

THE HISTORY OF THE CRYPTO-JEWS OF MASHAD

The Jewish community of Mashad, Iran formed in the 1740's, when Nadir Shah Afshar called for the relocation of forty Jewish families from Qazvin and Dilaman to Kalat. Circumstances ultimately led these families to settle in Mashad. Known for their integrity and loyalty, these trusted Jewish families were selected to protect Nadir Shah's treasures and jewels, spoils which he had taken from his Indian invasion. He did not live long enough to witness the implementation of his proclamation.

Mashadi Jews living in the current Iranian Diaspora remain steadfast in their community ties. Religion, community, and nationality are key components forming the identity of the Mashadi Jewish community. Yet, *community* best defines this group of people and has served as their savior.

Similar to many of their Jewish brethren, the Jews of Mashad gravitated towards professions that allowed their trade skills to flourish. They were avid merchants, navigating the ancient Silk Road. Mashadi Jews were held with the highest regard by Sunni Turkmen and Shiite Mashadi tradesmen, because of their reputation for honorable and ethical business practices. The perils of travel subjected Mashadi traders to deathly freezing temperatures, murderous bandits, and limited means of transportation.

Due to their occupations and the arduous conditions involved in their travels, Mashadi men adopted a lifestyle which required spending several months to years on the road without their families. Modern Mashadi men continue their forefathers' unique tradition of working as traveling merchants to support their families. Mashadi women have likewise upheld their matriarchal tradition of creating family and community cohesiveness by nurturing home, family, and community relationships. Unlike their female predecessors, modern Mashadi women are exemplary businesswomen, who are heirs to the savvy trade skills of their ancestors.

The pivotal historic event that transformed an undefined group of Iranian Jews into an unfaltering community was the Allahdad (*means "God's Justice"*) of 1839. Building social

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tensions and resentment and suspicion by Shiite Muslims of the Jewish inhabitants of Mashad's Eydgah ghetto, culminated in an explosive event. A blood libel on the commemoration day of a holy Muslim Imam led to a devastating pogrom. On the eve of Mashad's Allahdad (March 27, 1839), an estimated thirty-six Jews were killed and approximately seven Jewish girls were abducted to become Muslim child brides. Within the next twenty-four hours, under the risk of death, approximately three hundred Jewish families made the pretense of converting to Islam, under the advisement of their community leaders. The term Allahdad was coined by the forced converts to relate their past sins with the calamity they were enduring.

Following the forced conversions, a number of Jewish families, unable to sustain the facade of Muslim faith, escaped to Herat, Afghanistan. Very few Mashadi converts permanently assimilated to Islam. It is estimated that the remaining community members proceeded to live dual lives as crypto-Jews through the 1920's. During this time, the Jadid-al-Islam (a term meaning "New Muslims") boasted of two known Sheikhs, fifty-seven known Hajji's, and twenty-one known Karbalais while preserving their secret Jewish identities. Their ties to the Islamic religion were complex at times.

Mashadi families gradually migrated to Marv and surrounding areas of Czarist Turkmenistan, in an effort to escape persecution in Mashad and look for better business opportunities in pre-communist Russia. The seemingly stable social and trade environment of Russia did not benefit them for long. In the fall of 1917, the Russian revolution caused the first return of Mashadi Jews, from Marv to Mashad. Mashadis who remained in Russia, fell prey to Stalin's "purge of petit bourgeoisie" and some members of the community were imprisoned. In 1925, Reza Shah made an agreement with Stalin to exchange Iranian and Russian nationals. The imprisoned Mashadis were released to return home, once again. A second blood libel in 1946 led the disenchanting community's gradual relocation to the tolerant cities of Tehran and Jerusalem, joining the few Mashadi families who already resided there.

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Within an eighty year span, the Mashadi community migrated at least five times to avoid persecution. Throughout this short period they migrated from Mashad to Herat, Mashad to Russia and back, Mashad to Jerusalem and Tehran, ultimately fleeing during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Mashadi communities now exist in Israel, New York, Milan, Hamburg, and London.

Mashadi youth have assumed their predecessors' ethos of primarily socializing and marrying within their community. This once necessary survival mechanism has transitioned to a comfortable modus operandi for today's Mashadis. Many praise the modern Mashadi community for their sense of unity, while some question their insular lifestyle. All perspectives undeniably credit the Mashadi community for their fervor in upholding their Jewish heritage and traditions.

The resounding conclusion of the Mashadi story is one that reflects their ability to protect their inherent Jewish religion. The Mashadis are likely the only historically documented forced Jewish converts who proceeded to fully live secret lives as Jews, ultimately returning to practicing Judaism openly, as an entire community. The unusual survival method of the Mashadi crypto-Jews laid the foundation for a modern Mashadi community who now safely and proudly practice Judaism.



Global Mashadi Jewish Federation