucial gap that must be acknowledged, as it makes it difficult to find varied approaches, different schools of historiography, or even significant debates among the small number of scholars who study Persian Jewry. Indeed, the scarcity of books, letters, and documented evidence of Jewish life is partially responsible for some of the knowledge gaps within the field of Persian Jewish studies. Moreover, the existing sources are not without their complications. For instance, the present research discusses some accounts of foreign travellers visiting or residing in Persia, whose travelogues and letters occasionally discuss the general status of the Jews in the region. While these sources help fill in some of the gaps in Jewish history, their outsider perspective and bias must not be overlooked. Some of these travellers were Christian missionaries visiting Persia, which makes their accounts of the Jews susceptible to bias. Needless to say, the scarcity of reliable, detailed sources remains the biggest challenge of this research.

Generally, the status of the Jews as a religious minority meant they were quite often excluded from their contemporary historical and cultural volumes. This is an issue that Grabbe (2006) has traced back to the ancient Persian period. Persian chronicles were not particularly preoccupied by the circumstances of the religious minorities such as the Jews. This adds another dimension to the challenges of conducting this research. Furthermore, Persia can be considered an anomaly within the context of the Middle East. From the

sixteenth century onwards, Shi'ism became the major religion of Persia, as opposed to the "Orthodox", more mainstream Sunni Islam. Moreover, its major language being Persian restricts the accessibility of certain primary sources to a mass of scholars that are more familiar with Arabic sources. It must be noted that while Hebrew was occasionally used in Rabbinical writings and letters, many of the Persian Jews' significant writings were in Judeo-Persian—that is, Persian transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet. This arguably further isolated the Jews by limiting the readership of their written sources to their own community. However, it may also be indicative of their inclination towards their homeland, which the present research highlights as a key factor in shaping their lives and identities. Nevertheless, the aforementioned factors may have led scholars to regard this Jewish community as too remote and isolated, and therefore difficult to decipher. This supposition raises questions of perhaps broader significance. For instance, if the Persian Jews were indeed isolated from major centres of Jewish life, how did they preserve their Jewish identities? This is another question the research aims to discuss.

Any scholar of Persian Jewish history will quickly reach an inevitable point of frustration with the scarcity of historical evidence pertaining to Jewish existence in the region between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. This absence is often theorised as a consequence of centuries of oppression and persecution during which much of the Jews' homes, lives, and livelihoods were frequently looted and destroyed. It can also be explained as a vital means of dissimulation to which Persian Jews often reverted at times of perceived or actual danger (i.e., mass conversion). Regardless of the premise of the suppositions, the fact remains that focusing on preserved texts and their analysis can shed light on Jewish existence in Persia with concrete evidence from the past few centuries. The present study aims to facilitate this knowledge gap by studying the travelogues and accounts of European travellers, politicians, and missionaries, which can add a more nuanced perspective to the discussion of the region's social and political climate. The few primary sources this study utilises are mainly of this nature. While some of these sources contain brief observations of the status of Jews in Persian society, most of them do not prove to be sufficient overall in offering insights into their communal lives. One of these sources is George Curzon's *Persia and the Persian Question*, written in the 1660s and first published in 1892. Curzon was the viceroy of India and British foreign secretary who published several books on Central and eastern Asia and related foreign policy issues. Another significant account that contributes to the discussion on Persian Jewry is that of Joseph Wolff, a Messianic Jewish missionary who visited Persia in

the nineteenth century. His works *Researches and Missionary Labours* (1837) and *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara in the Years 1843–1845* are precious sources for exploring the case of Mashhadi Jews and their connections with the international trade networks that connected Persia to Herat, India, and Central Asia. Moreover, another significance of these sources is that they provide an outlook of the Mashhadi community both before and after their conversion. Similarly, the research uses the accounts of notable Western statesmen, travellers, and missionaries like Anthony Sherley, John Cartwright, and Raphaël Du Mans to both corroborate certain historical phenomena, and more clearly present the social, religious, and political dynamics of Early Modern Persia.

Scholarly interest in the literary and cultural heritage of Persian Jewry has gradually increased since the first half of the nineteenth century, when some written texts and documents produced by the Persian Jews were first studied by European scholars of Persian philology. However, despite the existence of these significant studies, so many aspects of the general history, culture, and literature of Persian Jews remain shrouded in mystery. It is important to acknowledge that this deficiency in research is not necessarily due to a scarcity of primary sources. Indeed, scholars like Yeroushalmi have spoken of the existence of manuscripts, letters, and other documents dating back to the ninth and tenth century BCE, which are preserved in various archives. Raphael Patai, who will be discussed later, has also utilised such valuable primary sources in his book on the Jewish community of Mashhad in Persia and the aftermath of an event of intense, violent persecution that compelled the community to develop a crypto-Jewish identity; openly professing adherence to Islam, while secretly remaining faithful to their Jewish practices. Accounts of eyewitnesses, marriage and divorce certificates, as well as oral history preserved by the Jewish community all offer different perspectives that shed light on the various dimensions of their intricate identities.

Literary productions are some of the most essential sources on Persian Jewry for the purpose of this research. Not only do they reveal aspects of the religious, cultural, and social history of the community in the desired time periods, but they also provide insight into the identities of the Jews and their interactions and relations with the Persian world. It can be contended that many of these works, written by specific Jewish individuals, may not fully or accurately represent the collective Jewish perspective on life and identities in Persia; to claim otherwise would certainly be a generalisation. Nevertheless, they remain invaluable for corroborating historical events, while also offering a closer perspective on Jewish life.

Except for a few works, little has survived of Persian Jewish history between the beginning of the sixteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries. Given the scarcity of historical documents produced by the Jews, the remaining works that are of utmost importance are mainly Judeo-Persian chronicles. Two key works that contribute to the studies of Persian Jewish history are: Babai ibn Lutf's chronicle *Ketab-e Anusi* (The Book of a Forced Convert)[KA] from the seventeenth century, and Babai ibn Farhad's *Ketab-e Sargozasht-e Kashan dar Bab-e 'Ebri va Guyimi-ye Sani* (The Book of Events in Kashan Concerning the Jews: Their Second Conversion)[KS] from the eighteenth century.

The chronicle of *Ketab-e Anusi* is a major Judeo-Persian source in understanding the social and political status of the Jews during the reign of three Safavid Shahs, Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), Shah Safi (1629-42), and Shah Abbas II (1642-66). It partially covers the history of Persian Jews during this period, describing the sporadic persecution of religious minorities in Persia between 1617 and 1662. Its primary focus is the wave of forced conversion and oppression that swept over most of the region between 1656 and 1662.

Babai ibn Farhad's Judeo-Persian chronicle, on the other hand, describes the troubles of Persian Jews during the late Safavid period, possibly close to the end of Abbas II's rule and the subsequent years of Afghan rule between 1662 and 1731. The author is introduced as Babai ibn Lutf's grandson. His chronicle takes on the task of recording the persecution and conversion of the Jews during this particularly turbulent time period in Persia. The most prominent, and arguably pioneer scholar, who has contributed immensely to the discussion of Persian Jewish literary and cultural heritage by translating and analysing these two sources, is undoubtedly Vera B. Moreen.

Moreen is the author of the first known critical edition of Babai ibn Lutf's chronicle, titled *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of Bābāī Ibn Lutf's Chronicle (1617–1662)*, which was first published in 1986. Although this book was not used in this research due to its unavailability, it is worth mentioning, if only to showcase Moreen's expertise in the field of Judeo-Persian studies. Moreen has published numerous books and articles that examine different aspects of KA in the scope of Persian Jewish history.

Furthermore, KA is extensively discussed in another book by Moreen, titled *Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*, first published in 2000. Her book serves as one of the pillars of the current research, when it comes to examining Jewish literary sources from the Safavid period. This book offers much more than only a curated

selection of translated texts, as anthologies usually do. Its significance lies first and foremost in the fact that it makes the Judeo-Persian chronicle accessible to the majority of readers who are not familiar with this particular Jewish language; it offers a vast body of textual and general historical information necessary for a better understanding of the literary contributions of the Jews in various periods of Persian history. In her article "The Status of Religious Minorities in Safavid Iran 1617-61", Moreen adds a new dimension to the study of ibn Lutf's chronicle; her historical analysis of the Judeo-Persian work aims to determine the status of the Jews under Safavid rule. Moreen's reading of KA is essential for this research as the chronicle indeed provides what many typical historical narratives fail to: the perspective of a religious minority witness to the times.

Similarly, Moreen published a critical edition of Babai ibn Farhad's chronicle in 1990, titled *Iranian Jewry during the Afghan Invasion: The Kitab- i Sar Guzasht- i Kashan of Babai Ibn Farhad (1721–1731)*. This book is a unique edition and historical analysis of KS, and contains a compiled Judeo-persian text based on two main manuscripts: Bibliotheque Nationale no. 1356 and Ben Zvi Institute (Jerusalem) no. 917 (Spicehandler, p. 311). Moreen's analysis highlights the importance of these literary sources for contextualising events in Persian Jewish history. For instance, while analysing ibn Farhad's recount of the siege of Isfahan, Moreen states that the author's description of the plight of the Jews adds a specific valuable element to the historical narrative. This volume currently seems to be out of print. However, Moreen has published a journal article titled "The Kitāb-i Sar Guzasht-i Kāshān of Bābāī ibn Farhād" (1990), in which she gives an extensive overview and brief analysis of the chronicle within its historical context. By reconstructing the historical timeline provided by these two works, she points out an important gap within research on the history of Persian Jewry: KA concludes with the events in 1662, and KS essentially begins approximately around 1721. Therefore, there is a period of about sixty years of which not much information is available about the Jews from outside sources, a somewhat common occurrence in Persian Jewish history.

One of the most important books in the present research is Habib Levy's *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran*. Originally published in three volumes in 1960 (An abridged version of the book was translated into English and published in 1999), this book is the first relatively comprehensive historical chronicle of Persian Jewry. As the name suggests, it recounts the history of the Persian Jews throughout different time periods, starting from ancient Persia all the way to the twentieth century. Its significance for the present

research lies in its contextualisation of Jewish life within the broader perspective of social, religious, and political history of the region. Furthermore, Levy takes into consideration the nuances of the general history of each time period. This is particularly useful as it takes into account the influence of external factors on Jewish identities; the social, religious, and political circumstances of the host society is an example of these factors. In the case of Safavid and Qajar periods, the former's religious unification of the land, and restricting the rights of the religious minorities such as Jews, played a key role in shaping their people's perception of these minorities.

A key theme throughout Levy's chronicle is the increase in the prominence and influence of the Muslim clergy during the Safavid and Qajar periods. Since religion became a defining point for the identification of the Shi'i nation state, the clergy and mosque leaders, also known as *mullahs*, would often exert influence over politics and people's lives. Levy emphasises the role of these clergy in inciting anti-Jewish sentiments in their followers, which occasionally resulted in dire situations for the Jewish minority. There are multiple instances of Muslim clergy who exerted influence over the Shahs, especially in the late Safavid period. Consequently, numerous passages recount events of persecution in various forms, such as restricting their economic, social, and political rights, and forced conversion. Another significance of the book lies in the way he incorporates various accounts of travellers who visited Persia throughout history, and more importantly, during the Safavid and Qajar rule, into the historical narrative of the Persian Jews. Taking diverse perspectives under consideration allows for a clearer view of the topic at hand. Although Levy does not delve into the historical development of Persian Jewish identities, this indication highlights the role of the host society in shaping the identities of its Jewish community. His book serves as a solid groundwork for constructing a reliable historical narrative of Jewish life under Safavid and Qajar rule.

Another prominent historian of Persian Jewry whose works both inspired and partly sustained the present research is Daniel Tsadik. In his edited chapter *Identity Among the Jews of Iran*, from Amanat and Vejdani's book *Iran Facing Others*, which was published in 2011, he presents the boundaries of Jewish identities in Persia during various time periods up until the 21th century. While Tsadik does not offer a specific definition of these identities—arguably because there may not be one definitive Jewish identity—he thoroughly analyses various aspects of Persian Jewish identities (e.g., cultural identity, religious identity, social identity). Similar to Moreen, Tsadik uses examples of the works of prominent Jewish

composers such as Shahin and Emrani. He then utilises these sources in an attempt to contextualise certain causes and effects on Jewish identities. For example, in his analysis of the aforementioned Judeo-Persian writers, Tsadik observes that while the distinguishing characteristic of the Jews was decidedly their "Jewishness" (both in their self-perception and the Muslim majority's perception of them), they also had an inclination towards Persian culture and literature, which was evident in their style of composing. He also emphasises the somewhat definitive nature of religious identity in determining an individual's status and identification, which solidified in the Early Modern and well into the late Qajar period. Needless to say, this is a key theme which lays the groundwork for the discussion on the fluidity of Persia Jewish identities in response to the culture and circumstances they were surrounded with.

Tsadik's focal point in many of his works is the major Persian society's approach to the Jews as a religious minority. In his book *Between Foreigners and Shi'is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and its Jewish Minority* (2007), he utilises archival records to trace developments in Jewish life in nineteenth century Persia, addressing a variety of issues in the process; some of these issues include the contrasting accounts regarding the size of the Jewish population in Persia and their relationship with the Muslim majority in both social and political context. He describes how the impurity laws—which prohibited Muslims from associating with religious minorities who were deemed ritually 'unclean'— were occasionally used as a pretext for restricting the Jews' economic prosperity. The Jewish community of Mashhad, for instance, flourished in the eighteenth to early nineteenth century partly due to their established international connections through the trade network that connected the Greater Khorasan to Herat, India, and outer parts of Central Asia. These impurity laws were perhaps part of the measures taken to diminish the community's economic domination, which may have further culminated in the violent episode of mass conversion in 1839.

Tsadik's book also provides a detailed account of instances of mass conversion within the Jewish community and their impact on them. He pieces together some of the possible reasons behind the 1839 episode, which are more or less consistent in many such anti-Jewish cases in the region at that time. Moreover, he poses the question of why the persecutions did not cease despite several interventions from the government. Much like Levy, Tsadik highlights the increased exertion of Shi'i clergy, who were moving beyond religion and expanding to political, social, and economic spheres, particularly between 1884 and 1896. Their competition for power and influence is another factor that affects the lives of religious

minorities such as the Jews during this period. His analysis thus adds further nuance to the discussion of the social and political status of the minority during the nineteenth century.

As previously mentioned, the gap in knowledge about Persian Jews is partially a consequence of the destruction of documents at times of peril, when any evidence alluding to their distinctive Jewishness could prove to be fatal. The process of conversion further complicates this matter; a number of accounts indicate that after converting to Islam, some formerly Jewish communities would burn books, receipts, and any documents that could link them to their past faith. While the lack of sources prevents a full understanding of Persian Jewry, it leaves room for discussions about the processes of conversion and integration in Early Modern Persia.

Mehrdad Amanat's *Jewish Identities in Iran* adds another immensely valuable dimension to the research by examining the roots of conversions of the Jews in the nineteenth century. Amanat traces the trends and patterns of Jewish assimilation and participation in Persian society. Furthermore, his analysis of the interactions between Judaism and Islam provides a fresh perspective on the development of religious identities among the Jews within the context of the Persian world. Although the book mainly focuses on explaining the social and cultural motivations behind the Jews' conversion to Baha'ism from the late nineteenth century onwards, his argument that these conversions were a means for the Jews' construction of an autonomous self highlights the intricacy of Jewish identities and the distinct way in which the community perceived itself, navigating the calamities of a religious minority in Persia; these are especially relevant to the present discussion on the role of conversions in shaping Persian Jewish identities.

This thesis seeks to address the intricacies of Jewish identity as both a collective self-perception, defined by shared customs and religious practices, and a reflection of external societal influences. Hilda Nissimi's *The Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis* is an immensely insightful work in this regard. Her examination of the reasons behind the distinctive Jewish identity of the Mashhadi Jews, as well as situating their experience within a broader narrative of Jewish covert defiance and identity perseverance provides a framework for a better comprehension of Early Modern and Modern Jewish identities. Furthermore, her emphasis on communal bond as a cornerstone for the Mashhadis' survival provides a groundwork for the discussion on how the Mashhadis' bond as a community joined in shared values, culture, and dangers helped them devise rituals and traditions that would serve to preserve their stories and identity. She

further explores some of these methods of identity preservation, most importantly emphasising memory transmission as a cornerstone of history construction, which the present research further argues at least partly contributes to shaping Jewish identities through strengthening communal bonds.

Thesis Structure

The present work is divided into three chapters. Chapter One examines the historical evidence of Jewish presence in Early Modern and Modern Persia, which provides the groundwork for a better understanding of the ever relevant topic of Jewish identities. The shifting dynamics of the Safavid dynasty arguably had a significant impact on the development of Jewish identities. Historians such as Habib Levy, Daniel Tsadik, and Mehrdad Amanat each offer a different perspective on the history of Persian Jewry. Despite the occasional discrepancies, these secondary sources are crucial in understanding Jewish life in the broader context of the Safavid and Qajar era. Using Levy's book as a foundation for the historical outline of the Safavid period, this chapter provides the historical context necessary for a profound grasp of the social, religious, and political conditions of this time period, emphasising a shift in the status of religious minorities. Moreover, Moreen's in-depth analysis of Babai ibn Lutf's KA provides more precious insight into the waves of persecution and forced conversion that are, to a certain extent, a characteristic of this era. This is followed by an overview of the transitory reigns that preceded the Qajars, such as the Afghan rulers and the Afsharid. Babai ibn Farhad's chronicle KS, as dissected by Moreen, is used as a case study to estimate the status of the Jews during the turbulent period of Afghan invasions.

The discussion regarding the Qajar period is enriched by Tsadik and Amanat. The latter, in particular, makes the argument that although conversions to Islam during that time are often attributed to economic and social pressure, they did not necessarily guarantee or facilitate the converts' integration into major society (Amanat, p. 2). Rather, at least in the Jews' case, being a *Jadid al-Islam* was often another label and burden they had to bear. Additionally, the chapter attempts to survey prominent instances of forced conversion, most importantly, the Jewish community of Mashhad, a key case study the thesis thoroughly discusses in the next two chapters. Besides Tsadik, Patai's book greatly contributes to the chapter. As previously stated, this book is a valuable asset because it employs the accounts of

two Mashhadi Jews. Ultimately, the chapter seeks to analyse the shifting historical dynamics of the late Qajar period which ultimately witnessed a gradual improvement in the situation of religious minorities, due to the reforms brought forth by the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11).

Chapter Two aims to delve deeper into the intricacies of Persian Jewish identities, examining how these evolved under shifting external pressures, in particular, conversions. It begins by establishing theoretical foundations of identity, drawing on definitions from sociologists like Milton Gordon, Arnold Dashefsky, and Erik Erikson to outline identity as both a static and dynamic construct. It is important to note that the purpose of this thesis is not to employ theoretical frameworks to shape its discussions and arguments, but rather define them for a better understanding of the boundaries of Jewish identities. The problem with some of the studies concerned with Jewish identity is that the concept of identity is not clearly defined, the question of who and what a Jew is, and its dynamics and implications are not properly explained. While more contemporary studies have aimed to address these definitions and fill in the gaps, another major issue persists; many of these studies tend to focus on American and European Jewry.

Nevertheless, this discussion sets the stage for exploring the status of Persian Jewry as a minority whose identities intersected religion, ethnicity, and cultural assimilation within Persian society. The chapter aims to demonstrate this cultural assimilation by using examples of preserved Judeo-Persian texts by prominent Jewish poets such as Shahin and Emrani, highlighting the fluidity of Persian Jewish identities—rooted in Jewish religious traditions, but not quite untouched by Persian culture and literature. The works of Tsadik and Moreen both contribute to the analysis of Persian influences on the identifications of its Jewish minority, while Amanat's book provides a perspective on how these identifications shifted as a result of conversion. Moreover, taking on a more comparative approach, this chapter attempts to explore the parallels between Mashhadi Jews and other crypto-faith communities like the Iberian conversos. The Mashhadi Jews are presented as a unique case study of how Jewish identities navigate the dynamics of cultural assimilation and internal cohesion, to which Nissimi's work greatly contributes. This comparative approach can provide insights into the development of the identities of these minority groups through examining the mechanisms they employ to preserve their identities after conversion to the majority faith, such as secretly adhering to their former religion. Most importantly, it highlights the emergence of crypto-Jewish identities as a significant demonstration of these Jewish

communities' endurance and internal cohesion, which the next chapter aims to argue are interrelated.

Chapter Three seeks to examine memory transmission as a significant phenomenon in identity preservation among the Mashhadi Jews, exploring the mechanisms by which they preserved their lived experiences, customs, and community during the decades they spent as crypto-Jews. It begins by establishing the definition of "collective memory", as proposed by Halbwachs, emphasising its importance in a case like the Mashhadis whose history is immensely intertwined with memory, memory that both formed and was formed by the community. In other words, the chapter argues that memory transmission strengthened the Mashhadis' communal bonds, which, in turn, greatly shaped their unique identity. Then a distinction is made between "communicative memory" and "cultural memory", which only serves to contextualise the transmission of oral traditions and religious practices as mechanisms for identity preservation. Patai's records of Mashhadi oral traditions further enrich this discussion. The accounts present a closer look into the community's shared values, customs, and fears, both before and after their conversion, which the chapter aims to argue strengthened their sense of community.

Chapter 1 - The Development of Jewish Communities in Persia from Their Earliest Presence in the Eighth Century BCE to the Nineteenth Century

1.1. A Glimpse into pre-Modern Persian Jewish History

The history of the Jews of Persia is an important chapter in Jewish history, yet it has remained rather obscure, many gaps left unfilled and questions left unanswered.

It is generally believed that the first Jews who settled in Persia were those held captive at Babylon alon who were liberated by Cyrus the Great and simply accompanied his army to Persia, instead of returning to their homeland, and that prior to this event, no Jew had set foot in Persia. However, this assumption is usually based on indisputable Biblical documentations that include detailed recounting of the relationship between the Jews and the Persian Empire. While it is difficult to give a definitive, documented answer to this question, it is believed that the first wave of Jewish migrants arrived in Persia following the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. The invasion of the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem by Babylonians in 586 BCE were followed by forced exile, commonly known as the Babylonian captivity, which lasted half a century. This period marks the beginning of what came to be known as the Jewish Diaspora. Some Jews interpreted this course of events as a divine punishment for failing to stay true to their pact with Moses (Amanat, 2011, p. 18).

The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE was a major turning point and highly significant in Jewish history. After conquering Babylon, Cyrus allowed the restoration of temples and cult statues. There are two passages in the Book of Ezra that claim Cyrus issued a decree with regard to Jerusalem and the Jews specifically. Ezra 1.2-4 states that Cyrus issued the edict sanctioning the reconstruction of the ruins of the Temple, allowing the Jews to return to Palestine. The authenticity of this edict, however, has often been questioned and disputed, as many scholars associate it with the possible propaganda of the Cyrus Cylinder, an ancient clay cylinder containing an Achaemenid royal inscription praising the Achaemenid ruler.

According to Grabbe (2006), although at first glance the Cylinder seems to substantiate the existence of a specific decree on behalf of the exiled Jews, it is more likely for the decree to have been a general policy towards all ethnic groups in captivity, rather than one on behalf of a specific ethnic minority. In any case, Cyrus is highly regarded in the Hebrew Bible. He is the only Gentile, non-Jewish ruler referred to as "the Lord's anointed", a title rarely given to non-Israelites (Amanat, 2011, p. 18). The Temple was rebuilt after Cyrus' death, details of which cannot be traced back in any reliable sources. The only chronological information available on the matter is Ezra 6.15, which claims the Temple was restored in five years, from the second to sixth year of Darius I (521 - 516 BCE), with no basis in any other known source (Grabbe, p. 284). Under the rule of Achaemenids, many liberated Jews chose to remain in Mesopotamia-Babylonia, as well as what is today western Iran, subsequently contributing to the formation of Talmudic law. Encounters between Jews and Persians influenced certain eschatological beliefs in Judaism (Amanat, 2011).

This period of coexistence and toleration became more apparent under the reign of Parthians, when the atmosphere in the neighbouring Roman Empire was all but oppressive towards the Jews. The lenient policies of the Parthians are believed to have persuaded some to migrate to Persia. The establishment of the position of the Exilarch in 70 CE under king Vologeses I (51-77 CE) allowed the Jews to enjoy a form of self-governance with autonomous political, administrative, and juridical powers.

Under Sasanian rule, Jews gradually lost the political autonomy they had gained under the rule of the Parthians. The Sasanian kings, as protectors and promoters of the Zoroastrian religion, minimised the freedom that non-Zoroastrians had previously possessed. Zoroastrian priests occasionally seized this opportunity to provoke their followers to destroy Jewish places of worship and appealed to local politicians to ban the practise of Jewish rituals. The Jewish community, however, managed to thrive nonetheless, thanks to their extensive economic networks, which were instrumental in the Silk Road trade operations. As early as the Parthian Era, Jews played an important part in the Silk Road trades from China to the Roman Empire. Their position as intermediaries was facilitated by their status as *dhimmis*, because it allowed them to travel more freely in certain regions than Muslims, which gave them a unique advantage in maintaining trade links and transactions. This connection with the "centre of the world" (Frankopan, 2016), however, was not without its challenges. Exchanges of faiths, ideas, and religion had always been a characteristic of the Silk Road, but they occasionally disputed with one another as well. The strife for spiritual dominion, which had

long marked the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, grew more intense. Religious leaders strove to draw the boundaries between the two; the Jews legislated against intermarriage[3] while the Christians moved Easter to another date to avoid coinciding with the Jewish Passover. As a result, Frankopan notes a negative shift in Jewish attitudes towards Christianity in Persia.

Once the Jews actively showed their support for Sasanian military efforts during the Roman-Persian war, the Persian government realised that they posed no threat to the Sasanians and that their commercial expertise was an invaluable asset to the prosperity of the royal court. Jewish scholarship gradually began to thrive under later Sasanian kings (van Gorder, 2010). The Jews were an active part of Persia's diverse religious landscape and became an integral part of the religious equilibrium that preserved the social fabric of the Sasanian empire, an equilibrium that drastically shifted after the Arab invasion, as an entirely new set of regulations began to be applied to non-Muslims (Amanat, 2011).

By the seventh century BCE, the dissatisfaction with archaic, exceedingly constrictive, and corrupt Sasanian social structure, which had deepened the gap between the social classes, drove many to welcome the Arab armies with open arms. Jews, like many other Persians, initially saw hope in the Arab armies' promises of social equality. After Islamic rule was established in Persia, it became clear that conformity to the new circumstances would be accompanied by certain restrictions in the social and cultural participations of non-Muslims. Jews, along with Christians and Zoroastrians, were assigned the status of *Dhimmis*, inferior in status to Muslim subjects of the Islamic empire. It is important to note that Jews, along with Christians and Zoroastrians, were recognised as 'People of the Book' (*Ahl al-kitāb*), which provided them with certain measures of protection, resulting in overall better conditions than that of the Jews of pre-modern Europe. While they were allowed to continue to practise their religion, the Jews, as well as other *dhimmis* were obligated to pay a *jizya* or tax poll. Their non-Muslim status often relegated them to second-class citizens, and they had to submit to certain social and legal disabilities, such as exclusion from military service, and in many cases wearing items of clothing that identified them as Jews. On the other hand, their status as non-Muslims turned out to be an economic opportunity for them. As Islamic law prohibited certain activities such as money-lending and handling gold and silver, Jewish bankers and goldsmiths took over these professions and filled in vital gaps within the economy.

[3] See: Codex Theodosianus, 16.7, p. 466; 16.8, pp. 467–8.

Apart from trade, some Persian Jews were involved in various craftsmanship. They were highly skilled goldsmiths, silversmiths, and silk weavers, crucial to textile and carpet manufacturing industries. Some merchants even managed to preserve their integral role in later periods when the Jews' social status declined in Persian society under Islamic rule (Amanat, 2010). Highly skilled as musicians and entertainers, the Jews played an important role in preserving and advancing the performing arts in Persia, especially music and theatre. Their significance became particularly apparent in the periods of growing social pressure from the Muslim clergies, condemning an increasingly Muslim society from partaking in any musical performances.

The Jewish community's contributions to the development and preservation of the Persian language and literature are also noteworthy, particularly through the medium of Judeo-Persian—Persian written with the Hebrew alphabet. The literary work of Jewish poets, mystics, and literary figures, who often reflected on their experiences as a community, is representative of the diversity within Persia's cultural environment. Judeo-Persian also contributed to the preservation and development of the middle Persian vernacular during the two centuries following the Arab invasion, which was particularly significant for the period of transition from middle to modern Persian.

In the area of science and scholarship during the Islamic period, the Jews' knowledge of Hebrew granted them a position of privilege, giving them access to esoteric knowledge in fields such as holy scripture, medicine, and astrology. Jewish physicians were especially prominent, often serving in the royal court, and their contributions to the development of Galenic and Indo-Persian medicine is noteworthy. Jewish scholars also played an important part in the intellectual exchanges that helped shape Western science and philosophy. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Jewish translators assisted in preserving and disseminating Perso-Islamic knowledge, translating works from Arabic and Persian into Hebrew and Latin. These translations were instrumental in transmitting scientific and philosophical ideas from the Islamic world to Europe (Amanat, 2011, p. 23)

The deterioration of Arab rule over Persia was followed by the brief rise of the Saffarids to power, along with a number of other smaller dynasties such as the Samanids and the Ghaznavians. This era was reversed with the invasion of the Seljuk Turks, who emerged from Central Asia and conquered Isfahan in 1051. Having already converted to Sunnism, their participation in wars against the Byzantine and Armenian empires made them prone to

persecute Christians. Their empire, which spanned from the borders of China to the Mediterranean shores, was accompanied with restrictions for religious minorities, primarily Jews and Christians. The conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is in this period only served to intensify their intolerance. They implemented a new feudal system, only leasing to wealthy Sunnis, thus excluding religious minorities from partaking in agriculture.

This period saw the revival of the Pact of Umar (known as *shurut*), a set of regulations that dictated the treatment of non-Muslim subjects living under Islamic rule. The Seljuks, before they managed to vanquish all of Persia, proclaimed new edicts concerning non-Muslims. Wearing clothing items that identified them as Jews or Christians became mandatory. In 1091, they went as far as commanding Jewish women to wear a shoe of a different colour on each foot. Some members of these religious communities converted to Islam to avoid such derogatory measures (Levy, p. 225).

The Mongol invasion of Persia, started by Genghiz Khan in 1219, was one of the most catastrophic events in Persian history. It was triggered by the execution of a Mongol trade mission at the hands of the Khwarazmshah Muhammad II, prompting a devastating retaliatory campaign. All religions were initially considered equal under Mongol rule, and they abolished the *dhimmi* status. During the early Ilkhanid period, some Jews were employed in administrative and government positions. Notably, under Arghun Khan's rule, the Jewish physician Sa'd al-Dawlah (d. 1291) rose to the position of vizier, granting the Jewish community a temporary reprieve from persecution. During his tenure, Sa'd al-Dawlah appointed several Jewish officials to important government positions, which allowed the Jews to exert some influence in state affairs. However, this brief period of prosperity led to some resentment among the Muslim population, and after Arghun died from a fatal illness, Sa'd al-Dawlah was accused of having inflicted the sickness, and was promptly assassinated. Anti-Jewish riots erupted in major cities like Tabriz and Baghdad, leading to widespread killings and forced conversions. The contemporary Christian historian Bar Hebraeus wrote that of the violence against the Jews in this period "neither tongue can utter, nor the pen write down" (Littman, 1979, p. 3).

The situation further deteriorated under Ghazan Khan, who converted to Islam in 1295 and imposed harsh policies against religious minorities, including the Jews. Ghazan's reign saw the destruction of synagogues and a general decline in the protection previously afforded to Jewish communities. Religious intolerance became more widespread, with many Jews

forced to convert to Islam or face severe persecution. One convert in particular, Rashid al-Din Hamadani, was noteworthy. A physician, historian, and politician, his conversion to Islam helped him advance his career at the court of Öljeitü, Ghazan Khan's successor. However, after Öljeitü fell ill and died, Rashid al-Din was executed in 1318 on false accusations of poisoning the king, and his head was paraded around town for several days, under a banner that announced him as 'the infidel Jew' (Levy, p. 242). Much like the case of Sa'd al-Dawlah, Rashid al-Din's execution was followed by a period of forced conversions that befell even some prominent Jewish scholars. His case is an instance of the drastic difference between the treatment of Jewish converts to Islam in Persia and those in many other Muslim regions, where the process of assimilation for Jewish converts was smoother. Whereas in Persia, Jewish converts were more likely to be stigmatised because of their Jewish background through many generations (Lewis, 1984, p. 101).

The relative tolerance and prosperity of the early Mongol period for religious minorities were replaced by further systemic discrimination after the rise of the Timurids in 1383. Timur unleashed a devastating campaign that left the kingdom in a wreckage, slaughtering countless people. He envisioned himself as a protector of Sunni Islam, thus the Jews as well as other non-Muslims were frequently targets of ethnic cleansing (van Gorder, 2010, p. 57). Habib Levy estimates that around 350,000 Persian Jews were either killed, forced to convert to Islam, or fled Persia under Timur's rule (Levy, p. 255).

1.2. The Safavid Dynasty (1501 - 1722)

The Safavid Period (1501-1722), which lasted for over two centuries, is viewed as a threshold in the modern history of Persia in various ways, particularly in the realms of economy, society, and religion. According to Amanat (2011), it was during this period that the notions of Persian identity and Persia as a political entity began to actualise. Sovereigns of Turkish origin with roots in Azeri culture, the Safavids preserved much of the cultural, ethnic, and religious aspects of the previous centuries, the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods in particular, while adding new elements to the cultural and ethnic diversity, the most enduring of which is the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of the state (van Gorder, 2011).

During this time, Persia experienced occasional periods of tolerance and economic prosperity, although historians like Habib Levy view the general image of Safavids as a glorious era in Persian history as an illusion, pointing to extreme corruption within the state as

a major characteristic of this historical period. Levy claims the intriguing exterior of the Safavids has misled some historians to characterise them as heralds of national unity, describing the architecture, fine arts, and craftsmanship, legacies of the Safavid period, as "the commotion and clamour they created while establishing a religious foundation in Persia" (Levy, 1999, p. 259). The Safavids era, accompanied by Shi'i indoctrination of the Sunni population, brought about an incursion of sporadic persecutions of non-Muslims, including the Jews, and forceful attempts to convert them to Shi'ism. As Mehrdad Amanat puts it, the "religious ambiguity" of the Mongol period was succeeded by widespread pressures and persuasions towards conformity as a way of embodying a form of "Imperial identity" (Amanat, 2010, p. 37).

When Ismail (1501-24), the founder of the Safavids, rose to power in Ardabil, the majority of Persia was governed by Turkic-origin governors along feudal lines. The absence of a strong central authority and government had caused the state's affairs to deteriorate. Although Sunni Islam was the dominant religion among Persians at the time, the Caliph in Baghdad, a key figure for Muslims in the East, was rapidly losing influence. Ismail, who adopted the name 'Safavi' from his grandfather, Safi al-Din of Ardabil, a Shafi'i cleric, led his soldiers, famously known as *Qizilbash* and raised the flag of Shi'ism in defiance of the Caliph's religious authority, eventually occupying Baghdad after a series of rapid conquests (van Gorder, p. 58). By 1510, Shah Ismail ruled over the most immense territory the realm ever possessed in the Safavid era (Moreen, 2017).

In the introduction of his book *The Life of Shah Abbas I*, Nasrollah Falsafi (1968), a modern Persian historian, claims it would be a biassed assumption to presume that Shah Ismail and his supporters were motivated by nationalism and the desire to restore the former power and greatness of Persia and create a unified state based on Persian nationalism, emphasising instead the Shi'i faith as the main motivator of the Safavid uprising. Moreover, Levy states religious unity, rather than patriotism, as the main factor that motivated the Safavids to step forward, and the circulation and acceptance of the Shi'i faith as the official religion of the state as the fuel that rallied the faction against the Sunni rulers (Levy, 1999, p. 260). Shah Ismail considered himself *sayyid* from his father's side, an honorific title that labels an individual as an alleged descendant of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Falsafi characterises Ismail as someone with "no misgivings about resorting to bloodshed and massacre in attaining his goals", viewing it as a factor in his accomplishment of promoting Shi'ism and forming a centralised political administration in Persia based on a common

religion (Falsafi, 1968, p. vi). Shi'ism had a long presence and was deeply rooted in Persia prior to the rise of the Safavids, and there had been interchanges between Persian Sunnis and Shi'is since the early Mongol period. But the Safavids had a distinct agenda in provoking the drastic polarisation of the two sects, and establishing a predominantly Shi'i support base to ensure their survival was part of their political strategy (Amanat, 2011, p. 38).

The Safavids' rise to power coincided with highly important movements in world history, for instance the spread of the Inquisition, which marked a period of brutal killings and torture of the direct opponents of the Catholic church, namely the Jews and Muslims. Another important historical progression during this period was the emergence of the Ottomans in Turkey as a force to be reckoned with in the Islamic world. Following the decline of the Caliphate in Baghdad, the great Ottomans, a predominantly Sunni Muslim empire, became the unrivalled seat of religious authority in the Islamic world. The Ottomans presence in Persian borders greatly influenced the Safavids, and the relations between the two became strained following the coronation of Shah Ismail I and the declaration of Shi'ism as the official state religion. Some European Jews, desperate by the persecutions of the Spanish Inquisition, sought asylum in Ottoman Turkey. Sultan Muhammad II famously said: "Ferdinand [the king of Spain] has impoverished his own country and enriched mine." Some historians, including Levy, theorise that this may be one of the reasons for the increase in the persecution of the Jews. By establishing firm boundaries between Sunni and Shi'i Islam, condemning the former, and persecuting the Jewish subjects that were welcomed and integrated in Ottoman Turkey, the Safavids made a clear stance against their rival empire. A rivalry that further escalated when Sultan Selim (1512-1520) attacked Persia and, in an attempt that became known as "the Battle of Chaldiran", defeated Shah Ismail's army, conquering the city of Tabriz. The Safavids' ongoing conflict with the Sunni Ottomans most likely further set the stage for the Shi'itisation of Persia.

While it is difficult to determine approximately when the Sunni population of Persia became entirely Shi'a, many historical sources agree that a great number of Sunnis converted to Shi'ism as early as the reign of Shah Ismail I, who continued to rule over Persia for nearly a quarter century. It was during the reign of his successors Shah Tahmasp I (1524-76), and Mohammad Khodabandah (1578-81) that the Shi'a faith became ingrained in the majority of the Persian population through persistent efforts of re-education enforced by the office of the *sadarat*, chief religious officials in Persia.

The question of religious unity became of utmost importance during the reign of Shah Tehmasp, Ismail's successor, who was enthroned at the age of ten, ruling over Persia for forty two years until 1576. It was during the reign of Shah Tahmasp that Europeans, alarmed by the rapid expansion of the Ottoman Empire, began to send ambassadors and agents to Persia. Anthony Jenkinson was the first English agent to enter the Safavids court under the guise of an ambassador, sent by Queen Elizabeth of England along with a substantial gift for the Shah. Before long, others followed, disguising themselves as ambassadors, representatives, missionaries, and even teachers, seeking to incite the Safavid court against the Ottomans, thus limiting the threat of Islamic government spreading to Christian Europe (Iqbal, Tarikh-e Iran, p. 686). In a time when commerce between the East and the West was growing, it became increasingly crucial for Europeans to have as much influence as possible in Persia, for it was considered a key player in the establishment of this relationship.

Shah Abbas I (1588-1629), the fifth Safavid king, commonly known as Abbas the Great, is regarded by many as the greatest of the Safavids and one of the most significant rulers in Persian history. He reportedly often visited the market while in disguise in order to learn what his subjects truly thought and said about him. Shah Abbas is well known for actively encouraging interactions with the Western world, as well as using the help of his recruited Armenian artisans to renovate his capital in Isfahan into one of the most magnificent capital cities in world history. His focus, however, was primarily dedicated to modernising his military with gunpowder and cannons. According to van Gorder, it was not uncommon to see a myriad of foreign merchants "lobbying for favours and lucrative contracts" at Shah Abbas' court (van Gorder, 2010, p. 58).

His reign has been vastly documented in various sources, from court chronicles written in Persian, to several descriptive European travelogues, as well as a considerable number of commercial, diplomatic, and religious documentations by European visitors and residents. Some of these accounts may have played a significant role in constructing the image, or rather persona, that Shah Abbas' name brings forth to the modern mind, typically that of s wise and relatively progressive ruler with a slight flaw of blinding and murdering his male offspring. This persona was in part influenced by his contemporary European visitors who, allured by his hospitality and apparent fondness for Christianity, portrayed him as an unwavering and dynamic leader with a charming personality, a tolerant visionary. Although it must be noted that they did in fact draw attention to the bloody beginnings of Abbas' reign as well as his "mercurial demeanour", as Rudi Matthee (2011, p. 184) describes it.

Anthony Sherley, the famed English military officer and diplomat who visited Persia in 1598-9 and subsequently became personally acquainted with Shah Abbas, characterised him as "loyal, wise, valiant, liberal, temperate, merciful, and an exceeding lover of justice". This testimony, however, was accompanied by insisting that the Shah ruled "through general love and awful terror" (Sherley, 1613, p. 29). John Cartwright, an English preacher who visited Persia a few years after Sherley, observed that "Abbas had come to power amid the shedding of much blood", but concluded that at present he was "exceedingly beloved and honoured by his subjects, in so much that when they will confirm anything by solemn oaths, they will swear by the head of Abbas the king" (Cartwright, 1611, p. 64).

Persian court chronicles, on the other hand, compelled by entirely different matters and agendas, construct a somewhat different image of Shah Abbas. According to Matthee (2011), while European travellers were trying in their documentations to describe a foreign ruler in a fathomable manner to their fellow Westerners, some Persian authors, seeking to legitimise Safavid rule in a way that appealed to their patrons and readers, often paid little attention to the economic and administrative policies, for instance the renovation of Isfahan. While they undoubtedly praised the Shah for his sensibility and love of justice, they mainly focused on his military exploits and his many campaigns. Much like his predecessor, Shah Ismail I, Shah Abbas, as portrayed in Persian chronicles, was a warlord first and foremost, governing in a ferocious environment with an iron fist.

Over time, especially within a few years after the monarch's death in 1629, the ferocity and cruelty in Shah Abbas' image was relegated to the background, overpowered by the part that personified him as a benevolent, exuberant leader, determined to create a magnificent, centralised empire, his reign fondly remembered in writing as a golden age of righteous governance. This image was further highlighted after the sanguinary purge endeavoured by his successor Shah Safi (1629-42), who murdered real and presumed rivals alike. The fact that the Safavid dynasty began to decline after subsequent kings gradually lost their grip on power and, in the words of Matthee, "allowed palace eunuchs and doctrinaire clerical forces to leave their mark on state policy" (p. 185).

Persia's transition to Shi'a Islam was in part accomplished by undisputed military force. The Safavids took many unsuccessful measures to gain control of Sunni Muslim cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, while also importing Shi'ite clergy from Syria and Lebanon to proselytise common Persian Sunni Muslims. Simultaneously, the support of state political

authority significantly transformed Shi'ism. Upon becoming the state religion, Shi'ism evolved new theological perspectives on the relationship between religion and society. Although the Safavids were ultimately unable to maintain their political power, growing increasingly weaker, the mark they left on Persian religious culture was indelible.

Throughout the Safavids reign, "Faith became more totalitarian, and politics more ideological", according to van Gorder, who describes the Safavid period as an era of religious intolerance "in the name of civic uniformity" as a form of expressing patriotism (van Gorder, 2011, p. 59). The Safavids began to bestow significant power and privilege upon the religious clergy, which gave them authority to enforce discriminatory policies against the religious minorities throughout the kingdom (Levy, 1999, p. 266).

Jews Under Safavid Rule

Despite the massacres that occurred during the Mongol invasion and the Timurid era, the writings of European travellers point to the existence of a large Jewish population in Persia prior to the Safavid dynasty. With Persia at war with Ottoman Turkey, Jews, as well as other religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, found themselves in a rapidly deteriorating position. Safavids persecuted and killed Sunnis while Christians were protected by them, and the Ottomans on the other hand killed Shi'is, but protected the Jews who had seeked refuge in Turkey from the persecutions of Inquisition in Europe. Some historians suggest that the European agents in the Safavid court who were opposed to the Ottomans may have used this opportunity to propagate anti-Jewish ideas and rumours, such as claims that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, and killed non-Jewish children (Levy, p. 269). As a result of widespread antisemitic propaganda by European agents as well as the Shi'ite clergy, the idea that the Jews were ritually 'unclean' or *najis* became widespread during this period, further creating a barrier between them and non-Jewish Persians. It is important to note, however, that other religious minorities were also harrassed on account of being 'unclean'. In one account, the Shah ordered someone to follow Anthony Jenkinson, the British traveller, around with a basket of sand in order to cover his steps while he passed through the palace grounds because his footprints were deemed the markings of a filthy infidel (Savory, 2003, p. 441). However, it cannot be said that the Shi'ite belief about the 'impurity' of the Jews was the main reason for their persecutions, because although these persecutions seem to have had

religious motives, references to 'impurity' in *Abbasnameh*, the Safavid chronicle, do not disclose the economic considerations. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the nature of such discriminations from the existing sources. However, it must be noted that Zoroastrians, who were also labelled as *najis*, did not receive the same treatment as, for instance, the Jews of Isfahan (Abisaab, p. 104).

Categorised as 'impure' heretics, many Persian Jews chose to leave Persia at this time, relocating to the Ottoman Empire where they were welcomed with open arms. Those who remained, however, were subjected to some of the most severe codes of conduct put in place in the Muslim world against non-Muslims. The Jews were segregated and forced to live in ghettos, and had to wear a badge of shame over their clothes while in public (Kazemi, 1985, p. 84). Levy's account claims that in 1642, a series of outlandish edicts were issued which demanded the Jews not to wear matching shoes, fine clothes or waist sashes; They were not allowed to walk in the middle of s street or walk past a Muslim, enter a shop and touch the food and other products. Additionally, the edicts demanded that their weddings must be held in secret, and if they were cursed by a Muslim, they must stay quiet (Levy, p. 293-5). Furthermore, when decrees issued by Safavid rulers demanded the Jews' conversion to Islam, these harsh conditions led some Jews to outwardly choose to convert, while secretly remaining true to their faith and religious practices.

The circumstances of Persian Jews under Safavid rule more often than not were dependent on the stance of the king at the time, stances that became generally more orthodox during the latter part of the dynasty. Between his violent attempts at defeating his neighbouring Sunni enemies, mainly the Turkoman tribes Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu, the Uzbeks, and the Ottomans, and having set in motion the mass conversion of the mainly Sunni population to Shi'ism, a process so elaborate and complicated that in reality took considerably longer than his reign (Abisaab, 2004, 80-1), Shah Ismail I indeed had too many preoccupations to pay much attention to the Jewish community of his realm. As previously stated, Shi'itisation was one of the primary means by which he ventured to separate the identity of his empire from that of the Sunni Ottomans. Indeed, there is very little information about Ismail's attitude towards the Jews. Tomé Pires, Portuguese ambassador and apothecary to China, who passed through Persia in 1511-12, remarked, "He [Ismail] reforms our churches, destroys the houses of Moors [possibly Sunnis], and never spares the life of any Jew (Pires, 1944, p. 27). In the 1660s, another traveller, Raphaël du Mans, wrote, "So deep is

his [Ismail's] hate for the Jews that whenever he sees a Jew, he orders to put out his eyes." (du Mans, 1890, p. 274) These two isolated accounts, however, are uncorroborated.

Reliable, verified documentation of the Persian Jews under the Safavids rule begins to appear with the reign of Shah Abbas I. Although Persian historiography was relatively advanced by the Safavid era, it mainly focused on events related to the ruling dynasties and offered little to no insight into the particular subject of religious minorities. Persian Jewish historiography, according to Moreen, also appears to have begun only during the reign of Shah Abbas (Moreen, 2017, p. 1047).

No major antisemitic events have been recorded in the first years of Shah Abbas' reign while he remained at Qazvin, most likely due to the fact that he was still consolidating his power. In the beginning of his reign, Shah Abbas the Great was initially cordial towards the Jews, overlooking religious laws where economic and political considerations were at stake. He encouraged and sponsored Jewish silk manufacturers and merchants with European connections to live and work in Persia. During his Georgia campaign, he allowed the Jews to establish their community in Farahabad, in recognition of their military aid. When the capital of Iran, which had been transferred from its precarious position at Tabriz to Qazvin, was moved to Isfahan, a large Jewish community was also established there (Levy, , p. 263). He is reported to have candidly associated with non-Muslims, sharing meals with them, overlooking the laws that branded them and other non-Muslims as impure, and even engaged in interfaith religious debates. Nevertheless, there were also cases of persecution and forced conversions of the Jews during his reign.

After Isfahan was declared the capital, the persecutions of religious minorities, including the Jews, intensified. Their employment opportunities were severely restricted, forcing many into a state of poverty (Levy, 1999, p. 282). Although not much is known about the economic status of the Jews in Persia during the 17th century, they were reportedly not significantly partaking in the profitable occupations at the time, like the silk trade and money changing, as the former was monopolised by the Armenians and the latter by the Banians. The Jews instead had occupations such as artisans and petty merchants. Therefore, unlike the case of the Armenian Christians, economic envy did not play a significant role in the persecution of the Persian Jews (Moreen, 1981, p. 124).

This made them more susceptible to poverty and hardship as a result of certain sanctions specified for non-Muslims, as indicated in the book *Jamai' al Abbasi* (Abbas'

Comprehensive Volume) written by Sheykh Baba al-Din Mohammad Amili (or Nizam al-Din, according to some scholars). Although the book did not directly call for different treatment towards Jews compared to Christians, Levy claims that in practice, the restrictions were more harshly applied to the Jews. An example specified in the book is the blood money for the murder of a Jew, which was set at an inconsequential sum compared to that of a Christian.

These peculiar edicts have led some historians to believe that state-sponsored conversions to Islam were initially motivated by monetary incentives and subsequently enforced through coercive measures demanding a genuine faith in Shi'ism rather than mere outward compliance. Notably, converts were rewarded and essentially bribed with money, such as the offer of two *tomans*, alongside exemptions from the *jizya* poll tax, enticing many Jews from Isfahan and other regions to convert, at least outwardly, to reap similar benefits.

Additionally, it was during the reign of Shah Abbas that the notorious inheritance law regarding the Jews who had converted to Islam was enacted. According to this law, if a deceased Jew had a relative who had converted to Islam, the deceased's entire estate would go to that relative, whether close or distant. Because of this edict, which remained in place well until 1880, some Jews would—genuinely or outwardly—convert to Islam in order to hold on to their properties, while others whose relationship with Jewish relatives was strained would do so to seek vengeance and claim what property they had for themselves. These severe regulations proclaimed by the mullahs occasionally caused divisions and conflicts within the Jewish community, in some cases the Jews who had newly converted to Islam plotting against their former community in order to prove they were true to their new faith (Levy, 1999, p. 282).

During this time, many Rabbis and Jewish religious leaders turned to more mystical religious practices like Kabbalah[4]. Over time, Kabbalah grew increasingly popular, along with increased longing and anticipation of the Jews for the coming of the Messiah. This, however, sparked widespread antisemitic rumours claiming that the Jews were using Kabbalist practices and books to cast harmful spells against the Shah. Shah Abbas, who according to some sources, firmly believed in witchcraft and magic[5], ordered all the books of *Zohar,* the

[4] Kabbalah is an arcane method, discipline, and school of thought in Jewish mysticism, which serves as the basis for mystical religious interpretations within Judaism. For more information, see Geoffrey W. Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism* (2007).

[5] According to Falsafi, "He [Shah Abbas] believed that sorcery and witchcraft influenced the world. He brought a magician with him from Zanjan to Azerbaijan to use his services in the war against the Turks...Astrologers often predicted the future for the king (p. 345).

fundamental text of Kabbalah, along with other Kabbalist and Hebrew books to be rounded up and destroyed (Levy, p. 283). Although mysticism, mainly in the form of Sufism, was somewhat commonly practised in Safavid Persia, these incidents further deepened the distrust of and discrimination against the Jewish community on the basis of false accusations.

In addition to these persecutions, the Jews faced a dire leadership crisis. The Jewish leader during the Safavid era was called a *nasi*, usually assisted by another rabbi called *dayyan*, and was responsible for collecting and delivering the *jizya* poll tax to local authorities. If the payment was not done on time or the amount was less than what the government council had demanded, the *nasi* was removed from office and usually imprisoned. The "Administration for Taxes on Non-Muslims" operated in Isfahan as part of the state's structure, where one or two Jews were forced to act as informants. The leadership crisis occurred when the official representative of the community, the chief *nasi* of Isfahan, who had been appointed by the exilarch in Baghdad, resigned from his post, thus severing the link connecting the Persian Jewish community and Jews in other countries. Lack of a centralised religious leadership only added to the community's afflictions, forcing each vicinity to make its own determinations.

Levy compares this era of persecution to the Spanish Inquisition, claiming that "under no previous Iranian dynasty had persecution of the Jews been so intense, widespread, and long-lasting." (Levy, 1999, p. 270) Demeaning caps and garments were imposed on the Jews in order for them to be identified as Jewish in public. Hebrew books and synagogues were burned and destroyed, and some Jews were even subjected to bedlam.

As previously mentioned, Jews generally did not partake in profitable occupations in the 17th century once the persecutions and mass conversion began, and had more humble trades, which indicates that the anti-Jewish policies during this period were most likely not sparked by economic envy. In the case of the reign of Shah Abbas II, neither were they planned policies of the Shah, but rather at the whim of his grand vizier, Mohammad Beg, who, although not particularly religious himself, had set his mind on converting all of the infidels in Persia, perhaps in order to make the kingdom more uniform. He offered the Jews the ultimate Hobson's Choice: They either had to be exiled to remote places, or embrace Islam in order to remain in Persia (Moreen, 1981, p. 125). Despite the clergy's self-righteous oppression and pressure from the royal court, a great number of the Jews seem to have taken a third route, that of becoming *anusim* (Hebrew: forced converts), outwardly observing Islam

while inwardly remaining faithful to Judaism, living a dual religious life similar to Crypto-Jews in Europe. Moreen claims this choice may have been made in hopes that circumstances may improve under a new administration and they may once again be granted freedom of religion.

Facing discrimination and misfortune in their daily lives, many Jews began to emigrate in small groups to Afghanistan, Bukhara, Turkistan, India, the Caucasus, and Egypt, among other places (Levy, p. 271).

Babai ibn Lutf's Book of Forced Converts

A crucial, major source for discerning the status of Persian Jews during the reign of Safavids is Babai ibn Lutf's *Ketab-e Anusi* [The Book of Forced Converts] (KA). KA is the first known Judeo-Persian[6] chronicle, it is more than 5,000 couplets long, and it depicts the recurring persecution of Persian Jews between 1617 and 1662. Babai ibn Lutf (d. After 1662) may be the first known historian of Persian Jewry. He resided in Kashan, where he documented the adversities faced by his fellow Jews. Certain revelations in the book, some of which unrelated to the Jews, have been confirmed by other Persian chronicles, namely *Abbas Namah* (the book of Abbas) by Mohammad Tahir Wahid Qazvini, therefore ibn Lutf can be considered a reliable historical source. These revelations indicate that the Persian Jewish community suffered through several waves of prosecution during the Safavid reign in the 17th century. Contents of Ibn Lutf's book span the three reigns of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), and his successors Shah Safi I (1629-42), and Shah Abbas II (1642-66).

Ibn Lutf mentions several antisemitic incidents that happened in the reign of Shah Abbas I. During the period from 1616 to 1619, through the excessive zeal of a Jewish apostate, wearing demeaning headgear became a common form of persecution towards the Jews. Although the Shah did not directly order this offence, he was well aware of it and yet did not take any measures to stop its perpetuation. In fact, when the Jewish community of

[6] Judeo-Persian is Persian written in Hebrew script with a number of linguistic idiosyncrasies. For a general idea of writings in Judeo-Persian over the span of a millennium, see Vera Basch Moreen, *In Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature* (Gorgias Press, 2013).

Farahabad took initiative and murdered the apostate, Shah Abbas forced the community to convert to Islam as a punishment.

Similarly, as previously stated, between 1619 and 1620, the Shah's violent retaliation to the accusations of magic spells being cast against his person by the Jewish community of Isfahan. According to Ibn Lutf, two Jewish factions of the community were at the time involved in a conflict, and the allegations may have been sparked by a Jewish apostate and former head of the Jewish community of Isfahan, seeking to betray his former community. Pietro della Valle, Italian musicologist and author, who visited and resided in Persia from 1617 to 1623 and wrote extensively about his travels in Persia as well as India and Turkey, was an eyewitness to this event and has documented it. Both accounts report that Shah Abbas punished the implicated community by ordering their holy books to be thrown into the Zayandeh river, and consequently forcing them to face his ferocious dogs, giving them the option to either convert to Shi'a Islam or be torn apart by the animals. Della Valle in his letters recounts that a Jew named Mulla Abba refused to comply and chose martyrdom, but the others converted and embraced their new faith out of fear (Vitalone, 2003).

Shah Abbas turned several churches in Georgia to mosques and between 1614 to 1616 CE, forced many Christians and Jews to convert to Islam, but his strategy in policies regarding his non-Muslim subjects was far from predetermined, as he took different measures depending on circumstances and political expediency. For instance, one of his considerations was the political affiliation of the people living along the frontiers of the kingdom. The Shah believed non-Shi'is were more susceptible to sway towards and side with the Ottomans, citing this view as a reason for relocating Jews as well as Armenian Christians and Sunni Muslims from Georgia, where their communities fell under Ottoman control at the time, to Mazandaran (Abisaab, 2004, p. 63).

Nevertheless, Ibn Lutf generally praised Shah Abbas I and, like many of his contemporaries, deemed him a magnificent king. His records include two events, most likely not much more than legendary stories, in which the Shah showed mercy and grace towards the Jews. One is the claim that Shah Abbas refurbished the town of Farahabad for the Jews, and the other recounts an apparently mystical experience at the tomb of Sarah bath Asher, which led the Shah to order the removal of the demeaning headgear for the Jews (Moreen, 1981, p. 124).

Although there is no information regarding the number of Jews who may have converted to Islam during his reign, Shah Safi I does not seem to have harboured any animosity towards the Jews. In *Ketab-e Anusi*, Ibn Lutf states that the Shah restored the Jews' religious freedom not long after coming to power. This tolerant atmosphere was all but temporary, as when the reign of Shah Abbas II began, Persian Jews as well as Christians were violently persecuted at the instigation of Mohammad Beg, the Grand Vizier (d. 1674).

Mohammad Beg was a Muslim of Armenian origin who served as the grand vizier of Shah Abbas II from 1654 to 1661. His office has been commonly associated with a period marked by forced conversions to Islam and the persecution of Persian Jews and Armenians in Isfahan and other regions of the empire beginning in 1656 until 1662. This topic has been thoroughly examined by various historians, who offer different perspectives that must be considered. Erza Spicehandler (1975) suggests that a decline in favourable political relations with European powers, following the weakening of the Ottoman threat are what resulted in a zealous policy of minority persecution. However, this interpretation raises several unresolved questions. For instance, while the Shahs permitted existing Christian European missions in Persia to operate without restrictions, the rationale behind associating Persian Jews with European interests remains unclear. Abisaab (2004) suggests that the answer likely lies within the internal dynamics of the empire during this period and the concerns of the central bureaucracy.

Persian Jewish and Christian European sources present differing accounts regarding the key architect of the policies of suppression and forced conversion. Persian Jewish sources primarily attribute responsibility to Mohammad Beg, viewing the Shah as only indirectly involved in the persecution. Conversely, Moreen (1981a) contends that Mohammad Beg was indeed the principal architect of these policies. Rudi Matthee (1991), however, presents a different perspective, asserting that it was Khalifa Sultan, the grand vizier of Shah Abbas I, rather than Mohammad Beg, who instigated this anti-Jewish campaign over a relatively brief period. This campaign exhibited characteristics reminiscent of ritual cleansing, reflecting a desire for purification by an administrator eager to establish his credentials upon assuming office. Sources suggest that Khalifa Sultan endorsed such a policy, which aligned with the interests of various courtiers and the grand vizier. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the anti-Jewish and anti-Armenian measures were predominantly driven by clerical animosity (Abisaab, 2004).

1.3. Babai ibn Farhad's Accounts of Kashan

By the early eighteenth century, due to foreign and internal forces, the decline of the Safavid dynasty had become evident even before the reign of Shah Sultan Hoseyn, its last true representative. Allowing state power and policies to be influenced by eunuchs and the clergy in his court, Sultan Hoseyn not only embodied the flaws of his predecessors, but also contributed to them. In 1709, the Qilzay Afghanis vanquished Qandahar. Motivated by the feeble response from the Safavid Shah, the Afghanis, led by Mahmud Hotak, ultimately conquered the Safavids in the Battle of Gulnabad and besieged the city of Isfahan. Following a devastating famine that went on for seven months, the siege ended in October 1722, with Shah Sultan Hoseyn himself willingly handing over the Persian crown to Hotak, although the entirety of the kingdom remained unconquered (Moreen, 2017, p. 1050).

Between simultaneous attacks by the Ottomans and the Tsarist Russians, and the internal struggle for power and the crown by various pretenders, it was a low point in Persian history and a turbulent era for the majority of the Persians, including the Jews.

Kitab-i Sarguzasht-i Kashan dar bab-i Ibri va Guyimyi Sani (The Book of Events in Kashan Concerning the Jews and their Second Conversion) (KS), is a Judeo-Persian chronicle of the historical period following the decline of the Safavid Empire, the Afghan invasion of 1722, until the expulsion of the Afghanis in 1731, right before the tumultuous reign of Nader Shah of the Afsharid dynasty, which recounts many of the Jews' trials and brief apostasy during this period. Although KS mirrors Ibn Lutf's chronicle KA, it is not a continuation of the latter. The book, a brief chronicle of 1309 verses, mainly focuses on depicting the struggles of the Jews of Kashan. Before delving into the contents of the chronicles, a brief overview of this turbulent historical period is needed.

During the brief reign of Ashraf (1725-1730), Mahmud Hotak's successor, the task of conquering the entire Persian kingdom became all the more difficult, giving the Russians under the rule of Tsar Peter the Great, as well as the Ottomans led by Sultan Ahmed III an ample opportunity to invade Persia, claiming various territories in the north and northwest. Moreover, the aforementioned pretenders to the throne managed to mobilise parts of the Persian population against the Afghanis, forcing them to face all opponents at once on at least three fronts. The only legitimate claim to the Safavid throne was that of Prince Tahmasp II,

who after escaping from the siege of Isfahan, declared himself the Shah in 1722. He was able to successfully challenge the Afghanis, even while they were at the height of their power, thanks to the cunning military leadership of general Tahmasp Quli Khan, who would himself subsequently claim the throne under the name of Nader Shah (Moreen, p. 145).

Despite the deplorable conditions Persia found itself in during the brief reigns of the two Afghan rulers, their appearance seems to have improved the state of most religious minorities, including the Jews. This turn of events was probably more politically motivated rather than an indication of the Afghani invaders' Sunni backgrounds. As Moreen points out, the Afghani army's humble size may have led them to turn to the non-Shi'i part of the Persian population, namely the Christians—Armenians and international trade merchants—and the Jews. Shah Ashraf, Mahmud's successor, published a well-known edict throughout the realm in which he ranked the population of Persia as follows: 1. Ghilzay Afghanis, 2. Armenians, 3. Dargazins, 4. Multani Indians, 5. Zoroastrians, 6. Jews, and 7. Shi'i Persians[7].

Moreen believes that this ranking represents the order in which Ashraf considered the groups useful in establishing his power, rather than an indication of his understanding and evaluation of each faith. Religious minorities nevertheless enjoyed this fleeting change in the state policies, even at the expense of the Shi'i population. Babai Ibn Farhad has praised both Afghani rulers in KS, particularly Ashraf (Moreen, 1985, p. 145-6), although he also acknowledges the consequences of their onslaught in pursuit of control over the realm.

Regarding the historical accuracy of KS, as previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, Moreen reports that it has proven to be difficult to evaluate the merit of Ibn Farhad's chronicles based on his knowledge of non-Jewish related events. While his grasp of outside events is understandably rather lacklustre, his chronicle makes up for it with detailed accounts of the internal affairs of numerous Jewish communities in Persia, notably his hometown, Kashan (Moreen, 1985, p. 147).

While the main timeline of the KS chronicle starts in 1721, the first incident depicted by Ibn Farhad dates back to 1694. It describes the punishment carried out on some Jews in Kashan for having desecrated the 21st night of Ramadan, the night of Ali's death, which the Shi'is considered sacred. The Jews, who had been drinking and feasting during a holy Muslim month characterised by fasting during daytime, were brought forth to Shah Sultan Hoseyn

[7] Lockhart, L. 1958, p. 298-99, quoting Krusinsky's *Histoire de la dernière révolution de Perse* (The Hague, 1928), vol. II, p. 323-35.

(1694-1722), which incited a dispute at the court regarding the proper way to punish the entire Jewish community by death or fining; this account is an example of the tremendous influence that the Shah's clergymen exercised over him (Moreen, 1985, p. 142).

The most crucial part of KS is Babai Ibn Farhad's recounting of the conversion of the Jewish community of Kashan. His narrative suggests that the apostasy was triggered by Tahmasp Quli Khan's march through Kashan in pursuit of Ashraf. His passage, as corroborated by other Persian sources, was reportedly accompanied with the pillaging of the regions he passed through. According to Ibn Farhad, the *nasi* of the Jewish community, a man called David, went out to greet and appease the general, along with Mir Abdul Qasim, a chief Shi'i theologist who would later gain the prominent title of *Sheikh al-Islam.* During this meeting, some of the Khan's servants demanded the Jews' conversion to Islam, and continued to further plunder the town, taking possession of the Jews' houses and terrorising them. The community leaders in return decided to pay a hefty sum of a few thousand *tomans* to appease the general, hoping his men would cease their harassment and move along. Ibn Farhad seems to support this act despite it impoverishing the community, commending them for remaining true to their faith. However, he reports that the amount did not entirely satisfy Tahmasp Quli Khan, and he demanded that the Jews pay an additional hundred *tomans* per person. The community leaders, desperate as their objections were in vain, promptly expressed their desire to convert to Islam, promising to convince every member of the community to convert as well. The general, who saw through their attempts at saving the community and avoiding the hefty fee, insisted the Jews to remain in their faith by paying the price. Benjamin, one of the heads of the community, reiterated his desire to convert so sincerely he managed to convince the general, who proceeded to partake in a banquet with the new converts, generously declaring their exemption from further payments of *jizya* (Ibn Farhad, in Moreen, 1985, p. 149-50).

Following the departure of Tahmasp Quli Khan, the community assembled at *nasi* David's house in order to contemplate their options. At this point, they were divided into two groups, those who planned on embracing Islam, and those who were determined to stay faithful to Judaism. Ibn Farhad's narration describes *nasi* David's severe reaction to the second group by locking all the doors and demanding everyone's immediate conversion. While most of the people present complied, Ibn Farhad mentions individuals like Ibrahim Yazdi and Rabbi Mordechai of Kermanshah who refused to do so (Ibn Farhad, p. 413). Based

on their names, they were most likely not originally from Kashan, therefore they may have used this opportunity to separate themselves from the apostasy of the community.

While he states in KS that most of the Jews of Kashan, including Ibn Farhad himself converted to Islam, the community was understandably grief stricken, and many privately remained true to their old faith, including *nasi* David, who Ibn Farhad states would not rest until he could save the community from this "preventive conversion" (Moreen, 1985, p. 151). The Jews of Kashan were hoping that Shah Tahmasp II would pass through town, as it gave them an opportunity to appeal to him to grant them permission to return to their original faith. When in 1729 the Shah indeed passed through Kashan on his way to Isfahan to claim the throne in the newly liberated capital, Ibn Farhad offered to compose a petition to submit to the Shah. He presented the petition to the community who, once again, found themselves in disagreement over the best solution, undoubtedly afraid of the wrath of Tahmasp Quli Khan should he find out. Ibn Farhad was berated by those opposed to his proposition, and the matter was dropped altogether. Before narrating the account of the return of the Jews of Kashan to Judaism, Babai Ibn Farhad briefly describes the liberation of Isfahan from the Afghanis by Tahmasp Quli Khan and his voracious army, who, in pursuit of Ashraf, went to Isfahan, pillaging its already despoiled population, and extorted great amounts of money from the Christian Armenians, the Hindus, and the Jews. The chronicle of Ibn Farhad recounts the flight and eventual death of Ashraf, who fled from Tahmasp Quli Khan to Shiraz. Although he raided and devastated the town, Ibn Farhad seems to harbour a sympathetic attitude towards the former Afghani ruler, as he believes the lives of the Jews improved under his rule compared to that of the Shi'i Muslims (Ibn Farhad, p. 662). According to Levy, the population of Shiraz suffered the same fate as Isfahan at the hands of Tahmasp Quli Khan, and the head of the Jewish community was captured and injured by the general's men (Levy, p. 346).

In the winter of 1729, Shah Tahmasp II officially claimed the throne in the capital, after which he summoned the most notable men of the realm to his court. Among those men was Mir Abul Qasim Kashani, whom the Jews of Kashan had conferred with the task of acquiring royal permission for the community to return to Judaism. He was accompanied on this mission to Isfahan by *nasi* David. However, they did not find the opportunity to bring up the matter with the Shah, meeting instead with Tahmasp Quli Khan in Shiraz. Mir Abul Qasim disclosed to the Khan that the conversions had been out of fear and therefore not genuine, after which the general demanded a hefty sum from the Jews of Kashan in exchange for their religious freedom (Ibn Farhad, p. 737). Initially, Mir Abul Qasim tried to reason with

him, but he nevertheless only gave his consent on the condition that the community pays six hundred tomans (p. 740), in addition to a yearly tax to the army (p. 743). Although this fine further impoverished the Jewish community, they were finally able to openly practise their faith.

Massiah ben Raphael, who penned the twelfth chapter of KS, has a somewhat different description of the events. In his account, it was Ibrahim Yazdi who would take on the mission to plead the Jews' case before Shah Tahmasp II in Isfahan, finally receiving the favourable edict right before Passover, which according to Moreen's calculations fell on April 2, 1730 (Moreen, 1985, p. 154). After paying a sum of an unspecified amount, the Jews were able to openly celebrate the holiday.

Babai Ibn Farhad resumes his narrative in chapter XIV, and states that the Jews of his grandfather's generation had suffered through seven years of forced conversions under the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas II, whereas his own generation only endured seven months (Ibn Farhad, p. 970).

Without the confirmation of outside sources it has proven difficult to determine which prominent figure of the Jewish community of Kashan was truly responsible for unravelling the dire circumstances. Nevertheless, Babai Ibn Farhad's chronicle, while insufficient in details of external historical events of the period, plainly reflects the divisions within this Jewish community and is a manifestation of the turbulent time period in which he lived; where religious freedom was but a tool of extortion in the hands of rapacious authority figures like Tahmasp Quli Khan, who would later continue his plundering on a more massive scale under the name of Nader Shah.

The apostasy of the Jews of Kashan is not the only incident connecting Nader Shah with the Persian Jewish community. After accepting the crown of Persia at an assembly of warriors of various tribes, in which they declared him as the 'liberator' of Persia, Nader Shah continued his military campaigns, finally defeating the Afghanis in their homeland in 1738. He then invaded India in 1739, ransacking the city of Delhi and the great wealths of the land, including the well-known Peacock Throne and the Kuh-e Nur Diamond, after which he proceeded to do some extensive resettlements within Persia. Nader Shah reportedly relocated about forty Jewish families, mainly from Qazvin (in modern-day central Iran), to Mashhad (in modern-day Khorasan-e Razavi in northeastern Iran), as he declared the latter as his official capital (Vadqani & Heydari, 2019, p. 10). This is an example of the monarch's unconventional

methods of approaching religious matters, as the tomb of Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (d. 818), the eighth Imam of Shi'i Muslims is located in Mashhad, making it a key pilgrimage site for Shi'is who generally viewed non-Muslims, including the Jews, as 'unclean'. Levy interprets this move as Nader Shah's goodwill and trust in the Jews (Levy, p. 18), as he reportedly entrusted them to guard his new treasures in the fortress known as Kalat-e Naderi (Pirnazar, 2005, p. 117-18), although this account has not been corroborated except in the oral tradition of Mashhadi Jews (Moree, 2017, p. 1052). This population transfer later proves to be unfortunate for the Persian Jews in one case when, only a century later, the prosperous Jewish community of Mashhad underwent a tragic event in 1839 known in Persian as Allahdad (God given), which will be discussed thoroughly later in the chapter.

Although the real intention behind this relocation is unknown, Moreen traces it in Nader Shah's distinctly pragmatic religious beliefs. After claiming power, he sought to redefine the foundation on which political and religious authority was justified in Persia (2017, p. 1052). Nader Shah's aim in mitigating the authority of clerical institutions, already deteriorated after the Afghani invasion, was twofold. He sought to reduce sectarian conflicts within Persia between the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims as part of his imperial ambitions, while also bringing the realm out of regional isolation. By addressing these religious divisions, he aimed to strengthen his rule and increase the influence of the Persian kingdom. Overall, one of Nader Shah's most significant achievements, apart from the actualisation of Persia's independence, creating a powerful state against Russian and Ottoman threats, was cultivating an environment of peaceful religious coexistence. By eradicating religious and sectarian conflicts within the realm, he sought to have better relations with his neighbouring Sunni regions, namely the Uzbeks, Turkmans, and the Ottomans (Fallahian & Heydari, 2019).

This era of relative religious freedom and toleration was, however, short-lived. It must be taken into account that the pressure of propaganda of the Safavid era and their discriminative measures against the Jews and other non-Muslims had taken their toll on the general consensus, something that short-lived dynasties such as the Afsharids were not able to change. Religious persecution and deeming the Jews and non-Muslims ritually 'impure' were still commonplace in this period. Additionally, decentralising clerical power not only antagonised the clergy against the Afsharid Shah, but it also contributed to the animosity between religious figures and military forces, a case that Levy believes continues to be present and significant in the contemporary history of Persia (Levy, p. 19).

1.4. The Qajars (1794-1925)

After Nader Shah's assassination in 1747, the debilitated realm was divided between the ferocious Afghani warriors and the Zands, who were of *Lur* origin. Eventually, the Qajars, another Turkic tribe, rose to power, conquering the previously Safavid Empire in its entirety. They were of the Qoyunlu clan of the Turkoman Qajar tribe (Mussi, 2013). The slow modernisation of Persia in this period was accompanied by social and political turmoil. The Qajar era coincided with the peak of imperial expansion in Europe (Yarshater, 2001). During this time, the study of what Lord Curzon referred to as "the Persian question" became intertwined with colonial interests and the "Great Game"—a strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia over the control of Central Asia and Afghanistan, particularly in relation to India, which was their main focus. The Qajar's rise to power added another layer of political turmoil to the region.

Agha Mohammad Khan, the founder of the Qajar dynasty, was crowned in 1796, choosing the city of Tehran as the new capital. Upon claiming the throne, he ordered the murder of a number of his political opponents, namely Lotf Ali Khan of the Zand tribe. There are numerous accounts of Agha Mohammad's tyranny and sadism. One in particular reports that after conquering a city, he enslaved every woman and child and awarded them to his soldiers as slaves, authorising his servants to blind anyone who resisted and to bring him their eyeballs. Sources indicate that his servant brought back heaps of the rebels' eyes in baskets to present to the Shah (van Gorder, 2010).

After the death of Agha Mohammad in 1798, he was succeeded by Fath Ali Shah, who would rule over Persia for thirty seven years until 1834. His governance was more moderate, mainly because he was more interested in drinking and spending time with his 158 wives (Axworthy, 2008, p. 176). It was during his reign that external threats, in addition to weak leadership, forced the Qajars to sign over significant and strategic territories to the British, French, Russians, and even Persia's longtime rival, the Ottomans. The greatest threat to the Qajars, however, was caused by the bitter rivalry between Great Britain and Russia, who both sought to exert political agency over the Persian realm. Defenceless against the superiority of Western military forces and, later, its economic infiltration into Persia, the independence of the region was gradually throttled by foreign subjugation.

As the threat of Russian troops drew closer to Tehran and they managed to gain control over large proportions of northern Persian territory, the Qajars had no choice but to turn to Great Britain for help, which was only begrudgingly provided. Britain, in turn, seized this opportunity to further exert control over the debilitating Persian government. The reason behind this insidious infiltration was that they sought a profitable sea route for the East India Company as well as hindering the southward expansion of the Russians (van Gorder, p. 66). Both Britain and Russia forced the Qajars into concessions that would give them massive control over the natural resources of Persia.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed Persia undergo the early challenges of modernisation and the influence of Western technology through the blow of military defeat. Losing territory to Tsarist Russia accompanied by the vigorous post-war economic burden, and the failure of Persia's Herat campaign in 1838 in which the British were heavily involved, showcase the vulnerability of the region to Western colonial powers, even a remote one like Britain (Amanat, 2011). Foreign control over Persia's economy culminated in the reign of Naser al-Din Shah (1848-96), who according to Levy, sold exclusive concessions to the West and others, among which was the concession for the cultivation and trading of tobacco, which was handed over to the British. Additionally, Naser al-Din's foreign loans, which were used to cover the expenses of his lavish voyages to Europe instead of being spent in the national interest, further angered the Persisn population. The Tobacco Concession and the national protests of 1890 against it, which forced the Shah to revoke it, set in motion the Constitutional Revolution in Persia (Levy, p. 373).

In 1906, growing unrest among the local population led the religious leaders to request Mozaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907), Naser al-Din's successor, to establish a constitutional parliamentary system in Persia. Some members of the Armenian community, influenced by Russia's 1905 revolution, played a key role in leading political movements seeking to gain influence and promote reform at the beginning of the twentieth century (van Gorder, 2010, p. 66). Although the Qajar Shah, nearing his last days, issued the decree, officially establishing Constitutionalism, after his death in 1907, Great Britain and Russia settled a treaty by means of which Persia was divided into two domains of influence, with the Russians controlling the northern part of Persia while the British controlled the south. Thus began a period of turmoil as the bloody Constitutional Revolution shook the foundations of the Qajar dynasty.

Levy considers the Qajar era one of Persian decline and deterioration. Unlike the Safavids, whose objective in the propagation of the Shi'i faith was clearly defined, the Qajar rulers had no firm commitment to either Shi'i or Sunni sects, leaving matters in the hands of the local religious leaders (Levy, p. 374).

It must be acknowledged that nineteenth century Persia, a period of significant religious fluidity, was an ideal environment for religious conversions. Mehrdad Amanat writes: "Faced with the challenges of modernity, humbled by Western economic and military dominance, and disillusioned by manifestations of social and political stagnation, the People of [Persia] were compelled to face a profound identity crisis. For many, religious conversion became a means of dealing with this crisis and with deeper socio-economic changes the country was experiencing." Shi'i clergy, who established their authority once again, attempted to dominate the religious lives of the Persians, which caused many to be drawn to different variations of Sufism, which offered a more non-conformist alternative to orthodox Shi'ism. New debates began to be introduced to the religious discourse, to which Christian missionaries, for instance, Catholic Lazarists, who appeared in this period contributed (Amanat, 2011, p. 45). The Lazarist Christians' arrival was facilitated by the French representative in the royal Qajar court. Interested in pursuing French favour as an alternative to British and Russian political affairs, the Qajars not only did not interfere with the Lazarists, but also granted them permission to advance their efforts in Persia, including the construction of several big churches (van Gorder, 2010).

The Jews, however, were not quite as fortunate as the Christians under Qajar rule, partially due to the lack of any international support to provide a breadth of political protection. During the Qajar reign, Jews were scattered across Persia, with communities in big cities such as Shiraz, Isfahan, Hamadan, Kermanshah, Senneh (modern-day Sanandaj in western Iran), and Tehran, as well as smaller towns and villages. According to Fischel, an estimate from the early nineteenth century shows the number of Jews at 30,000, a figure which increased to approximately 50,000 during the nineteenth century (Fischel, p. 119).

The degrading *najis* label continued to negatively affect the Jews' everyday lives, to the point where they were ostracised from the Muslim Persian society and had to be externally differentiated from them by wearing badges over their clothes. Although Haji Ibrahim Shirazi, a descendent of converted Jews, who had assisted the Qajars in their rise to power, had been appointed to serve as Naser al-Din's prime minister, did not win the Jewish

community any favours against the wave of antisemitic laws and behaviours in this period. In 1815, Sir John Malcom, a Scottish diplomat and East India Company administrator who had visited Persia several times on diplomatic missions for the British, wrote that “the Jews in Persia, who are not numerous, cannot appear in public, much less perform their religious ceremonies, without being treated with scorn and contempt by Mohammedan inhabitants of that Kingdom.” (Malcom, 1815, p. 425)

The intolerance of Qajar rulers made it impossible for the majority of the Persian Jews to actively participate in any principal economic roles. In fact, Fischel recounts that they were generally “peddlers wandering overland to remote villages, brokers, agents, shopkeepers, and small businessmen dealing in spices, drugs, antiques, jewellery, cloth, and luxury articles, and also millers, tailors, weavers, and dyers. The manufacturing of wine and alcohol, prohibited to Muslims, became a monopoly of Jews and a steady source of trouble and conflict.” (Fischel, p. 121) George Curzon wrote that "The majority of Jews in Persia are engaged in trade, in jewellery, in wine and opium manufacture, as musicians, dancers, scavengers, peddlers, and in other professions to which is attached no great respect." (Curzon, p. 510) The Jewish communities in Hamadan and Tehran were an exception to this, as they produced some notable Jewish physicians who achieved a higher social status. In the mid-nineteenth century, the most popular physicians in Tehran were four brothers of Jewish origin, one of whom, named Hak Nazar, served as the court physician of Mohammad Shah (1834-1848). However, as demonstrated in the case of Haji Ibrahim Shirazi, these people had little to no actual influence on the political and living conditions of their fellow Jews (Fischel, p. 121-22).

As previously mentioned, nineteenth century Persia was a fertile environment for religious fluidity and witnessed an abundance of conversions, not all of which were compulsory. During this time, some Jewish individuals voluntarily converted to Islam. Due to the gatekeeping nature of the higher social class, for Jews who either had special expertise, were pursuing political careers, or even simply wanted for financial advancement, converting to Shi’ism was all but inevitable. Needless to say, according to Amanat, these individuals were few, mainly ambitious people who already had close connections within the ruling class, and they represent “the opposite end of the conversion spectrum” (Amanat, p. 46); their experiences are by no means representative of the majority of the common Jewish converts.

A notable example of how conversion to Shi’ism facilitated the Jewish converts' advancement in royal society is that of Aqa Esma‘il Jadid al-Islam Pishkhedmatbashi, a royal

servant who served three Qajar rulers. He converted to Islam at a young age through the influence of Fath ‘Ali Shah. Despite having few political connections, he maintained his position for over forty years. In a time when Grand Viziers were frequently executed, Esma‘il’s loyalty and competence made him an important figure in political and administrative continuity. Aqa Esma‘il’s family continued to gain influence in the Qajar court. His son, Aqa Reza ‘Akkasbashi (also known as Eqbal al-Saltaneh), held high-ranking roles, including command of the royal armoury, and became Iran’s first professional photographer, a skill which he learned from a French photographer in 1859. His achievements as an artist are a reflection of how conversion to Islam was linked to innovation and modernity. Esma‘il’s younger son, ‘Ali Naqi Hakim al-Mamalek, studied medicine and philosophy in France and became a royal physician, also serving in high-ranking administrative roles and governorships. He was respected as an educator, philanthropist, and statesman. The family’s rise to power mirrored the trajectory of other prominent families like Amir Kabir and Amin al-Sultan, who also rose from humble beginnings to significant political positions (Amanat, p. 46).

Another such example, from the twentieth century, is Esmail Khan Mo’azed al-Molk, the son of Hakim Naser (also known as Naser al-Atebba), a prominent Jewish convert physician. After his conversion to Islam, Esma‘il Khan quickly rose in the Qajar administration in the 1910s, holding important roles such as Kermanshah’s foreign office agent, deputy finance minister, and deputy in the parliament's moderate faction. He acted as de facto governor of Kermanshah during World War I, where he was heavily involved in negotiations with various occupying armies. His position became more complex as different Persian factions competed for power, and a pro-German Iranian government in exile was formed. He was eventually murdered, a victim of the turbulent political climate, marked by conflicting pro-British and pro-Russian sentiments. Despite some lingering negative references to Jewish heritage in the writings of contemporaries, prominent converts like Esma‘il Khan avoided much of the stigma associated with being a *Jadid al-Islam* (new Muslim). Nevertheless, such voluntary conversions were rare and generally limited to a small group of highly educated and talented Jews. The Jewish traveller Rabbi David Beth-Hillel noted that hundreds of Iranian Jews, in an effort to escape violent death and persecution, were repeatedly abandoning the faith of their ancestors and converting to Islam (Beth-Hillel, 1973, cited in Mussi, 2013, p. 182).

Proud of their religious identity, some Persian Muslims occasionally expressed sentiments of superiority over religious minorities, including the Jews, through their disdain and degradation. This behaviour, along with pressures they occasionally placed the religious minorities under, caused many to convert to Islam. For instance, during the early days of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar's rule, many of the Jews living in the vicinity of Kashan were forced to abandon their faith. Following this incident, the communities of villages such as Ghamisar, Abyaneh, Aran (Harun), Bidgol, Nushabad, Barzuk, and Isar, among others, preserved the Kashani Jewish dialect, despite converting to Islam (Levy, p. 381). The persecutions apparently also compelled 2,500 Shirazi Jews to embrace Islam (Tsadik, 2007, p. 34).

Moreover, the forced conversion of Jewish communities under Qajar rule reached its peak in March 1839 during the reign of Mohammad Shah and in the city of Mashhad, as "local politics and international forces beyond the Jews' control" culminated in a sanguinary episode of mass conversion (Amanat, 2011, p. 45). Although most conversions were initiated by royal decree and were relatively temporary, the case of the mass conversion of the Jews of Mashhad marks a turning point in the religious history of the region.

The Secret Lives of Mashhadi Jews in 1839

The case of the mass conversion of the Jews in Mashhad in 1839 is a turning point in the religious history of the Qajar period. It is by far the most significant case of forced conversion in modern Persia not only due to the large number of converts—estimated to be around thousands—but also the peculiar circumstances leading to the conversion, which make this episode a notorious case of mob violence in Persia, leading to the appearance and maintaining of crypto-Jewish identities that persisted for over a century (Amanat, 2010, p. 47).

The question of the beginning of Jewish settlement in Mashhad, according to Amnon Netzer, is a topic still in need of further exploration (Netzer, 1990, in Patai, 1997, p. 25). The majority of scholars, however, along with the oral tradition of the Mashhadi Jews, unanimously agree that it began in the eighteenth century and during the rule of Nader Shah. As previously mentioned, Nader Shah ordered the relocation of about forty prominent Jewish families of the city of Qazvin to the fortress of Kalat, northeast of Mashhad. The date of this population

transfer is unclear. Habib Levy claims it was accomplished in 1730, six years before Nader Shah claimed the throne, with more Jews moving to the city by 1734. Others consider 1734, 1743, or 1747 to be the year Jewish settlement in Mashhad began (Patai, 1997, p. 25). Being home to the tomb of the seventh Shi'i Imam, Mashhad was far from welcoming towards non-Muslims. The Jews were nonetheless able to purchase some land and establish their community in a neighbourhood named *Eydgah*.

The Jews of Mashhad in this period were, by all accounts, among the most affluent of Persian Jews, and possibly the only ones involved in long distance trade (Amanat, 2011, p. 49). According to another Joseph Wolff account, they were part of a regional trade network that extended not only across Khorasan but was also connected with Jewish communities in greater Khorasan, Turkestan, and the outer parts of Central Asia. Using the ancient Silk Route, they exported textiles and spices to Bukhara and Khiva while importing furs from Bukhara (Wolff, 1837, p. 106).

Following the assassination of Nader Shah in 1747, the Mashhadi Jews, deprived of their main source of protection, turned to the British traders and Sunni Turkoman tribes, with whom their relations continued. The Jews played an important role in assisting British agents, extending the region from Khorasan to Herat and the Central Asian cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. Their network acted as banking sources and trading contacts for the British. As non-Muslims, they occasionally had the advantage of facilitating trade between several rival sectarian and ethnic groups. Much like the Jews, Europeans were considered ritually "impure", and were thus not allowed to stay in Muslims' houses or use their public baths. Since they had no access to any local Christians, the Jews were the ones to provide their housing and assist them during their stay (Amanat, 2010, p. 49).

Taking advantage of the trade routes along Mashhad, as well as the network of Jewish merchants in other cities, the Mashhadi Jews were able to flourish, despite the continued persecutions imposed on them. Due to their success, they were able to form close ties with the British agents in the area, providing loans, and occasionally passing on intelligence to them. This connection, although beneficial at first, likely became grounds for the eventual persecution of the Jews.

There are different variations of the incident that resulted in the events of *Allahdad*, although most of them are in agreement over its essence. According to the findings of Raphael patai, the first to write about the incident of Allahdad was Joseph Wolff, a missionary

who first visited Mashhad in 1831. Although he was not present at the time of the events, he returned to Mashhad in 1844, where he learned from the locals what had occurred, and included a brief section about it in his book *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara in the Years 1843-1845*. Wolff recounts his encounter with several people from the Jewish community with whom he had previously established contact. He alludes to the wealth of the Mashhadi Jews by mentioning the loans they would occasionally give out to the English during the nation's invasion of Afghanistan in the same year as *Allahdad*.

As for the incident itself, Wolff states his findings as follows:

> All the Jews of Mashhad, a hundred and fifty families, were compelled seven years ago to turn Mussulmans. The occasion was as follows: A poor woman had a sore hand: a Mussulman physician advised her to kill a dog, and put her hand in the blood of it: she did so; when suddenly the whole population rose, and said that they had done it in derision of their Prophet. Thirty-five Jews were killed in a few minutes; the rest, struck with terror, became Muhammedans, and the fanatic and covetous [italics in the original] Muhammedans shouted, "Light of Muhammed has fallen upon them!" They are now more zealous Jews in secret than ever; but call themselves like the Jews in Spain, Anusim-"the compelled ones." Their children cannot suppress their feelings when their parents call them by their Muhammedan names. (Wolff, 1846, p. 177)

Although Wolff mistakenly places the incident as having happened seven years before he wrote it down, rather than five, his statement seems to be in line with numerous other accounts.

Raphael Patai states the account of Samad Aqa ben Yousef Dilmani, which was given in 1839 and recorded in 1945, as the most detailed one. It is preserved in the Central Zionist Archives of Jerusalem. Aqa Dilmani states that the events of Allahdad occurred on "The Great Sabbath" preceding Passover, "on the twelfth of Nissan 699", which coincided with the tenth day of the month of Muharram 1255 of the Hijri calendar, also known as *Ashura*, a day of mourning for the Shi'i Muslims as the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam. Patai points out an inaccuracy in Dilmani's account, as the Jewish date he provides cannot correlate with the Muslim one. Regardless of this error, much like Wolff, Dilmani also claims the slaughter of a dog by a Jewish woman prompted many of the Persian Muslims—who already harboured hatred for the Jews—to attack the Jewish neighbourhood. Dilmani describes the desperation of the Jewish community as they tried to stop the mob from destroying their entire community as follows:

"Evil days followed for the Jews. They went to the house of the Imam Jum'ah to ask for his protection against the wrath of the mob. But the Imam answered that as long as they adhered to the religion of their fathers he could not help them. They must convert to Islam, and then he will protect them and their property, their freedom will be restored to them as of old, and the mob will no longer persecute them. Since the Jews had no other choice, for they could not turn to the central government whose seat was already in Teheran, they were forced to accept the demand of the Imam, and thereby become Muslims." (Patai, 1997, p. 58)

There are various other possible reasons behind the massacre. Although many sources point to some kind of a misunderstanding that led the Muslims to believe the Jews were mocking their mourning[8], other sources—mainly the accounts of British travellers—believe the Shi'i clergy's continuous anti-Jewish incitement eventually turned their followers against the Jews. Economic motivations are another cause believed to have started the attack; the affluence of the Jews and their foreign connections may have stirred feelings of envy and suspicions of treason among the less fortunate Mashhadis.

Regardless of the reasons—suspicions of treason, poverty, or religious intolerance—the result was a devastating blow to the Jews of Mashhad. A mob consisting of Shi'i Muslims attacked the Jewish neighbourhood, pillaging the houses, destroying properties, and killing around 36 Jews in the process (Patai, 1997, p. 58).

As in most cases of mass conversion, the decision to convert to Islam was taken by the community's religious leaders, as a way to stop the persecutions. Mullah Davood Cohan, the chief Rabbi of Mashhad, was reportedly the first to convert (Amanat, 2011, p. 56).

The Jews found themselves in increasingly desperate circumstances, where they were pressured and threatened into converting to Islam in order to ensure their survival. Public conversions were often conducted in humiliating ceremonies, where entire families were compelled to renounce their Jewish faith. Amanat suggests that these events were not only acts of religious coercion but also demonstrations of power by the Muslims over the Jewish community. However, they were not completely successful in their persecutions. Although some *Jadid al-Islam* Jews genuinely embraced their new faith, most continued to practise Judaism in secret. Even for the former group, the psychological impact of their forced conversion was profound, as they were forced to deal with the stigma and shame of abandoning their faith (Amanat, p. 57).

[8] Faraj-Allah Nasr-Allahof, "Livi", in Gusheh-ha¯-yi az ta¯rikh-e ja¯me'eh-ye ma¯ (New York, 1987), p. 8.

Interestingly, the secret adherence of the community to their original faith seems not to have been much of a secret to the religious authorities. This is evident in Wolff's account of visiting Mirza Askari, the chief Imam of Mashhad:

> Mirza 'Askari, the Imam Jum'ah, or chief of the mosque, called on me in the night time, for I was exceedingly unwell. He made me a present of a turquoise ring . . . . I besought him to protect the Jews and not to allow the Mohammedans to carry on against them a regular system of inquisition. Mirza 'Askari is very fond of money, and after receiving a few tomans from a Jewish family, he allowed a considerable number of them to emigrate to Herat, Yazd, and Teheran, where they live again as Jews. How affecting it is to look at the Jews of Mashhad! Despite the discrepancies among these accounts that vary in minor details, they are all in agreement of the essence of the events. (Wolff, 1846, p. 394)

When news of the Allahdad incident reached Tehran, it caused significant concern within the court of Muhammad Shah. The Shah's minister of foreign affairs, Mirza Mas'ud, was sent to Mashhad to investigate the events surrounding the Jewish community and to attempt to secure the return of looted property. According to some accounts, Muhammad Shah even met with a delegation of Mashhadi Jews who described the attacks, and the Shah presented them with gifts. After the Jews in Mashhad converted to Islam, the Imam Jom'eh agreed to return their looted goods, including a quantity of silk merchandise owned by a Jew who had been killed during the Allahdad. The Jewish community sold the silk and used the proceeds to buy land for a cemetery (Patai, 1997, p. 63). This detail highlights the distinctive position of the Jadidim in Mashhad following their conversion. Officially, they were considered Muslims and were required to observe Islamic laws and customs. However, it was understood that they would maintain their ethnic identity, marry within their community, bury their dead in a separate cemetery, and gather for worship in their own mosque. This form of ethnic segregation under a shared religious affiliation was typical in Mashhad, affecting both Muslims and Jews. Even before and after the Allahdad, Jewish groups who had relocated to Mashhad from other regions maintained their distinct identities and were identified by their places of origin, such as Yazdis, Heratis, and Qazvinis (Patai, 1997, p. 64).

Despite such violent episodes, the conditions of Persian Jews improved in the latter half of the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the gradual improvement of Persia's overall economic, political, and social conditions. During this time, Western Jewish communities began to take an interest in the plight of their Persian brethren and offered support in order to elevate their status (Mussi, 2013). The initial isolation of the Persian Jews from governmental affairs may be one of the possible reasons for their low status. Spector

writes that as a part of a religious minority, “the [Persian] Jew at first had no way of influencing the ruling élite of Muslim [Persia]. As time went on, however, the Jews learned how to use Western diplomats to voice their grievances. Western Jews, especially those in Britain and France, were particularly instrumental in this, and Persian Jews soon learned that they could carry their complaints to the Jews of London or Paris who, in turn, would pressure their diplomats in [Persia]. This was very much similar to what was being done by [Persian] Christians, and the Western legations evolved into a sort of legitimate institution through which minority groups expressed their grievances.” (Mussi, p. 97).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Western Jewish philanthropic organisations, including the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and the Anglo-Jewish Association, sought to improve the conditions of Persian Jews by persuading Naser al-Din Shah to make reforms. Their efforts culminated during the Shah's 1873 European tour, where he frequently met Jewish committees in major cities like Berlin, Amsterdam, Vienna, Brussels, London, and Paris. In Paris, members of the AIU successfully requested the Shah's permission to establish schools for Jews in Tehran, although it took 25 years for the first school to open in 1898 (Oberling, 1978, p. 6-7). Western pressure eventually led to some administrative improvements for the Persian Jews. In 1873, Naser al-Din Shah publicly declared Jews as equal members of society, and in 1880, he repealed the law of Apostasy, officially equating the political status of Jews with the Shi’i population. However, promoting their social and religious equality was more challenging, as Tsadik points out that Shi’i society continued to view Jews as second-class citizens. He reports that some sectors resisted this change of status, calling for the reinforcement of traditional *dhimmi* laws, thus forcing the government to balance both foreign pressure for reform and domestic opposition. Despite these challenges, Persian Jews benefited from unprecedented protection from both their own government and foreign persuasion. The increased interaction between European Jews and their Persian brethren, facilitated by growing political and economic ties between Europe and Persia, played a significant role in this change of affairs (Tsadik, cited in Mussi, 2013, p. 184). The first Jewish school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded during the reign of Mozaffar al-Din Shah, was established in Tehran under the supervision of the Jewish educator Joseph Cazés. Other schools were soon established in Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Senneh, and Kermanshah between 1900 and 1904. The Persian Jews envisioned the presence of foreign representatives of their Western brethren to warrant their security (Fischel, p. 146).

As Mozaffar ad-Din Shah proved even less effective than his father in promoting political and social reforms, however, many Persian Jews turned to the Constitutional Revolution, seeing it as a potential path to meaningful change. The 1906 Constitution marked a step towards equality for religious minorities, granting the Jews equal legal status and important rights, such as inheritance regardless of the existence of any Muslim heirs. By 1909, Jews had gained the right to elect a representative to the *Majlis* (parliament), signalling the end of the exilarch title, which had previously been responsible for mediating between the Jewish community and the government. Mullah Abraham ben Mullah Agha Baba (d. 1910) was the last to hold the title, after whom the role ceased to exist due to these political changes.

Persian Jews can perhaps be considered the oldest continuous Jewish diaspora (Moreen, 2017, p. 1046). Some historians consider the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE to have triggered the first wave of Jewish migration to Persia. For over a millennium, from the Achaemenid to the late Sasanian era, with few exceptions in between, the Jews experienced relative toleration and freedom of religion. The Achaemenids offered protections to Jewish communities, most notably through Cyrus the Great, who allowed the return of exiled Jews to their homeland and supported the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. During the Parthian and Sasanian periods, Jews retained a level of autonomy, particularly through the establishment of the Exilarch system, which allowed them to govern their own communities. Despite occasional pressures from Zoroastrian religious leaders, Jewish economic networks thrived, especially along the Silk Road, contributing to the empire's prosperity.

The Safavids rose to power at a time when the world was overwhelmed with vicious wars motivated by religion, with Catholics and Protestants clashing in Europe and Sunni-Shi'a tensions intensifying in the Islamic world. The imposition of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion under the Safavids drastically altered the position of Jews in Persia. Forced conversions, discriminatory laws, and the declaration of Jews as *najis* (ritually impure) contributed to widespread persecution and social isolation. Although Shah Abbas I initially demonstrated tolerance toward non-Muslims, particularly for economic purposes, his reign also saw instances of violent repression, such as the forced conversions in Isfahan.

Religious intolerance intensified throughout the reign of the Safavids, with Jews increasingly persecuted by both state policies and the growing influence of the Shi'ite clergy.

The Safavid state's efforts to forge a cohesive Shi‘a identity relied heavily on religious conformity, making life increasingly difficult for religious minorities. Though some Jews outwardly converted to Islam to avoid persecution, many secretly maintained their faith, creating a hidden community of crypto-Jews. By the end of the Safavid period, Jewish communities faced severe restrictions on their economic activities and social participation, leading to widespread poverty and further alienation from broader Persian society.

The Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) inherited the religiously stratified society created by the Safavids, though the political landscape began to change under the influence of foreign powers. While Qajar rulers were less ideologically driven in their treatment of Jews, the community remained subject to social discrimination and violent outbursts, most notably the mass forced conversion of the Jews of Mashhad in 1839. Despite their conversion, the Jadid al-Islams continued to adhere to Judaism in secret, leading to the emergence of one of the most unique cases of crypto-Jewish identities in the history of Persian Jewry. During the second half of the nineteenth century, international intervention, particularly from Western Jewish organisations such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle, began to exert pressure on the Qajar state to improve the conditions of Persian Jews. These efforts led to some administrative reforms, but anti-Jewish sentiments remained deeply ingrained in Persian society.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the Qajar state weakened and Persia faced increasing foreign intervention, the position of Jews gradually improved. Reforms such as the abolition of the Law of Apostasy and the recognition of Jews as legal equals under the Constitution of 1906 were significant steps forward. However, these political gains did not fully translate into social equality, as Jewish communities continued to face hostility from both religious leaders and segments of the broader population. Despite these challenges, the gradual improvement in their status under the Qajars laid the foundation for further advancements in the modern era.

To conclude, the early modern period in Persia, particularly under Safavid and Qajar rule, was one of profound transformations for the Jewish community. The Safavids, driven by their ambition to solidify Shi‘ism as the defining element of Persian identity, subjected Jews to intense periods of persecution and forced assimilation. Meanwhile, the Qajars, though presiding over an era of modernization, were unable to fully dismantle the structures of exclusion that defined Jewish life in Persia. While international pressures and internal reforms

led to some progress, the legacy of these centuries continued to shape the precarious, turbulent position of Jews within Persian society. The exchanges between religion, politics, and identities during this era not only marginalised Jews but also set the stage for the ongoing negotiation of religious and social status that would persist into the modern period.

Chapter 2 - Jewish Identities: Resistance and Conversion in Safavid and Qajar Period

The question of identity is among the most fundamental of inquiries, the concept of which has long occupied man's mind. Numerous definitions of identity have been proposed. In general, "collective identity" refers to the set of essential social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, biological, and historical characteristics and attributes that coherently and accurately convey the essence or nature of a group. This essence implies a unity or similarity among members that distinctly and consciously differentiates them from other groups and individuals within a specific temporal and spatial context (Al-Tayi, 2003, p. 139).

The social psychology theorist Richard Jenkins (2008) considers identity a concept that encompasses the values, beliefs, norms, symbols, attitudes, and specific self-awareness that are individual or collective, accompanied by a sense of belonging and commitment to that "self." Identity is inherently dual in nature: on the one hand, it expresses the similarity among members, while on the other, it signifies distinction from others. Over time, this concept presumes continuity and consistency (Jenkins, p. 5-7). Thus, the term "identity" establishes two potential relationships among entities and individuals, which lead to two forms of similarity: similarity with each other and difference from others.

Dashefsky (1972), on the other hand, argues that identity functions as a coherent, unified explanation of the individual, distinct from the various social roles they may have to assume. He views identity as a broad, overarching concept that encompasses many smaller, more specific aspects, representing a core sense of self that shapes and unifies all the specific ways an individual may identify, such as their self-perception and self-identification. Assessment and studies of identity, however, must be done in terms of what Dashefsky calls "lower order concepts", emphasising the focus on specific, measurable aspects. Identification can be considered one of such concepts, through which Jewish identity is then expressed. Erik Erikson (1963), a prominent theorist in the area of identity formation, views it as a part of the overall process of psychological development. The concept of identification is crucial to this development of identity. In other words, identity can be considered the end result of a synthesis of an individual's lived experiences since childhood.

The question of Jewish identity remains a complex one even in the modern world, encompassing not only a person's religious and spiritual affiliation, but also their cultural and

national identity. Jews today identify in a variety of ways, such as a peoplehood, as a religion, and as an ethnic group, to name a few common perspectives. Whereas in premodern times, these various facets of collective identity had a tendency to overlap and be in harmony with one another. In both Christian Europe and Muslim Middle East, the Jews were assigned a distinct, lower status based on their religion. While they were an ethnic minority in different regions, arguably, in both cases they preserved an enduring sense of peoplehood and future redemption as core aspects of their religious life (Goldberg, 1996).

According to Orthodox Judaism, Jewish identity is simply defined by being born to a Jewish mother and/or observing *Halakhah*, Jewish Law. This traditional perspective categorises the Jew as a person who practises or otherwise engages in Jewish rituals and believes in the doctrines of the Jewish faith. Yet in modern times, many consider themselves to be Jews despite rejecting the irrevocable nature of Jewish Law, as reflected in more modern Jewish denominations such as Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism. Jews express their Jewish identity in various ways, some through decorating their homes with Jewish religious or cultural artefacts, belonging to and/or attending a synagogue, participating in their Jewish community, or even simply by maintaining their connection with other Jews (Walzer, 2010).

Many Jews in the modern times would identify themselves as either religious, secular, or somewhere in between on this spectrum; what they all have in common is being members of the Jewish community, set apart of course by the secular Jews' lack of participation in faith-based practices and rituals. Historically, the people and the faith were so entangled that they were practically indistinguishable. It was the Jewish Emancipation that made the distinction between the two possible, although Walzer believes this possibility is mainly in theory and it is not clear whether it is entirely possible in practise. Jewish Emancipation was the European process of eliminating legal restrictions and obligations imposed on European Jewry during the Middle Ages—known as Jewish Disabilities—and recognising the rights of the Jews as citizens (Walzer, 2010). Before the Emancipation, Diaspora Jews were governed by Torah Law as a unified religious-national community. Walzer writes, "There were not any secular Jews simply because there was no social space for a secular existence." Spinoza, a Jewish philosopher of Portuguese origin, encountered such a situation in seventeenth century Holland, which is why Yirmiyahu Yovel calls him the "harbinger" of Jewish secularism, but not yet a secular Jew, as he did not consciously articulate it as such (Yovel, 1989, p. 200). Although non-religious Jews indeed must have existed before and during Spinoza's time, they

most likely had to conform to the legal and social norms of their societies and Jewish communities, leading lives similar to their pious co-religionists.

Milton Gordon (1960) defines ethnicity as a shared psychological bond that connects people based on race, religion, or national origin. This definition, however, only partially applies to the Jews as an ethnic group as it does not leave room for the range of identities within the Jewish communities, or how Jewish identities can evolve over time. While most minority groups differ from the societal majority in just one aspect, such as religion, culture, or language, Jews are distinguished from the dominant majority in multiple ways simultaneously. Due to this multidimensional distinction, Jews are sometimes called a "compound" minority, a characteristic that distinguishes them both from the majority as well as other minority groups (Strauss, 1979, p. 51).

The Jewish community of Persia is one of the oldest surviving clusters of Jewish presence in the Diaspora, if not the oldest. The preserved traditions, literature, and history distinctive to the Jewish Diaspora showcase both a genuine sense of Jewishness and the results of long exposure to and exchanges with the Persian environment. Shaked argues that the Persian Jewish community is a nearly perfect example of Jewish existence throughout history; the interchanging, or otherwise simultaneous patterns of high accomplishments and suffering, intimate cultural harmony and internal rejection, and of occasional wealth and extreme poverty as a consequence of harsh persecution represents the Jewish manners of being in Persia (Shaked, 1982).

The defining feature of Jewish identity, in the eyes of the Jews themselves as well as from the point of view of the non-Jewish majority of Persia, has been their "Jewishness"—a sense of belonging to one group unified in their shared beliefs, customs, and religion, much as it is today. While this statement may seem straightforward, there are several questions that complicate matters when it comes to defining identities among the Jews of Persia: 1) Singularity or plurality of identities: Is there a single Jewish identity, or do multiple identities exist e.g. religious identity, cultural identity, ethnic identity, and national identity? 2) Primary versus secondary identities: If there are multiple identities present, is one more central and dominant than the others? 3) Static versus dynamic identities: Did Jewish identities remain relatively consistent or did they shift and evolve over time? 4) Jews as one unified group or more: Is it possible to generalise about the Persian Jews as one cohesive group with shared identities, or should they be studied as a synthesis of different subgroups with diverse

identities? 5) Sources of identity: Was the identity of Persian Jews established solely by their own self-perception, or was it also shaped by the broader society? (Tsadik,

Such questions can certainly be applied to Jewish communities in other parts of the world as well, although in some cases, answers tend to be more thorough and detailed than in the case of the Jews of Persia during the period from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. This is due to a severe lack of sources and scholarship that directly examine the evolution of identities among the Jews of Persia in this time period.

As previously mentioned, Persian Jews throughout history in their self-certainty knew themselves to be Jewish. Moreover, in Early Modern Period Persia, religious identity was a key aspect of both an individual's self-perception and society's perception of the individual. Therefore, the Jews did not feel the need to explicitly address the question of their identity: they were Jews; they were members of the same community, sharing the same religious practices and life rituals. When trying to confirm the existence of Jewish identity with concrete evidence from the past few centuries, any corroboration is limited to focusing on the few surviving written works. Since these texts were written by particular individuals, their reliability as representations of the common Jewish perspective on identity is open to question. Nevertheless, these written works were preserved, studied, and in general embraced by the Jews of Persia, therefore they can arguably be considered as reflecting Persian Jewish identities. Despite the dominance of Judaism as the basis of the Jews' identity, examining these texts allows a glimpse into a more nuanced Jewish self-perception.

While they occasionally wrote in Hebrew, the Jews of Persia mainly used Judeo-Persian in many of their significant compositions—-Judeo-Persian is Persian written in the Hebrew alphabet. The reason for this choice of transcription lies in their Jewish contemporaries' lack of familiarity with the Perso-Arabic alphabet as opposed to the Hebrew alphabet, although they knew the Persian language. It can therefore be argued that writing in Judeo-Persian rather than in Hebrew, which was the language more widely recognised among the Jews of the world, limited the accessibility of the written works to the Persian Jewish world. According to Tsadik, This choice of language might indicate that Persian Jews were orienting their identity and communication toward the Persian context rather than a broader, more international Jewish community. On the other hand, writing in the Hebrew alphabet meant barring access of the texts to the non-Jewish readers of Persian who were not familiar

with Hebrew. Thus, the Jews' inclination towards the Persian world and language, however significant, was still limited.

The greatest Persian Jewish writers were certainly familiar with the best literary works of the neighbouring *gentile* world, as reflected in the works of three of the most prominent Persian Jewish authors: Shahin, Emrani, and Rabbi Yehudah b. El-azar. Known as Maulana Shahin Shirazi, Shahin was born in Shiraz under the Ilkhanate rule, and is arguably both the earliest known and the most proficient Persian Jewish poet. Not much is known about his biography, other than that his poetry flourished during the reign of the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan (1316-1335), as professed by the poet himself in a poem which praised the Mongol ruler.[9] He may have been a near contemporary of Hafez (d. 1389), one of the greatest Persian lyric poets who also hailed from Shiraz. The obscurity of Shahin's life extends not only to his birth and death dates, but even to elementary questions regarding his name and place of origin, for although he is called "Shirazi", some scholars believe it is possible that he actually hailed from Kashan—Babai Ibn Lutf, the Jewish poet and historian of the city of Kashan during the seventeenth century, claims that Shahin was buried in Shiraz (Moreen, p. 308)—and it is still not clear whether or not Shahin was the poet's real name or simply his *takhallos* (nom de plume); Moreen (2013) states that scholars such as Bacher lean towards the former theory on the basis of Shahin being a common name in Persia, whereas modern scholars such as Netzer subscribe to the latter view. It is highly likely for Shahin to have been the poet's nom de plume, considering the fact that the majority of prominent Persian poets acquired one at some point during their careers.

Shahin's surviving opus consists of two epic cycles, the first of which is a metrical adaptation of selected narrative sections of the *Pentateuch*, including the *Bereshit nameh* (The Book of Genesis), The Tale of Job, and *Musa nameh* (The Book of Moses); the second epic consists of The Book of Esther, *Ardashir namah* (The Book of Ardashir), and *Ezra nameh* (The Book of Ezra). Out of the two, the former are the most extensive, and can be considered the poet's *magnum opus*. This biblical cycle was named The Book of Shahin's Commentaries on the Torah by its first and only editor, the Bukharan scholar Shim'on Hakan, who published them in Jerusalem sometime between 1902 and 1905. The original title intended by the author remains unknown. Moreen considers the editor's title as a reflection of the epics' popularity among the Jews of Persia. In his work, Shahin was inspired by numerous non-Jewish bodies

[9] See: Shahin, *In Praise of Bahador Abu Sa'id*

of work, such as *Qasas al-Anbiya* (Stories of the Prophets), a genre of classical Islamic literature that narrates the stories of the prophets mentioned in the Quran, as exemplified in al-Tabari's (d. 923) Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk (History of the Prophets and the Kings), which influenced Shahin's work. Examples of this influence can be found throughout the poet's biblical epics. *Bereshit nameh,* for instance*,* includes the recounting of the fall of Azazel (Satan) from grace, as well as Jacob's grief after the disappearance of Joseph, both of which are themes widely used in Islamic literature. Furthermore, the story of Joseph and Zulaykha is a popular theme among Persian epics, a famous example of which is *Yusuf va Zulaykha* by Abdul Rahman Jami's (d. 1492). In both examples, Shahin weaves together Jewish, Muslim, and Persian mythological elements.

In addition to the aforementioned sources, Shahin was reportedly also influenced by Abul Qasem Ferdowsi's (d. 1020) epic, *Shahnameh.* Regarded as one of the most influential figures of Persian literature and poetry who strove to revive and preserve the Persian language and cultural traditions, Ferdowsi intertwined history with mythology in his long epic, which consisted of around 50,000 couplets. Shahin's use of the Persian language and grammar, his poetic turn of phrase, and rhetorical forms are clear indications of the influence of classic Persian poetry, such as the Shahnameh, on Shahin's biblical epics. In this regard, Moreen (2013, p. 30) states that his "epics reflect his thorough knowledge of classical Persian forms and conceits." Furthermore, Shahin's depictions of the stories of the Old Testament occasionally have some Persian undertones. The best example of this fusion between Jewish and Persian themes emerges in the Book of Esther, *Ardashirnameh*, where Shahin introduces Cyrus the Great, renowned Achaemenid ruler, as the son of Queen Esther and King Ardashir (Moreen, 2013, 28, 103-104).

Emrani is often referred to by the scholars as the second most significant Judeo-Persian poet. Much like Shahin, he is only known by what appears to be his pen name. He was born in 1454 in Isfahan, where he remained until he was in his mid or late twenties, when, according to Vera Moreen, he was forced to relocate to the city of Kashan for unknown reasons; he remained there until he died at an advanced age sometime after 1536. Scholars believe his exile significantly influenced and is reflected in his poetry. According to David Yeroushalmi, "a profound sense of exile and alienation prevails in the majority of Emrani's works and this sentiment may, in part, explain the poet's essentially disillusioned and pessimistic view of man and society. To his larger awareness of the Jewish exile Emrani adds his personal feeling of forced and unjust banishment" (Yeroushalmi, 1986, The Judeo-Persian

Poet, p. 16). Emrani lived during a turbulent era in Persian history, the end of the reign of Timurids (1453-1501) and the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). A period of disruption and upheaval which disturbed the lives of the majority of the Persians, and yet, Emrani's works do not disclose specific information about the living conditions of the Persian Jews during this time. Despite witnessing a significant shift in the religion of the empire—from Sunni Islam to Shi'a Islam—accompanied by an intense period of forced conversions to the Shi'i faith following the coronation of Shah Ismail (1501-1524), the founder of the Safavid reign, the aftermaths of these drastic changes on the Jewish community are not reflected in the poet's works. This lack of elaboration may be due to the fact that the persecution and forced conversions of religious minorities, such as the Jews, likely did not intensify until some decades later, under the rule of Ismail's successors.

Emrani's longest and probably most significant composition is *Fathnameh* (the Book of Conquest), based on the Books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel I, and part of Samuel II, in which his poetic narration depicts major biblical events from Samson until Solomon's ascendency to the throne. Emrani took on the writing of the epic *Fathnameh*, which emulates the form of Shahin's poetic narration of the Pentateuch, at the patronage of someone with an official rank who bore the title of Amin al-Dowleh—trustee of the state (Yeroushalmi, 1986, p. 24-5).

Originally, Fathnameh and Ganjnameh were the only poetic works directly attributed to Emrani at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the research of scholars such as Moreen, Netzer, and Yeroushalmi has proven the poet to be more prolific than previously believed, even more so than Shahin. These two works exemplify how Emrani merged Jewish and Muslim-Persian themes. Fathnameh, a masnavi of approximately 10,000 couplets, showcases how Emrani, much like his predecessor, closely emulates the rhythmic, rhetorical, and stylistic specifications of classical Persian verse. Moreen, however, believes Emrani to be less proficient than Shahin at times, which she attributes to the corrupt manuscript copies and repeated use of Hebrew words which disrupt the poetic metre of the works (Moreen, 2013, p. 334). Although Emrani appears to be more reticent in drawing inspiration from Islamic mythical sources, Moreen observes that Emrani's work on Fathnameh draws extensively from Persian epic poetry, particularly Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, through its language, imagery, depictions of feasts and battles, and the portrayals of heroic characters. Fathnameh includes numerous direct references to the heroes of Shahnameh and incorporates Persian and Islamic themes, archaically woven into the biblical narratives. Furthermore, Emrani's work reveals his

inclination toward didacticism, a defining characteristic of classical Persian poetry, particularly mystical poetry. Didacticism is a philosophy that emphasises teaching or conveying moral and ethical lessons through the medium in which it appears (literature, art, architecture, etc). Didactic poetry aims to instruct or guide readers, often through clear messages, proverbs, or reflections on virtue and wisdom.

This philosophy is most evident in Ganjnameh, likely Emrani's final work, which was completed in 1536. Ganjnameh includes a poetic adaptation of the first four chapters of Pirkei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers), a widely popular Mishnaic text within the Jewish world. Avot focuses on essential ethical teachings rather than legal matters, making it accessible to common people as well as scholars (p. 121). "Consisting of sayings and epigrammatic teachings of the [rabbinic] authorities of the Jewish tradition, Abot has been defined as 'the nearest approach made by rabbinic Judaism to a philosophical formulation of its ideas.'"[10] Numerous Judeo-Persian manuscripts of Avot, especially in prose, highlight the popularity of the Mishnaic text among the Persian Jews, likely due to its resemblance to Persian wisdom poetry, known as Pandnameh (Books of Counsel). Moreover, Ganjnamah is infused with a mystical Sufi perspective and draws inspiration from writers like 'Attar, Sa'di (notably his Bustan and Golestan), and even evokes the imagery of Hafez's poetry (Yeroushalmi, 1986, p. 57).

Amnon Netzer, in his published work on Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar's Hovot Yehudah (Duties of Judah), introduces Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar as a Jewish scholar born in Hamadan during the nineteenth century. He was the son of *dayyan* (Hebrew: communal judge) Eliyahu ben El'azar, the learned and distinguished chief rabbi and religious leader of the Jewish community of Hamadan between the 1840s and 1860s. Based on the information derived by Moreen and Yeroushalmi from written and oral sources concerning the author and his family, as well as the Jewish community of Hamadan throughout the nineteenth century, Yehudah ben El'azar underwent training as a physician, a common career path among many Persian Jewish men of affluent backgrounds in several Jewish communities within Persia—among them those of Yazd, Kashan, Tehran, Golpayegan and Khansar—between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. On account of his reputable background and skills, during the 1850s, he was appointed the head of the Jewish community of Hamadan. However, due to conflicts and possibly resentments within the community towards him, he was accused by some of the

[10] Yeroushalmi, 1986, p. 46, quoting Louis Finkelstein, Mabo' le-nuiddektot Awot we-Awot de-Rabbi Natan (New York, 1950), p. 5.

members of his community of embezzling communal taxes, as a result of which he was summoned to court in Tehran in the summer of 1865 and subsequently put in jail.

According to Moreen and Yeroushalmi, this account, as well as the long ordeal of El'azar's journey to Tehran and his subsequent release from release in 1866 has been corroborated in detail in the report of Charles Alison, the British Minister Plenipotentiary in Tehran at the time. On his journey to Tehran, Molla El'azar was arrested by guards hired and bribed by his adversaries, who forcibly brought him to the city. They mistreated him, demanding a large sum of money to stop the abuse. Although briefly released, he was soon imprisoned again, chained, and tortured. Describing the ordeal, he said, "Once every hour they put a chain of twenty manns[11] on my neck […] and took twenty tomans from me." Even upon learning of his father's death, he was denied permission to return home to Hamadan. Later, he met with Mohammad Khan Qajar Sepahsalar (d. 1867), the grand vizier of Naser al-Din Shah (1848-96), and was referred to a court. However, his opponents never appeared in court, and the judge demanded a pishkesh (gift) of 200 tomans to rule in his favour—an amount he couldn't pay. Seeking refuge, Molla El'azar found sanctuary in the grand vizier's stable, where he endured further harassment, threats, and demands until his eventual release. Upon his return to Hamadan, he struggled to regain his status in the community and ultimately left his hometown for Baghdad, where he reportedly continued his medical practice until his death sometime between 1881[12] and 1887[13].

He wrote Hovot Yehudah (Duties of Judah) sometime during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although not as well-known and renowned as the works of the aforementioned authors, Hovot Yehudah is nevertheless an important Judeo-Persian oeuvre on Jewish thought and the doctrines of Judaism, which demonstrates Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar's profound knowledge of various Jewish sources, as well as his familiarity with numerous literary works of non-Jewish origins, namely those of Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE), al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE), Naser al- Din Tusi (d. 1274 CE), Plato (d. 347/8 BCE), and Aristotle (d. 322 BCE).

Examining the works of Shahin, Emrani, and Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar showcases the significance of non-Jewish elements influencing and shaping their writings. While interpreting specifically Jewish texts, they occasionally incorporated Persian and Islamic

[11] 60 kg.
[12] See: Moreen & Yeroushalmi in The Jews of Iran, 2014, p. 72, nr. 9.
[13] See: Geula (2007), p. 77.

perspectives. It can be argued that while the main focus of these authors, particularly Shahin, was Judaism, they were still authors with roots in the cultural landscape of Islamic Persia. It would therefore not be implausible to propose that these cases can, to some extent, reflect Persian Jews who regarded Persia, with its Muslim majority, as a part of their identity. Indeed, their Jewishness was their defining attribute, leading them to consciously criticise certain Muslim beliefs that contradicted their own. For instance, Shahin indirectly rejects some Muslim scholars' polemical view of Ezra (Uzayr) which accused him or one of his disciples of having falsified the Torah after it was burned by Nebuchadnezzar during the destruction of the First Temple, a common theme in Islamic polemics against the Bible. In *Ezranameh*, Shahin states, "Ezra however, had memorised it all; Thus skilled through miracle and might. He wrote it all down as it was at first; Not a jot or tittle of it was changed." (Moreen, p. 110). Similarly, in his poem *Amina: In Praise of Moses, Our Master, Peace Be Upon Him*, Emrani praises Prophet Moses as being "better" than Prophet Muhammad (Yeroushalmi, p. 85) (Moreen, p. 273). Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar also wrote passages criticising Christianity and Islam. Tsadik observes that these cases exemplify how religion was arguably the most significant "dividing line in society" that determined a large part of an individual's self-perception and identity (Tsadik, 2011, p. 223). By revealing their stance on religious disputes in their writings, Shahin and Emrani embrace the fact that they first and foremost, at least religiously, identified as Jews, which separated them from the majority of Persians. Simultaneously, their tendency to draw inspiration from Persian and Muslim cultural elements indicates that, at least to some extent, they culturally identified with Persia.

Although it must be acknowledged that what Shahin and Emrani's mainly focus on in all of their compositions are Judaism and Jewish texts, making the Persian and Muslim elements found in their works only a marginal part of the narratives. Additionally, during that period up until the late nineteenth century, it was common for society to categorise individuals by their religious affiliation, leading to Jews primarily being recognised as adherents of a different faith. This suggests that while Persian Jews may have culturally identified as Persian, it was secondary to their religious identity as Jews, due to society's tendency to define people largely based on religious distinctions. This is further confirmed by instances of Jews converting to Islam, whether by choice or under coercion.

2.1. Conversion

Identity is shaped not only by a group's self-perception but also by how other groups, and by extension, society, view that collective. In the case of the Persian Jews, this meant that their identities were influenced both by their self-image and their self-identification as Jews, and by society's perception of them. This external perception has deep roots in history. From the early Islamic period (around 650 CE) until the dawn of the twentieth century, religion was often the lens through which Persian society in general viewed the world and categorised individuals, distinguishing Muslims from non-Muslims, including the Jews (Tsadik, 2012).

This manner of differentiation, and the fact that the Jews were largely perceived through the lens of religion is evident in the way they were occasionally coerced into converting to Islam by their Muslim neighbours. These attempts to integrate the Jewish minority into the Muslim majority indicate that the main social divide between different groups was religious-based. This was particularly true during the Early Modern period, under the reign of the Safavids (1501-1722). There was a period during the seventeenth century when, as a result of the Safavids' attempts at shaping the identity of their empire through religious uniformity, some of the Jewish communities of Persia underwent major waves of forced conversions. Numerous sources have recorded these accounts of persecution, among which Babai Ibn Lutf's Judeo-Persian chronicle, *Ketab-e Anusi* (The Book of Forced Converts) is most prominent.

Babai Ibn Lutf is the first known historian to talk about Persian Jewry, according to Vera B. Moreen, and little is known about him, except that he was from Kashan. His *Ketab-e Anusi*, written in the style of popular poetic masnavi Persian chronicles, reports the accounts of suffering and persecution faced by the Jews under the reigns of three Safavid rulers: Shah Abbas I (1571-1629), Shah Safl I (1629-1642), and Shah Abbas II (1642-1666). The period between 1656 and 1661/2 was the peak of persecutions against numerous Jewish communities within Persia, such as Isfahan, Kashan, Hamadan, Golpayegan, and Khansar. Ibn Lutf describes in detail the circumstances leading to the forced conversions in the aforementioned cities and towns, as well as the process and manner in which the Jews of these communities managed to regain their religious freedom. These persecutions are largely attributed to the instigation of Mohammad Beg, the Grand Vizier of Shah Abbas II at the time, and seem to have been primarily religiously motivated, although some scholars believe economic factors also played an important role in the process.

This chronicle provides a glimpse at Babai Ibn Lutf's and his fellow Jews' self-identification when the author, while talking about the forced conversions of his time, places it into a larger perspective, viewing the events as part of general Jewish history: "See how the Jewish people have suffered more and more in each generation . . . In every generation, a new exile, following fast upon the other, comes to the Jews from different kings."[14] To be specific, Ibn Lutf places this unfortunate part of the history of the Persian Jews within the larger scope of a larger Jewish history, thus viewing the Jews of Persia as part of the Jewish world.

Another significant Judeo-Persian chronicle that provides insight into the centrality of Jewish religious identity of Persian Jews is *Ketab- e Sargozasht- e Kashan dar bab- e 'Ebri va Guyimi- ye Thani* (The Book of Events in Kashan Concerning the Jews: Their Second Conversion), written by Babai Ibn Farhad, Babai Ibn Lutf's grandson. More limited in focus than *Ketab-e Anusi*, this chronicle focuses primarily on the plight of the Jewish community of Kashan during the Afghan invasion of Persia (1722-1730). Amid conflict between Persian and Afghan forces, and facing suffering and pillages from both sides, the Jewish community leaders in Kashan opted in 1730 for a "voluntary" conversion to Shi'a Islam as a measure of protection, as well as to avoid various taxes the Jews, as well as other non-Muslims were obligated to pay, including the *jizya*. However, despite their efforts, the community was not spared the burden of substantial taxes. Following the continued appeals of one of the chief community leaders, the Jews of Kashan were eventually permitted to return to their faith seven months later.

Babai Ibn Farhad demonstrates his cultural connection to Persia when he writes that he "rub[s] the dust of Khajeh Hafez['s grave] upon"[15] his eyes, a Persian expression that reflects his respect and admiration for the poet, as well as his own cultural identity that links him to Persia. However, the centrality of his Jewish religious identity remains evident throughout the chronicle. He opens by describing the Creator who revealed the Torah to Moses, and later appeals to God to "send the Messiah . . . Reestablish the Temple and Sanctuary . . . O Lord, make us glorious again so that we may engage ourselves in Your Torah every minute."[16] He recounts the times of Moses, the "prince of the prophets" (*sarvar-e*

[14] See: Moreen (1987). *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism* (New York: The American Academy for Jewish Research), p. 28.
[15] See: Moreen (1990). *Iranian Jewry during the Afghan Invasion.* (Stuttgart: Steiner- Verlag), p. 44.
[16] p. 20.

anbiya'), as well as those of Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac.[17] In his account of the conversion of the Jewish community of Kashan, he quotes Abraham Yazdi, one of the members who, despite the pressures from the community leader who had promised Tahmasp Quli Khan he would convince every member of his community to convert to Islam, proudly declares, "I am Jewish, openly and secretly. My Jewishness does not depend on anyone; and if there is oppression, I will emigrate from the county . . . Whether I live or die, I was and remain a Jew."[18] Yet many Jews in Kashan did convert, demonstrating the role of conversion as a means of survival in a society where adherence to religion was the "distinguishing character"—conversion to Islam offered a form of protection for one's life and property. Conversions continued in the following years, albeit not consistently, the most notorious and violent of which is the forced conversion of the Jews of Mashhad in 1839.

2.2. The Crypto-Jews of Mashhad

The Jewish community of Mashhad arguably has a history different from any other Jewish community in Persia. Compelled by circumstances beyond their control, in a place that proved to be hostile to them on numerous occasions, they continued to endure, demonstrating resilience in the face of one of the darkest periods of Persian social and religious history. As part of the "systematically marginalised" Jewish community of Persia, they endured persecution, having to fight for their religious freedom, only to lose it once more on accusations of apostasy and treason against Islam and their homeland.

As previously discussed, on March 27, 1839, which coincided with the Shi'i Muslim mourning period of *Ashura*, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam, the Jewish community of Mashhad was attacked by its Muslim neighbours. In a desperate attempt to stop the violent mob from completely annihilating the neighbourhood, a number of Jewish men sought the *Imam jom'eh* of Mashhad, converted to Islam in his presence, and promised to convert the rest of their fellow Jews in exchange for their safety. As promised, mass conversions to Islam occurred within the community to escape further persecution. This led to the emergence of a crypto-Jewish identity, where Jews began to lead a double life, outwardly practising Islam while maintaining their Jewish traditions in secret. Some genuinely embraced their new faith. Most of them, however, could not see themselves

[17] Moreen (1990). p. 21-25.
[18] p. 39.

as anything other than Jewish. They would go to mosques and publicly observe Shi'i Holy days, but secretly continue to observe their own traditions at home. Patai (1997) states that they would gather through secret passages connecting their houses to pray together and observe their rituals. They would reportedly buy bread on Passover, but not eat it. They were constantly observed by their Muslim neighbours to make sure they had not become *murtad* (apostates), in which case another wave of persecution would have followed.

Although they now shared the same faith as their Shi'i neighbours—at least publicly—the *Jadid al-Islams*, new converts to Islam, as they were generally referred to, were not fully accepted and integrated into the Muslim majority. Indicators such as their separate cemetery, limited or lack of Persian education (evident in Muslim marriage contracts where the *Jadids* signed in Hebrew rather than Persian), and segregated neighbourhoods suggest that they were still mistrusted by their neighbours and not fully integrated. These aspects show that, while these new Muslims were treated better than non-Muslims, they were nonetheless "othered", in spite of conforming to the Islamic society's standards after their conversion. This showcases the fact that the boundaries of their Jewishness went beyond religion, influencing society's perception of them even after they attempted to conform to its standards by converting to the faith of the majority.

The dual lives and experiences of the Mashhadi Jews, while unique in the context of Persia, are reminiscent of a broader pattern of similar occurrences observed elsewhere in the world. They immediately bring to mind a few notorious instances of mass forced conversions such as: The Jews of Spain during the Inquisition of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese Jews of the sixteenth century, as well as the Huguenots of seventeenth century France. Despite the spatial and temporal differences, all of their journeys share similarities with that of the Jews of Mashhad (Nissimi, 2006).

Typically, the majority group enforces forced conversion with the intent of bringing about uniformity of religion, despite the fact that many of them are well aware that true, full conversion cannot be accomplished through a single action or declaration of faith. A famous example of this is a quote from Philip II (1556-1598), who enacted the forced conversion of the Moors of Granada, who said: "[M]y wish and that of the queen is that these moros be baptised; if they do not become Christians, their sons or grandsons will." It is evident that the conversions were partially intended to essentially eradicate the faith-based barriers hindering

the process of "acculturation and fusion", barriers maintained by religious discourse.[19] Similarly, Louis XIV (1643-1715), who decreed the forced conversion of the French Protestant Huguenots, in 1685, as part of his grand scheme of achieving "une loi, une foi, une roi" – "one law, one faith, one king" (Nissimi, 2006, p. 3).

These conversions were, at best, only partially successful. A seventeenth-century report on Seville describes the Moriscos, that is, the ex-Muslims who had converted to Christianity, as existing in great numbers; they were continuously accused of activities like stealing children and spreading Islamic teachings.[20] In a similar fashion, a century after the 1391 mass forced conversions of the Jews in Spain, the *conversos* were still a cause for concern, leading the Spanish court to expel the remaining Jews in an attempt to eliminate Jewish practices. In France, even nearly a hundred years after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, some Protestants were still executed for allegedly preventing their children from becoming Catholics.

Rather than eradicating these "undesirable" religions or enforcing conformity, forced conversion often seemed to strengthen resistance. Those who endured this "crypto life" often emerged with an even stronger commitment to their original faith. For instance, after enduring the Inquisition, these Portuguese new Christians practised their crypto-Judaism more covertly and with greater dedication.[21] Ben-Zion Netanyahu, despite his belief that most *conversos* had abandoned Judaism by the time of the Inquisition, argued that the violent actions of the Inquisition itself halted assimilation, ultimately reviving Marranism in Spain.[22] The Moriscos, too, maintained a distinct ethnic identity until their expulsion between 1609 and 1614.[23]

Even in an outline framework, the similarities between these cases and the *anusi* of Mashhad are noteworthy. The main objection to such a comparison would arise from the significant difference in the size of the populations: the Mashhadis' population of about 7,000 Jews is humble compared to the 200,000 *conversos* in Spain and Portugal, or to the French Huguenots, who constituted about ten percent of the French population. The Mashhadis' century-long forced conversion bears resemblance to the Huguenots' similar experience but pales in duration compared to that of the Iberian *conversos*, for whom it spanned several centuries. This extended period led to a complex and, at times, untraceable identity for many

[19] Ladero Quesada, 2014, p. 74.
[20] Perry, 1996, p. 48.
[21] Gerber, 1992, p. 143.
[22] Netanyahu, 1973, p. 3.
[23] Stuczynski, 2000: 140

conversos; some lost all connection to their Jewish origins, while others faced scepticism from Orthodox Jewish communities about the authenticity of their identity. Many developed a unique, hybrid identity, which was difficult to define. However, some Iberian *conversos* found a path back to openly practising Judaism with the establishment of a community in Holland about a century after forced conversion in Portugal.

One major difference between the Iberian *conversos* and groups like the Huguenots or the Mashhadi Jews is that the *conversos* faced the Inquisition, a threat neither of the other groups encountered, though all went through periods of persecution that led to them being forced to lead lives of religious secrecy. This secrecy involved the constant fear of exposure, with the possibility of betrayal by neighbours or acquaintances ever-present, which was common for all aforementioned groups. Although distinguished by time and geography, crypto-faith communities share essential traits within the context of their social identity. In her book *The Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis*, Nissimi argues, "their common denominator as crypto-faith communities have been the main generator of their new identity." (Nissimi, 2006, p. 5). This shared identity developed through every stage of their existence, from the double lives of the individuals to the organisation of groups dedicated to preserving the faith of their members, each shaping an entity that contributed to this social identity.

There have been various sociological theories explaining the persistence of crypto-faith communities. Spinoza was the first to attempt an explanation of the difference between the Spanish and Portuguese conversos:

> That they are preserved largely through the hatred of other nations is demonstrated by historical fact. When the King of Spain formally compelled the Jews to embrace the religion of his kingdom or else to go in exile, a considerable number of Jews accepted Catholicism. Now since all privileges of native Spaniards were granted to those who embraced their religion, and they were then considered worthy of full civic rights, they were so speedily assimilated to the Spaniards that after a short while no trace of them was left, nor any remembrance. But just the opposite fate befell those whom the King of Portugal compelled to embrace his country's religion. Although converted to this religion, they lived on their own, because the King declared them unworthy of civic rights. (Spinoza, 1998, p. 47)

Spinoza appears to have made an assumption that these groups endured as a reaction to the external persecution, but his explanation does not fully account for the internal differences within these communities. Moriscos' survival is perhaps briefly suggested or

implied, rather than fully explained, within the framework of the pariah group model.[24] Developed by sociologist Max Weber (1963), the pariah group model was initially intended specifically to explain Jewish survival and economic success in the face of persecution:

"In our usage, pariah people denotes a distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by prohibitions against commensalism and intermarriage originally founded upon magical, tabooistic, and ritual injunctions. Two additional traits of a pariah people are political and social disprivilege and far-reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning." (Weber, p. 109).

Basically, Weber proposes that social groups ostracised due to religious or cultural differences often maintain distinct identities and even thrive economically. The term may also be fitting for the conversos following the *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity) laws due to the Catholics' rejection of them. Weber applied the pariah group model to explain Jewish survival without specifically distinguishing between Jews and conversos, acknowledging similarities between Protestants and Jews. However, he emphasised their differences, viewing these as the reason Jews became a pariah group, while Protestants established a foundation for modern capitalism. Even after Weber, pariah groups are perceived as minorities, representing "groups which are actively rejected by the host population because of behaviour or characteristics positively condemned, though often useful in some specific practical way . . . [T]hey are often forced to make use of easily noticeable diacritica to advertise their identity."[25] For Protestants, the issue was largely about faith rather than conduct; where they were tolerated, they did not occupy a pariah status, and where they were not, they, figuratively speaking, simply ceased to exist, being forced either to renounce their faith and convert, or leave. Protestants wishing to assimilate faced no difficulties after renouncing their beliefs, unlike Jewish pariah groups, who found it challenging to shed the stigma tied to their origins. Consequently, the Protestants had no need to conceal or falsify their backgrounds to integrate (Nissimi, 2006). Furthermore, since the crypto-faith groups were not tolerated as such, it is highly unlikely that this concept could accurately characterise any of them. If they were found to be disloyal to their new faith, they were required to pay the price of their treachery, which was usually fatal.

Since these explanations fail to consider the fundamental similarities across all crypto-faith groups, they are generally inadequate. Neither the number of persons who remained faithful nor the number of religious principles to which they remained faithful can

[24] Perry, p. 50 nr, 27.
[25] Barth, 1998, p. 30.

be used to dismiss this resemblance as merely coincidental. Instead, it confirms that converts share a common identity as a social group. They do, in fact, share many characteristics with religious minorities, particularly those of underprivileged backgrounds facing persecution. The distinction between a persecuted religious minority and a converted community—particularly one that is attempting to maintain secret commitment to another religion—lies not in the degree of persecution or danger, but rather in the character of the danger and the core of religious loyalty (Nissimi, 2006, p. 7). It's possible that the danger is more subtle than evident. The individual bearing the religious mask may even benefit from a higher social status and financial situation as a result of their conversion, but they are always in danger of losing not just what they have acquired in material belongings and status, but also their existence altogether.

The theories mentioned above fail to explain the overall image of the crypto-faith communities, and what compelled them to turn to a dual life and form tightly-knit, cohesive communities shaped by this duality. The statement of Pedro López de Ayala, a Castilian converso is representative of this argument: "I'll have you know that I will never forget the milk that I suckled." (Parrondo, 1992, p. 30) Indeed, a new convert was expected to instantly change long-standing habits and memories, which was a difficult task even if the individual wished to do so. In sociological terms, Kenneth Moore (1976) has remarked that even in the case of a sincere conversion with the intent of cultural assimilation, it was hard to abruptly cut off all social ties and relationships: "As a product of a complex communal social organization, how much could the individual undo the intense socialization of his childhood?" (Moore, p. 161) At least during the initial stage of assimilation, the converts continued to hold on to the familiar and, whether consciously or unconsciously, invoked a sense of community.

Generally, according to Nissimi, the converted minority behaved in one of three ways: Some went into exile to practise their faith openly, and some genuinely embraced their new faith. However, what she refers to as the "middle group" posed the greatest dilemma: "those who went underground, retaining different parts of their former beliefs and customs." (Nissimi, 2006, p. 9)

Spanish Jewry is an excellent example of multiple choices available to the converts, as individuals who chose different paths coexisted, even in the Spanish court itself. From 1391 to 1492, observant Jews maintained a distinct, albeit diminished, community. They lived alongside the newly converted Christians, many of whom continued to firmly hold on to their

Jewish roots. Nissimi claims the 1492 Expulsion Decree ultimately served as an invitation for many to convert and remain in Spain, therefore whether an individual chose conversion or exile, they exercised this choice. In contrast, Portuguese Jews faced a mass forced baptism in 1496, removing the option to openly practise Judaism. Yet even in Portugal, individuals could still decide whether to become crypto-Jews, fully embrace Christianity, or leave and openly practise Judaism. Despite the mass conversions, most converts chose to remain in Portugal—many of whom had previously opted for exile when given a similar choice in Spain (Nissimi, 2006, p. 10).

The contrasting fate of the *conversos* in Spain and Portugal highlight the crucial role that a cohesive community plays in sustaining a crypto-faith identity. The longer endurance of the Portuguese conversos supports this, as their collective structure remained intact when they were forced to convert, allowing community bonds to transform alongside their religious identity. Drawing parallels between the aforementioned crypto-faith groups of Europe and the Jewish community of Mashhad, and examining the sociological theories developed to explain their complexities provide a better understanding of the multitudes of identities that exist within these communities. Furthermore, this comparison underlines the significance of the Mashhadi crypto-Jews as a distinctive case of Jewish identities within the context of Persia.

The importance of the story of the Mashhadi Jews cannot be overlooked. Primarily, their story reveals valuable insight on the process of identity formation—its origins, its evolution over time, and its continuity in maintaining cohesion. As a community well-rehearsed in concealing their faith, they developed from an early age a capacity to navigate these multiple identities with ease. Initially, after the events of 1839 during the reign of the Qajars, they presented themselves outwardly as Muslims and Persians, while retaining their Jewish identity. This manifested in various ways, namely in the way they went about upholding their original beliefs and religious rituals.

Observance of *kosher* dietary laws and religious *mizvoth* (commandments) placed the Mashhadi Jews in a challenging position, as the fulfilment of many of these regulations involved the danger of exposing their secret religious identity. A source that provides an account of some of these challenges is the Dilmani document. Written by Samad Aqa ben Yousef Dilmani, this document, according to Raphael Patai, is the most detailed one regarding the lives of the Jews of Mashhad and the aftermath of *Allahdad.* This document is preserved

in the Central Zionist Archives.[26] The document explains that following their forced conversion, the new converts, fearing that any documents revealing their covert Jewish identity might provoke further Muslim attacks, destroyed all receipts and other papers. For similar reasons, they avoided writing *gittim* (divorce letters), as these would also demonstrate their continued observance of Judaism. Additionally, they sent Torah scrolls and other Jewish texts to other cities, such as Yazd and Kerman, for safekeeping (Patai, 1997, p. 57). These measures, which may have also been taken by the Jews of other cities in Persia, may explain the scarcity of primary sources regarding Persian Jews in general, as anything that linked them to their Jewishness pre-conversion could be used against them and put them in further danger of persecution.

According to the Dilmani document, in the early period after the conversions, the crypto-Jews struggled to keep *kosher*. To obtain kosher meat, a man would give a chicken to his wife, who would secretly carry it at night to the *shohet* (Jewish ritual slaughterer) under her chador (veil). Some individuals even slaughtered sheep in secrecy at midnight, distributing the meat to those who avoided non-kosher foods, including the sick and women recovering from childbirth, all while taking considerable precautions. Initially, the crypto-Jews had to refrain from weekday prayer gatherings; they instead gathered only on Shabbats and other jewish holidays in secret places, such as in cellars that were safely locked, and took further precaution by placing guards outside. These guards were sometimes an unveiled woman who would sit in the courtyard or the entrance corridor, which prevented any strangers from entering the house due to the laws of segregation that forbid any interaction between a man and a woman who were not related.

For Passover, families secretly prepared matzoth (unleavened bread consumed during the seven days of Passover) at night and behind well-guarded doors, keeping them well-hidden. In order to mislead the Muslims and avoid being discovered, they would continue to buy normal bread from the market, which they would secretly distribute among the poor Muslims. Their diet during Passover consisted mostly of rice, and the Passover wine was also hard to obtain. Moreover, they avoided blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*; they would instead fast and gather to pray in secret at their houses. For the feast of *Sukkot*, they refrained from sitting in booths, but they did procure two *lulavs* and *etrogs*, two of the spices used during *Sukkot*, which were shared among the community for blessings.

[26] Stuart, 1845, p. 325-6, in Patai, 1997, p. 57.

Circumcisions continued as per Jewish tradition. As for the wedding ceremony, however, the Jews would first officiate the details according to Muslim tradition, but would gather at night to perform their own ceremony with the *chuppah* (the canopy that the Jewish couple stands under during their wedding ceremony) and a marriage contract according to Jewish laws. Moreover, they observed the regulations of *niddah* (menstrual impurity) and the laws regarding childbirth, but did not have *mikveh* (ritual bath) in the traditional sense. Prayer books and sacred texts were guarded with utmost secrecy, and although their shops remained open on Sabbaths and holidays, no transactions were conducted (Patai, 1997, p. 229). As previously mentioned, society's tendency to view the Jews primarily through a religious lens may have further contributed to their reinforcement of their religious bonds, strengthening their connections with Judaism, identifying to a greater extent with Jewish beliefs, practices, and values.

Notably, the majority of these new converts succeeded in maintaining Jewish rituals in secret despite substantial pressure from the Muslim clergy. This pressure included strict prohibitions against animal slaughter by converts, aimed at preventing adherence to *kosher* dietary laws, as well as mandatory attendance at the mosque. Additionally, their children were required to attend Quran classes (Amanat, 2011).

It must be acknowledged that the contrast between the community and the surrounding society did not inhibit cultural interactions; rather, it fostered them. Some of the Mashhadis, in an attempt to facilitate the process of assimilation/dissimulation, turned their attention to the similarities between Islam and Judaism. Others found solace in Persian culture as a means for cultural assimilation that required little religious commitment; Mashhadi Jews had an inclination for Persian literature and poetry long before the forced conversions, particularly Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and the poetry of Hafez. After the conversion, this served as a way for them to evade Islamic doctrines by using these Persian compositions as a vehicle to facilitate their assimilation within Persian society. Moreover, according to communal tradition, some members briefly displayed an inclination towards Baha'ism, a religious movement that gained momentum in Persia around the mid-nineteenth century. Founded by Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-1892), Baha'ism began to gain many followers in Persia despite the cruel, active measures taken to suppress it; their numbers are estimated to have reached between 500,000 and one million by the end of the nineteenth century. The Bahai faith upholds the divine unity, encourages its followers to seek the truth, promotes the oneness of humanity and the inherent unity of all religions, and calls for harmony between science and religion. It advocates for

equal rights and responsibilities for men and women, rejects all forms of prejudice—whether national, religious, political, or economic—and prioritises universal education. Ultimately, the faith aspires to achieve world peace, among several other high principles (Patai, 1997, p. 76). It is a small wonder Baha'ism appealed to a great number of Persian Jews who had to navigate the intolerance and persecution of the Shi'i majority in their daily lives.

Many Persian Jews viewed the Baha'i faith as a form of secularism. Nissimi states that they were potentially drawn to its principle of the essential unity of all religions, which may have been appealing to those navigating a complicated relationship with the faith of the majority. In some ways, aspects of Baha'ism aligned with certain core principles of Enlightenment modernity, such as the question of the separation of religion and state, individual liberty, gender equality, and the rule of law. Nissimi (2006, p. 32) views this interest in Baha'ism as the closest some Mashhadi Jews came to the model attributed to the conversos: "modernism and secularism as outcomes of the crypto-faith situation."

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, religious customs began to proceed more leniently, allowing the community to practise them as closely as possible to Jewish traditions. According to the existing recorded memories, approximately after the 1870s, the community was unified in their adherence to Judaism (60). Jewish holy days like Yom Kippur, Passover, and Shabbat were celebrated and the majority of the community kept *kosher* (Nissimi, 2003, p. 86).

The crypto-Jews of Mashhad were eventually able to identify as Jews once again after the end of the Second World War, details of which are beyond the scope of the present research. Nevertheless, the case of the Mashhadi Jews is undoubtedly one of significance for the study of Jewish identities, through which the relationship between religion and identity can be closely examined. Moreover, it is a case where an identity can be preserved alongside multiple others, regardless of whether the other layers of identities were genuine or merely protective measures.

To conclude, identity is a complex and evolving construct, shaped by a variety of internal and external factors over time. The question of Jewish identity, in particular, is a fundamental, albeit complicated and multidimensional one; delving deeper into the topic reveals that this identity is often not singular, even when examining a specific minority group such as the Persian Jews. The Jews found their Jewishness to be the core element uniting them, but it also alienated them from the majority group, creating an "us" versus "them", both

for the community and the majority of the society. Nevertheless, their Jewishness sustained a collective sense of self that transcended individual variation in religious, cultural, and ethnic expression. Persian Jewish identities were dynamic rather than fixed; they adapted to shifting historical contexts, which were more often than not hostile towards them during the Early Modern period, while maintaining a strong foundation rooted in shared religious beliefs and cultural practices, as well as a strong sense of community. The identities of the Persian Jews in this period were neither solely imposed by the external forces of Persian society nor wholly self-contained within Jewish traditions. Rather, they were an evolving synthesis of internal values and external influences. It is necessary to view Persian Jewish identities as dynamic constructs, shaped by historical circumstances and cultural interconnections with their surrounding environment. The resilience of the Persian Jews, and their adaptability in the face of intolerance and persecution reveal a myriad of identities that, while distinctively Jewish, were far from unresponsive to the broader cultural currents of their homeland. In conclusion, the Jews of Persia serve as a compelling case study in the broader discourse on collective identities, emphasising the importance of recognizing the complexities and nuances inherent in the lived experiences of minority groups.

Chapter 3 - Memory, Community, and Identity Perseverance: The Case of Mashhadi Jews

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Mashhadi Jewish community is the way its history and culture has been persevered since its formation in the eighteenth century. The majority of the evidence regarding the community's turbulent history has survived in the form of stories embedded within their folklore and tradition. Even so, its story has been told from different angles and by various accounts, most of which depended on the memory of the narrator. Thus, it is crucial to research these memories for a better understanding of how this community's specific identity has been preserved throughout their history.

Anthony D. Smith, British historical sociologist, states: "Later generations of a particular community are formed in their collective life through the memories, myths, and traditions of the community into which they are born and educated." He further argues that these traditions, histories, myths, and symbols must evolve through "the existing, living memories and beliefs of the people who are to compose the nation." (Smith, 1993, p. 16). This principle can arguably be applied to many forms of community. Indeed, as Hilda Nissimi states, "an interaction of building and rebuilding exists between a community and its collective memory." (Nissimi, 2003, p. 76)

The concept of collective memory—also known as social memory—was developed in the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist. In his book *The Social Framework of Memory*, he states that only social groups determine what is worth remembering and how it will be remembered; even individual memory is, to a certain extent, structured through social frameworks, and that collective memory is a social reality transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and traditions of the group. In contemporary academic discourse, collective memory is generally regarded as a social construct. The process of selecting and perpetuating specific memories serves not only to forge a shared identity among members of a social group but also to shape the group's broader self-definition (Burke, 1989).

Halbwachs' approach led the discourse on collective knowledge into more of a cultural framework. In his view, if the specific identity a person develops as a result of belonging to a distinct society or culture manages to maintain itself through the generations, it would be a result of the endurance of their social interactions and traditions. In other words, the continued existence of a distinct group or culture depends on its cultural memory, a

concept which will be thoroughly discussed later in the chapter. This shared memory provides a knowledge framework that shapes the behaviours and experiences of the members of that group. It is preserved through their rituals and traditions, as well as their folklore and oral tradition, which are passed down through the generations.

The history of the Mashhadi Jews is immensely intertwined with memory and its transmission, to the extent that distinguishing them may seem almost impossible. Their position as a crypto-Jewish community in a majority Muslim environment led them to take measures to ensure the perseverance of their Jewishness. This was done in a variety of ways, all of which required the cooperation of their fellow community members; thus, a strong communal bond was shaped in the process that came to define their identity. As any evidence of their secret practices would bring further life-threatening danger to the whole community, much of their history and culture survived through various forms of memory transmission. Thus, examining these memories provides valuable insights into some of the ways in which a Persian Jewish community preserved its identity in the face of forced conversion.

3.1. Communicative Memory and Oral Traditions

While it is not the purpose of the present research to immensely elaborate on the sociological implications of memory in itself, but rather use them as instruments in order to better explain the particularities of the Mashhadi identity, it is useful to introduce the concept of “communicative memory”. Aleida and Jan Assmann, German Egyptologists and cultural historians, define the term as the recollections formed exclusively by everyday, informal personal interactions. Halbwachs gathered and analysed these varieties under the concept of collective memory; they comprise the field of oral history. Assmann describes these everyday interactions as highly non-specialised, lacking thematic cohesion, and disorganised (Assmann, 1995, p. 126). Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep the concept in mind while examining a community with little surviving documentation of its existence and culture; these interactions, while lacking strong historical foundations in many cases, often provide valuable insights into the communal life and traditions otherwise obliterated by time and circumstances.

In the case of the Mashhadi Jews, besides transmitting their history and practices during their time as crypto-Jews, they passed along communal accounts of oral history, which constitutes a crucial source for purposes of history reconstruction. In a community that was

determined to preserve its past despite the considerable danger that threatened its very existence, transmitting the stories of the past through oral traditions and folklore seems inevitable. As the stories of various Mashhadi families were being developed and transmitted, a new community was blossoming in the process. In other words, these oral traditions both preserve the community's history and simultaneously acknowledge a sense of belonging to that collectivity (Nissimi, 2006). Each story became a commemoration of both Jewish tradition and communal life representing the intricate combination that evolved during their years as a crypto-Jewish community.

Raphael Patai, Hungarian anthropologist, who has recorded several accounts of the Mashhadi, states that the characteristic of these narratives can be boiled down to a central theme: "[They are] stories of trials and tribulations to which their ancestors were exposed and which they survived because of their decency and honesty, their ability and cunning, and also their faith and unwavering trust in God." (Patai, p. 151) These stories describe how in the face of danger and destruction to the community, their religious leaders were often the ones who did not hesitate to take great measures, even at the risk of self-sacrifice. Additionally, the Mashhadi Jewish tales and memories have another common characteristic; the events they recount either actually did happen or or the narrators believed them so. This feature, according to Patai, distinguishes the community's stories from usual folktales. These stories do not include supernatural elements and differ from legends that describe miraculous or extraordinary events in the lives of saints or heroes. While an element of wonder exists within them, it is subtly implied rather than openly stated, revealing itself in the form of divine intervention. Major milestones of their communal history are represented by these tales, some of which include: The community's foundation, the events of Allahdad in 1839, and the community's aid to Herati Jewish prisoners who were brought to Mashhad after the Persian-Afghan war in 1856 (Patai, 1998, p. 151-52).

The first story recorded by Patai in 1945, as narrated by Farajullah Nasrullayoff, a member of the Mashhadi community, tells a peculiar account of the life of Nader Shah, who inadvertently enabled the establishment of the Mashhadi community in the eighteenth century. It is peculiar in the sense that the monarch's reputation for ruthlessness and cruelty is rarely alluded to in this story, which rather focuses on recounting Nader Shah's military conquests, in particular his invasion of India, and his use of Kalat as a fortress for safeguarding the treasures he had returned with from the pillaging campaign. The Jews' gratitude towards the Afsharid Shah is further expressed in the story, as it interprets his relocation of the Qazvini

Jewish families to Mashhad as a gesture of his trust; Nader Shah allegedly entrusted these Jews with protecting his treasures more than his Shi'i Muslim subjects. Thus, the story provides a subtle hint into the self-perception of the Mashhadis. First and foremost, it showcases their sense of belonging to their homeland as Persians; being entrusted with such a great task by the emperor further validates their status as Persians, despite being a Jewish minority. Moreover, the narrative of Jews being more trustworthy than Shi'is, while partially alluding to Nader Shah's decentralisation of the political authority of Shi'i clergy, can be viewed as a case of "us" versus "them". After all, the Mashhadi Jews were surrounded by the Shi'i majority in a city that was home to a major Shi'i pilgrimage site. By assigning this distinct purpose to Nader Shah's population transfer, they position themselves in the broader context of Persia as Persian contributors who help shape its history, while also emphasising their distinct identity as a Jewish community.

As previously stated, some of these oral traditions highlight the great deeds and sacrifices of the community's religious leaders. An example of this is found in the stories narrated about Mullah Siman-Tov, a historical figure and religious leader of Mashhadi Jews in the decades preceding the events of Allahdad in 1839. Although almost nothing is known about his life, the fact that the tales of his life and deeds—particularly his sacrificial act for the benefit of his community—were still a part of the collective memory of Mashhadis over a century after his death is indicative of his significance for the community. Some of these stories highlight Siman-Tov's knowledge of Judaism and the Bible, which could reflect the high regard of religious piousness as one of the values of the community. Furthermore, some of the stories display Siman-Tov's strong sense of justice, even at the expense of his community. In one account, Mullah Siman-Tov resolves a dispute between a Muslim man and a Jewish goldsmith. The Muslim had commissioned the goldsmith to make earrings for his betrothed, giving him an amount of gold. When he turned up to acquire the earrings, however, the goldsmith denied he had ever met the man. When the matter was brought to Mullah Siman-Tov by an official accompanying the two men, he asked the goldsmith in the Mashhadi Jews' particular dialect[27] to deny everything; the Jew proclaimed that he had already denied it, thus confessing to his guilt in the dispute. Subsequently, Siman-Tov disclosed this to the official, thus bringing the goldsmith to justice. Apparently, Siman-Tov had decreed the man's guilt before the official had the chance to finish his statement of the affair, which seems to

[27] Patai refers to it as Lo-Torai or "not Toraic"., containing elements of Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkic. I was unable to find any academic sources that back this up.

have confused the Imam Jom'eh of Mashhad. According to the story, when he met Siman-Tov, the Imam asked him whether he had declared the Jew guilty out of fear. Mullah Siman-Tov answered: "No, I did not fear you. when I am sitting on the chair of judgment, I cannot do aught but judge the case according to its merits." (Patai, 1998, p. 170-71). Although the guilty man was a member of Siman-Tov's community, he did not hesitate to expose his crime for the sake of doing what was right. This could be a reflection of the values the broader community holds dear, for instance their inclination towards divine justice. These stories, trivial as they may seem, can help paint a more clear picture of the community's characteristics, as reflected in their collective memory.

Another oral tradition worth mentioning is the story of the Jews of Kalat as Rainmakers, which recounts how the community almost fell victim to an anti-Jewish conspiracy. According to the narrator, Nasrullayoff, during a severe drought that lasted three years and devastated the town's crops, the Muslims accused the Jews of having caused the crisis. They repeatedly appeared before Palang Tushkhan Jalayir, the governor of Kalat, and claimed that the Jews had provoked God by consuming alcohol, demanding that every Jew should either convert to Islam or be annihilated. Facing increasing pressure to resolve the crisis, he proposed that the Muslims hold a forty-day prayer ceremony for rainfall, and if their prayers went unheeded, then the Jews must assume their role, praying according to their own customs for three days; if their prayers, too, went unanswered, they would be punished according to religious law. According to the narrative, the Muslim prayers failed to produce any rain, and thus the Jews, drawing upon their faith and communal solidarity, approached the matter with solemn preparation, fasting and conducting collective prayers. Eventually, the Jews' prayers were answered, leading to a significant downpour that ended the drought. This event reportedly improved the Jews reputation, particularly as it led to them gaining the respect of the governor, who subsequently took measures to protect them from further accusations by the Muslims. The incident is remembered as a moment of divine intervention and a validation of the Jews' dedication to their religious practices.

Although it is not clear whether the timeline of this story falls before or after the events of *Allahdad*, it is a stark reflection of the fear and anxiety that the community experienced as a Jewish minority surrounded by religious intolerance and persecution that could, at any given chance, prove to be fatal for them, even in the form of accusations that could not be corroborated in any reasonable way. This fear is embedded in this story, as well as other tales in the community's traditions, highlighting the instability of its position.

Interestingly, the story concludes with the governor of Kalat warning the Jews that the Muslims' deep-rooted animosity and intolerance could very well escalate further in the future with no one to protect the Jews, advising them to leave the town for their own safety. Assuming this story takes place before 1839, the governor's warning could somehow serve as a kind of foreshadowing, as the Jews reportedly did move away from Kalat, most of them settling in the city of Mashhad, where the events of Allahdad happened, which were also sparked by accusations made against the Jewish community. It could also be indicative of the aforementioned anxiety preserved in the community's memory through several generations.

While the narratives before Allahdad generally reflected on the community's values—particularly religious values—and anxieties of accusations and religious persecution, the recorded stories of the community after its mass conversion often allude to a strong sense of community; the stories, albeit not historically corroborated, show how the Mashhadi Jews navigated their lives as *Jadid al-Islams* in a communal context, their ties with their fellow crypto-Jews coming to their aid in times of dire need. The most prevalent example of this in the stories recorded by Patai, is the account of the community rescuing the Herati Jewish prisoners in the aftermath of the Persian-Afghan war. As previously discussed, during and after the events of 1839, many Jews chose to emigrate to Herat, capital city of the Herat province in Afghanistan, rather than stay in their community and convert to Islam, even if it was only outwardly.

Although the specifics of the Persian-Afghan war and Herat's precarious position are not within the scope of the current research, it suffices to say that prior to 1856-57, Herat was a part of the Persian province of Khorasan, with its governors appointed by the Persians. Its prominence made it difficult for the Persians to accept the loss of such a vital centre. In 1857, Nasr al-Din Shah led a substantial military campaign to reclaim Herat, ultimately capturing the city. Following the conquest, the Muslim population of Herat expressed allegiance to them. In an effort to gain favour with the Persian authorities, they accused the Jewish community—many of whom had migrated from Mashhad less than two decades earlier—of aiding the Herati forces by importing nails, horseshoes, gunpowder, and lead from Mashhad, thereby allegedly supporting resistance efforts against the Persians. While some Herati Jews indeed engaged in these trades, they were a means of conducting business rather than declaring their political allegiance against their homeland. Subsequently, the Persian authorities issued an edict, charging the entire Jewish community of Herat with treason and illegal trade of weapons. They were reportedly compelled to march on foot from Herat to a

village in the vicinity of Mashhad. The main focus of the present story, however, is the Mashhadi community's aid to these Jews in their dire state.

According to oral tradition, these Jews were confined in Baba Qodrat village, near the gates of the Mashhadi Jewish community for two years, during which many of them died from starvation and various diseases. While the local Mashhadis were initially unable to improve the living conditions of their fellow Jews—they were afraid that doing so would draw further suspicion to them and expose their crypto-Jewish practices—they frequently provided them with food and clothing. They also appealed to the governor, requesting that the prisoners be set free, for which he demanded a large sum of money that even the wealthiest Mashhadi Jews did not have. In this seemingly hopeless situation, Hajj Ismail Levi, a community leader who was apparently also the founder of the Mashhadi synagogue in Jerusalem took initiative. He offered to contribute a significant amount to the ransom, arguing that all worldly possessions were worthless if they could not be used to save their fellow Jews. His generosity and sacrifice inspired the other families to do the same, thus raising the sufficient funds to liberate their brethren.

Although some particularities of the story are questionable in terms of historical accuracy, it nevertheless paints a picture of the community's history as its members preserved it through their oral transmissions. Unlike many folktales, there are no supernatural elements evident in this story. Even the element of divine intervention is arguably not as actively present, as it is the community and its members that make a collective effort to save their kind. It is perhaps also a testimony to the resilience and resourcefulness of the Mashhadis, demonstrating their ability to occasionally leverage their economic and social networks even in dire circumstances. Moreover, stories like this highlight how the Mashhadis' communal experience was arguably strengthened by the events of Allahdad. Although the anxiety and trauma of the violent conversion inevitably found their way into the corners of the community's memory, it also arguably solidified their sense of community. As a religious minority living in a majorly Shi'i, religious city like Mashhad, they soon realised the value of their community, and through historicising the folklore and stories discussed above, they strengthened their communal identity.

3.2. Cultural Memory and the Sacred History

After discussing how Mashhadi Jewish oral traditions and folklore contributed to the formation and development of their "collective memory", it is necessary to take a step back from the everyday interactions and stories in order to consider a different aspect of "collective memory", which deals with memories maintained through cultural construction and communication. This is referred to as "cultural memory". According to Jan Assmann, "cultural memory" is a form of "collective memory" maintained by a group of people sharing the same culture. Assmann defines the concept by distinguishing it from the concept of "communicative memory"; as previously mentioned, the latter refers to everyday interactions, which lack the structured, symbolic elements characteristic of "cultural memory". As stated above, the memories that comprise it are maintained through cultural construction, (e.g., texts, rites, monuments) as well as group communication (practice, observance, recital) (Assmann, 1995, p. 129).

When an individual encounters a dominant culture, conception of their own culture is sharpened. The very notion of joining a new culture, regardless of their acceptance or rejection, either intensifies or refines the original culture. Thus, through a process of redefinition, communal identity is formed (Gellner, p. 61-62). This identity is often shaped by communal history, religion, and culture, among others. Therefore, since "cultural memory" is formed by a group who share the same culture, it can be argued that the communal identity of the Mashhadi Jews was shaped by their "cultural memory". Redefinitions of Persian Jewish social identities, more often than not, are partly a result of external pressures, such as persecution and conversion, which compel the Jews to reconsider their selection of customs and values (Nissimi, 2006, p. 52). In the same fashion, the forced conversion of the Mashhadi Jews led them to redefine themselves in order to facilitate their integration within general society, while maintaining their separate, secret identity.

The aftermath of the conversion raised certain questions regarding the Mashhadi crypto-Jews' identity. What did it mean to be a Jew? What were the essential parts of their religion and culture they needed to preserve and remember at all costs, and how? While the answers may have diverged from the strict religious standards of Jewish Law, they nonetheless represented the necessary foundation to ensure their identity would be preserved, even if it was not a strictly religious one, per say. Although every individual and family made their own choices, each of these decisions was a step towards sustaining their community. For

the Jews of Mashhad, the preservation of a distinct identity inherently required the performance of certain rituals and adhering religious practices. Jewish observances, rooted in the commemoration or reenactment of sacred historical events, served as markers of sacred memory within the yearly cycle of the Jewish calendar (Yerushalmi, 1981, p. 44-5). Furthermore, as each community developed its own methods of preservation, sacred history emerged as a cornerstone of communal identity.

According to Nissimi, the most essential layer of identity for the Jews of Mashhad was their memory of sacred history. She states that each of their religious observances served as a dual act of remembrance (Nissimi, 2006, p. 53). For the majority of Persian Jews, including the Mashhadis, these practices commemorated sacred historical events and reaffirmed their Jewish identity. Traditions and customs in general are a significant element of communal consciousness that created a bond by connecting the present and the past (Petrov, p. 86-7). For the Mashhadis, much like other crypto-Jews, these customs carried an additional, secret meaning, which preserved the memory of their Jewishness, and their dual existence as outwardly Muslim but secretly Jewish, thus defining their unique identity as Mashhadis. The Mashhadi community's sudden transformation following their mass conversion further highlighted collective memory as the element that bound the Jews by creating a stronger sense of community.

In the early decades of their existence as crypto-Jews, the Mashhadis almost exclusively married other members of the community, thus avoiding inter-faith marriages with their Muslim neighbours. These tightly knit marriage networks ensured that maintaining family ties also required a basic commitment to Judaism. Over time, these family ties evolved into communal ones, making adherence to Judaism a key condition for belonging to the community. Mashhadis often had family businesses and formed closely-knit communal groups, even when living outside Mashhad (Nissimi, 2006, p. 54) Through these familial and social connections, business relationships also flourished. While some Mashhadis maintained their religion out of personal devotion, this commitment was often twofold: a demonstration of both religious faith and loyalty to the community. The balance between these motivations of course varied by individual. Moreover, this devotion was reinforced by the Mashhadis' bond with other Jewish communities in the world, some of which happened to have more freedom than them. Identifying with these religious beliefs and practices strengthened their sense of connection to the broader Jewish world, providing solace and a shared hope for collective redemption.

The argument that sacred history plays a crucial role in shaping the Mashhadis' collective memory holds particularly true for unique religious practices that define a group by creating a distinct subculture (Nissimi, 2006, p. 54). Any community living together for an extended period naturally develops its own interpretation of religious practices. In this context, because religious practices involve selection, as they are embedded into a group's collective memory, they become one of its defining elements. The community's way of adhering to their religion, combined with its celebration and commemoration of its past as an openly Jewish group, creates a blend of sacred history and collective memory. In this way, religious practices are shaped by the transmission of communal memory, while that memory is sanctified through religious rituals (Yerushalmi, 1981, p. 44-5). The particular circumstances of the Mashhadi community further strengthened this inclination. By secretly adhering to their variation of Judaism, and strictly marrying within the limits of their community, this religious culture gradually became part of their collective tradition.

For a long period of time, certain religious practices among the Mashhadis developed a unique character. As previously discussed, celebrating Passover was a significant challenge for them. Its importance required observance, but there was always the risk of being discovered, which required them to make alterations to the commemoration, often celebrating it before or after the official date. When they did occasionally celebrate it on the correct day, they avoided leavened bread because making it would attract unwanted attention; thus, for them, Passover was marked by the consumption of rice instead. Similarly, the Hanukkah candles posed another challenge. Instead of using a traditional menorah, the candles were placed separately, allowing them to be quickly spread around the room if a stranger entered (Patai, 1997, p. 212). Mourning was a particularly complex process for the Mashhadis; while it was possible to find a way around a holiday by celebrating it on a different day, the Jewish mourning period could not be easily concealed—it was, after all, through mourning customs that the Spanish Inquisition found the most extensive knowledge about the *conversos*. The Mashhadis outwardly followed Muslim burial practices in the mosque, concealing their own mourning rites as much as possible. Similarly, burial practices were mostly performed at home, before placing the deceased in the coffin. In fact, one of the accounts recorded by Raphael Patai tells a story of how the community's secret Jewish identity was nearly exposed when there was a threat to open a coffin and reveal their particular burial customs (Patai, 1997, p. 182-84).

By creating customs and practices unique to the particular circumstances of their community that were embedded in their cultural memory, the Mashhadis strengthened their religious identity, which, in part, immensely contributed to their communal identity. These examples of cultural memory were adapted and evolved over time in accordance with the necessity to not only distinguish themselves as a Jewish community from their majorly Muslim surroundings, but also keep this community and its practices well hidden to avoid further religious persecution.

It is important to acknowledge that preservation of their original faith required communal organisation. What little is known about the first decades after *Allahdad* suggests that maintaining their Jewish precepts called for cooperation among the community members. Recalling the example of *kosher* meat discussed in the previous chapter, ritual slaughter was a dangerous process for the crypto-Jews that could easily expose them if detected by Muslim locals; therefore, the Mashhadis assisted each other in quickly distributing the meat among the community members (Patai, 1997). This process unified them not only in religious customs, but also in the danger surrounding it. Another example previously mentioned is their secret prayer gatherings; they also required the cooperation of the entire community as well as their sacrifice in opening their homes to facilitate these meetings, which was accompanied by tremendous risk.

As the Mashhadis attempted to preserve their Jewish identity by secretly practising their religious observances —individually and collectively—they embedded these practices within the framework of their cultural memory. As their religious identity became intertwined with their communal identity, the methods developed for the covert transmission of Judaism through the generations also served as mechanisms for transmitting their communal memory. This, in turn, was also a significant factor in preserving their communal identity. Their shared rituals and customs, as well as the danger of them being exposed, further reinforced their communal bond, thus creating a distinct communal identity rooted in the shared experience of perseverance.

To conclude, through the lens of communicative and cultural memory, the Mashhadi Jewish community exemplifies how memory transmission serves as the cornerstone of their communal identity. Their oral traditions and folklore, which constituted their communicative

memory, not only conveyed their history—albeit with a degree of fictionality, as stated in the account of Nader Shah's life—but also reinforced their shared values and a sense of belonging to their community. These stories, firmly rooted in historical consciousness and mainly devoid of supernatural elements—besides the occasional cases of divine intervention—highlight the Mashhadis' commitment to preserving their history and culture in a manner that resonated with their lived experiences.

At the same time, cultural memory played a crucial role in maintaining the Mashhadis' religious identity through adapted rituals and practices. Celebrations of holidays like Passover and Hanukkah, as well as mourning rituals were adapted to the constraints of their crypto-Jewish existence. By reinterpreting sacred Jewish ritual, they not only ensured the survival of their faith but also reinforced their identity as a distinct subgroup within the broader Jewish Diaspora of Persia. These adaptations were not merely acts of survival but mechanisms for preserving their Jewish identity, ensuring its continuity even under the constant threat of exposure.

The community's survival was equally dependent on its shared experiences and communal cooperation in rituals and practices despite the great risks involved, binding the community through shared purpose and sacrifice. This shared effort not only fostered a distinct communal identity, rooted in both religious devotion and mutual reliance, but was also a key factor in their survival as a crypto-Jewish community.

Ultimately, the case of Mashhadi Jews illustrates the significant role of memory transmission in preserving communal identity. Through folklore and oral traditions, religious practices and rituals, and strong communal bonds, memory transmission facilitated the perseverance of Mashhadi Jewish identity.

Conclusion

The present work has explored the intricacies of Jewish identity in Persia during the Early Modern period and the dawn of the Modern period until the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on the way these identities developed under the particular interplay of religious, social, and political circumstances of the region. The goal of this thesis was to analyse the profound interrelation between historical phenomena and identity formation and evolution in the context of Persian Jewry under Safavid and Qajar rule, as well as some of the mechanisms used by these Jewish communities that contributed to the perseverance of their identities. By analysing the dynamics of the relevant historical phenomena, and the development of Jewish identities, this thesis has tried to paint a picture of how Persian Jews navigated their lives and identities in a host society that was quite frequently hostile to its religious minorities.

Chapter One has laid the groundwork by delving into the broader historical context of Jewish existence in Persia, tracing the development of Jewish communities from their earliest presence in the eighth century BCE to the Early Modern period, in order to contextualise their historical and social position in the region before the Safavids' rise to power. The study has acknowledged the latter as a critical turning point for the religious, economic, social, and political status of the religious minorities such as the Jews. This is mainly due to the establishment of Shi'i Islam as the official religion of the state, which the Safavids enforced as a way of distinguishing their empire as a political entity from its mainly Sunni neighbours, particularly their long-standing rival, the Ottomans. Moreover, the chapter has analysed historical evidence of Jewish presence under Qajar rule in the nineteenth century, which was marked by political decline. Although they did not emphasise Shi'ism as the distinguishing identifier of Persia to the extent that Safavids had, the study has found that it continued to influence Jewish life, as highlighted in numerous accounts of religious persecution and episodes of violent mass conversion.

Many of the sources used for this work have emphasised that religion was a divisive matter and arguably the ultimate dividing line in society at the time. While in some instances it can be attributed to a common case of "Othering" the minority, the research has revealed that there were many cases of the Jews who would convert to Islam, whether by choice or coercion, and were still not able to culturally assimilate within the major society. The study has examined the history of the Mashhadi Jewish community, who exemplify a unique case of

crypto-Jewish communities within Persia, and thus are a key case study throughout the research. Although they converted to Shi'i Islam following the catastrophic events of 1839, they were labelled as *Jadid al-Islams*, and thus were not able to fully integrate into the general society, as this label created a barrier between them and the Shi'i majority. Studying religious persecution and conversion through the lens of history, the chapter has highlighted that historical phenomena provide a solid framework for a better understanding of the external circumstances that shape the decisions and identities of the Jews.

Using this historical context as a groundwork, Chapter Two has delved deeper into the fluid, complex layers of Persian Jewish identities. It has highlighted that while the defining feature of the Jews, both from their own perspective and that of the non-Jews, has been their "Jewishness", this feature is neither singular nor stagnant; it contains a myriad of different aspects that are formed and transformed by both internal and external factors. One of the ways in which the chapter has analysed these dynamics is through examining some of the prominent Jewish literary works. Using examples of Jewish poets like Shahin and Emrani, the study has traced the influence of Persian culture and literature in the writings of these Jews, which is indicative of their inclination towards the culture of their homeland, further reinforcing that their identities were still shaped by the Persian context in which they lived, despite being a religious minority frequently alienated from the Muslim majority.

A central theme that has emerged throughout the chapter is the role of forced conversions in shaping Jewish identity. The chapter has demonstrated that conversion was not merely a change of religion but a phenomenon deeply tied to social integration, economic survival, and political necessity. This form of external pressure, however, also highlighted the importance of communal bonds for the Jews, which has been more thoroughly discussed in Chapter Three. The groundwork for discussing these communal bonds has been laid in Chapter Two, which has analysed the crypto-Jewish identity of the Mashhadi Jews, a dual identity maintained not only as a result of their mass conversion, but also through their collective efforts as a community. This observation has set the stage for the discussion on how Persian Jews preserved their identities through a collective effort to remember.

Chapter Three has presented memory transmission—both in the form of oral tradition and cultural heritage—as a prominent phenomenon in the preservation of collective identity, particularly among crypto-Jewish communities like the Mashhadis. Their importance as a case study for this chapter cannot be overstated, as much of their story and culture has

survived through the oral traditions and folklore transmitted through the generations. Moreover, their covert Jewish religious practices and rituals, which were altered and adapted to ensure their crypto-Jewish nature would not be revealed, were also instrumental in maintaining their identity, as demonstrated by their persistence in observing their faith.

Finally, the chapter has also highlighted how the profound communal bond within the Mashhadi community significantly facilitated their identity preservation. Their shared values and religious customs unified them in the dangers of being crypto-Jews, which the research has established as a key factor in fostering their unique identity—distinct, even among most other Persian Jews. Most importantly, the methods they developed for transmitting their tradition and religious practices required the collective efforts of the community, which further served to define and maintain their identity.

This research could be expanded in the future in a number of ways. As stated throughout the thesis, There is still so much left unknown about the history, religion, and culture of Persian Jewry, considering their long history of settlement in the region, and their intricate identities. First and foremost, there is very little known about the Persian Jews' religious customs and practices. Indeed, the ones who converted, whether by choice or through coercion, made sure to leave little evidence behind of their former lives, or kept them well hidden under another layer of identity. Examining these religious practices, at least with what little is known about the customs and beliefs of communities like the Mashhadis, could add another dimension to the discussion of the interrelation between religion and identity.

In general, very few attempts have been made to conduct a comparative analysis of Jewish life in Persia and that of other regions. The research briefly discussed some of the similarities between the Mashhadi Jews and the crypto-Jews of Spain and Portugal. Studying these groups that shaped social identities with similar traits, despite the differences in social, religious, and political environments enriches the discussion of the role of conversion in forming a distinct Jewish identity.

Another fascinating direction this research could take is by expanding its scope to include the twentieth century in order to explore the role of women in the endurance and perseverance of Jewish communities and identities. While there is almost nothing known about Jewish women in the Safavid period, there are numerous oral traditions, interviews, and memoirs that provide a fresh perspective on gender roles in Persian Jewish communities and the lives of Jewish women in the late Qajar and Pahlavi period. The present research has

highlighted the importance of community in forming and maintaining Jewish identities. This could be further expanded by examining women's roles in protecting the community, providing education, and memory transmission that ensured its survival.

Additionally, the research could benefit from analysing the similarities and differences between religious persecution of the Jews in Persia and elsewhere in the Muslim world, especially the Ottoman Empire, to which the dimension of bitter rivalry between the two regions could add more depth. Another promising direction that comes to mind is exploring the little studied interactions between Persian Jews and other minority groups, such as Armenians, Christians, or Zoroastrians; their various exchanges can provide precious insights into how these groups influenced one another as religious minorities navigating religious persecution and the religious "us" versus "them" environment of the Early Modern period.

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