

**Between Foreigners and Shi`is:
Nineteenth-Century Iran
and Its Jewish Minority**

Daniel Tsadik

Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007. 295 pages.

After twenty-seven centuries of uninterrupted presence on the Persian plateau, the Jews of Iran have become so inextricably ingrained in every possible aspect of Iranian life, culture, religion, and history that any valuable work of scholarship in Judeo-Persian studies, such as the one at hand, must by necessity entail an interdisciplinary approach. *Between Foreigners and Shi`is*, a ground-breaking work that will henceforth prove indispensable to any researcher of modern Judeo-Persian studies, is a meticulous piece of scholarship that brings as much novelty to its own field as it does to modern Iranian historiography, Middle Eastern political studies, and Islamic studies.

Daniel Tsadik's book provides a history of the religious, political, and social life of Iranian Jews under Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-96). Relying on a wealth of previously untapped archival material, the author examines in particular detail episodes of persecution in Barforush in 1866-67 (pp. 60-78), in Shiraz at the hands of Hajj Sayyid `Ali Akbar Fal Asiri (pp. 130-37), in Isfahan at the hands of Shaykh Mohammad Taqi Najafi (pp. 137-49), and in Hamadan at the hands of Mullah `Abdallah (pp. 155-77). Examining these and other episodes of anti-Semitic persecution against the broader backdrop of socio-political events throughout Iran at large, such as the Tobacco Rebellion of 1891 and the great famine, he brings to light a hitherto unnoticed dynamic in which Iran's Jewish community emerges as the rope in a three-way tug of war between the Shi`ite clergy, the Qajar court, and western diplomats, with each jostling for dominance in the fledgling nation that was becoming modern Iran.

Tsadik's ground-breaking achievement in this seminal work lies in his ability to demonstrate with precision how inseparably the fate of this community waxed and waned with every ebb and flow of western influence over Iran vis-à-vis the shah's malleability thereto and the Shi`ite clergy's invariable backlash to the shah's reforms. In an atmosphere where the West was increasingly securing its geopolitical interest by asserting a growing influence over the Iranian court, whose attention to matters of state was daily declining, he convincingly shows how the Jews became a pawn in the hands of a clergy whose vested interests were threatened by foreign intervention and western reforms. Thus, in a dynamic analogous to the one underlying the Tobacco Rebellion, the Jews became the object in a merry-go-round of persecution. They pleaded with the western powers for protection, the West pressured Nasir al-Din Shah to protect them, and the shah obliged, at times with genuine intent and at others with diplomatic ceremonial insincerity. The clergy, who saw the shah's reaction to foreign intervention as a threatening influx of values and ideologies essentially alien to traditional Shi`ite worldviews, instigated further persecution in defiance of western-instigated reforms, which lead to further Jewish pleas for help.

To develop this argument, Tsadik begins with a close analysis of Shi`ite legal attitudes toward Jews (chapter 1). Though far from comprehensive, this chapter is one of the most extensive studies of the subject published to date. Other than examining the *dhimmi* status, this first chapter offers novel perspectives on the more central Shi`ite issue of religious impurity (*najasah*) as it pertains to Iran's Jews in particular. As such, it offers new and valuable information to scholars of Islamic and religious studies as well. Given this

issue's immutable centrality to virtually every aspect of Jewish social, political, religious, and historical life in Iran since the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, Tsadik's relatively brief treatment of *najāsah*, while spot on, further serves to underline the still lingering need for a thorough book-length examination of this notion.

The book's remaining body comprises four chapters, each one roughly covering consecutive twelve-year periods during Nasir al-Din Shah's rule. In this context, Tsadik examines various anti-Semitic persecutions in a chronological line alongside different socio-political markers to reveal, in addition to the above dynamic, the gradual changes in the Jews' position in Iranian society. The shah's trips to Europe, his meetings with influential members of European Jewry and their numerous interventions on behalf of Iranian Jews, Zel al-Soltan's mostly amicable and protective relation with the Jewish community, and previously unknown details pertaining to different persecution events are discussed with meticulous documentation consistently throughout the book.

Barring one socio-historical mistake (Tsadik incorrectly refers to a Jewish quarter in Hamadan [p. 155]), although Hamadan is one of the rare Iranian cities that never had a Jewish quarter [see: Houman Sarshar, "Hamadan: Jewish Community," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 11:620]), *Between Foreigners and Shi'is* represents a comprehensive and impressively documented history of Jewish Iranian life during the second half of nineteenth century. References to primary archival sources, most of them previously untapped, comprise nearly seventy of the text's 262 pages. More importantly, it heralds what one may hope to be a new era in Judeo-Persian studies, an era in which researchers will hopefully follow the author's lead in taking a step beyond data gathering to arrive at new theoretical extrapolations about Iran's Jews in particular and Iran in general.

In addition to shedding new light on the life of Iranian Jews by placing them right at the center of history-altering power struggles among the clergy, the court, and the West in nineteenth-century Iran, Tsadik's watershed work will surely prove invaluable to scholars of contemporary Iranian history, for example, by delineating some of the earlier underpinnings of the court-clergy dichotomy that in 1979 led to the Islamic revolution. Scholars of yet other disciplines are sure to gain equally significant benefits from this work.

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