THE HISTORY OF THE MASHADI JEWISH COMMUNITY

Anussim of Mashad

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In the Beginning (1746 – 1839):

When we study the history of the Jewish people, we encounter many oppressed and persecuted Jewish communities. One of the most famous, of course, is the community of the Marranos of Spain and Portugal of which almost everyone has heard. There is another community of Marranos that practically no one has ever heard of. They are the Marranos of Mashad, or the Mashadi Jews. What you are about to hear is the story of an exceptionally small group of people who were forced to abandon Judaism. This is the story of Anusei Mashad.

This community of Jews comes from the city of Mashad, Iran's second largest city, and the capital of a province in the northeast region of the country. Iran or Persia is a relatively large country in the Middle East with a population of 67 million. The official religion of Iran is the Shiite branch of Islam and 95% of the population adhere to that religion.

The beginning of Jewish history in Iran dates back to late Biblical times. The Books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles and Esther contain references to the Jewish life in Persia. It is believed that many Jews found their way into Persia after Cyrus the Great, the King of Persia, ended the Babylonian Exile in the Fifth Century B.C.E. The Persian Jews are, therefore, neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardic. A more accurate description of the Persian Jews is probably "Mizrahi" or Eastern Jews. But since their customs and traditions more closely resembles the Jews of Spanish background, they are categorized as Sephardic Jews.

The story begins in the year 1746, nearly 250 years ago, when Nader Shah, the reigning king of the Persian Empire, decided to relocate 40 Jewish families to his new capital, the city of Mashad. These original 40 families were selected by the king because of their honesty and trustworthiness to safeguard and protect the treasury of the king in his new capital.
The city of Mashad, where this story takes place, has a religious significance for its Shiite population. It is the burial site of one of Islam's most important Imams or religious leaders. The presence of this sanctuary, which brought many pilgrims to the city, made the inhabitants fervently religious. So being among Moslems with deep fundamentalist ideologies, famous for their intolerance of other religions, made the lives of the newly-arrived Jews extremely difficult.
The Shiite population of Mashad considered the Jews unclean and prohibited any contact with this group of people. The Jews were confined to the outskirts of the city in ghetto-like localities. Since they could not engage in business activities with the general population, the newly-arrived Jews very soon developed trade among themselves, and established trade routes with the nearby cities. As the years passed, the Jewish population of Mashad grew in number and established a small synagogue and other institutions for a proper Jewish life.
Even though the religious elements of the city had discouraged any contact with the Jews, the Mashadi Jews proved to be reliable and trustworthy business contacts with excellent credit standings. Very soon the reputation of honesty of these Jews spread throughout the city, and their Moslem neighbors felt more and more comfortable engaging in business with the Jewish community. However, the Jews were still constantly under the watchful eyes of the Moslem population. They would be blamed and attacked for every unfortunate incident, and, like everywhere else, they were the victims of any outburst of bigotry.

Allah-dad (1839 – 1925)

Tolerance for the Jews took a sharp decline in the year 1839, about 160 years ago, when on the 12th day of Nissan, the most traumatic event in the history of the Mashadi Jews took place.

On this day, which happened to be a holy day for the Moslems, a rumor was spread during a procession that the Jews were mocking and ridiculing some of Islam's religious practices. This false accusation was very quickly spread throughout the city and a huge mob assembled at the office of the local religious leaders demanding action against the Jews. On the same day, a permit was granted and an angry mob attacked the Jewish neighborhood. In the course of this event, which was called the Allah-dad, the rioters attacked Jewish homes and shops, destroyed their property, destroyed books and religious articles, and burned the synagogue. By the time the dust settled, 36 Mashadi Jews had lost their lives.

The Jews were given 2 simple choices: conversion or death. The leaders of the Jewish community realized that their only chance of survival at the moment was to embrace Islam. The entire Jewish community of Mashad, which by now consisted of more than 200 families, converted to Islam and started new lives as "Jadid-Al-Islam" or "New Moslems." This newly adopted faith, however, was only on the surface and for the eyes of their Moslem neighbors. The Jews started to live a double life; on the surface they were Moslems, but in secret they continued to live their lives as true Jews.

But how does one do that? How can a person live among Moslems, pray in their mosques, observe their holidays, and assure their neighbors of their sincerity, and at the same time cling to their Jewish traditions? To do this, the newly-converted Mashadis had to make significant changes in their lifestyle:

A) First, they had to adopt Islamic names for themselves and their children. Names such as Mohammad, Ali and Hassan are quite common among the older generation of the Mashadi Jews. Some even had to make the required pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina which awarded them the title of Hadji. In addition to their Islamic name, every child born in the community was also given a secret Hebrew name, a practice that is still common among today's Mashadi Jews.

B) Then there was the problem of kashrut and keeping a kosher home. The converted Jews had to buy their meat from local non-kosher stores, so that in the eyes of their neighbors, they were not observing any strange dietary laws. But Mashadi women refused to allow any

non-kosher meat into their homes. All of this meat was immediately discarded or fed to the dogs. The men of the community learned the practice of shchita, the ritual slaughter of animals, and provided their families and friends with the meat that was prepared under the strictest Jewish dietary laws. For the distribution of this meat they were aided by the Iranian architecture. All houses were built with private courtyards with windows that faced inward instead of toward the street. The houses were connected from the inside which enabled the Jews to gather for secret meetings and distribute the meat without ever going outside.

C) Then there was the problem of praying in the mosque. The Mashadis had to participate in prayer sessions in the local mosque with their Moslem neighbors, but after attending the Friday prayer in the mosque, they would rush home to their secret gathering places to welcome the Sabbath. These secret minyans were held in dark and dilapidated basements. All the Torah scrolls and prayer books had been destroyed during the riots of 1839, but the Mashadi Jews somehow managed to reproduce their hand-written siddurim and Torah scrolls to be used in their secret gatherings. They even established Torah classes for their children. Of course this education for the children had to start at an age when there was no longer any danger that they might reveal their true identity to their classmates. This usually started around the age of ten, and it was explained to them very carefully not to discuss anything about it in their classrooms. Children studied Islamic subjects in school, but at home they were taught the principles of Jewish religion.

D) On Shabbat and holidays, since the Jews had to keep their stores open, they often hired help from outside to run the stores for them. The help was instructed to turn potential customers away with various excuses. This way they were able to refrain from engaging in business transactions on Shabbat and holidays.

E) Funerals were also held twice. After burying their departed in the Moslem cemetery, the Jews would rush home to recite kaddish in the privacy of their home.

F) Probably the most important concern of the newly-converted Jews was intermarriage. To protect themselves, the Mashadi Jews would often marry off their children at very young ages, around nine or ten. If a suitor approached them for their daughter, they could claim that she was either married or had already been spoken for. This way they kept marriages among themselves. Incidentally, the practice of marrying within the community is exercised even today, and the vast majority of marriages among Mashadis are within the community.

As you can imagine, living a double life was not easy and carried with it enormous risk. The Jews were constantly under the doubtful watch of their Moslem neighbors. Those who had doubts in the sincerity of the new Moslems were always looking for clues to prove that this group of people were practicing Judaism in secret. On many occasions, the Jews encountered serious threats from their neighbors and local authorities who had become suspicious of their practices and their true identity. Miraculously, the true identity of the Jews was never revealed.

The question arises as to why the Jews of Mashad didn't leave and start a new life somewhere else. Of course it is never easy to leave one's birthplace and venture into a new and unknown world. Besides, the authorities had forbidden the Jews to leave town, and would punish anyone who was caught fleeing the city. And even if they did decide to leave, the nearest town in which the Jews lived in a relatively freer society was a 12-day journey away. Amid all the risks, some Jewish families did leave their birthplace and sought refuge in other nearby cities.

Those who did stay, however, did not lose hope that someday they would be free to practice Judaism in the open. They continued to live as Moslems but they never forgot their true identity. They continued to teach their children, and continued to assemble secretly for Shabbat and holiday services. At one point, the Mashadi Jews had 11 secret synagogues in their neighborhood.

Reza Pahlavi (1925 – 1946)

The Jews of Mashad lived a double life and under difficult conditions for nearly one hundred years. Their situation did not improve drastically until Reza Pahlavi, the father of the recent Shah of Iran, ascended to power in 1925, and a period of religious freedom was inaugurated. The Jews of Mashad came out of the closet, so to speak, and started to practice their religion freely, under the protection of the new regime and the new king. With the start of this period, the Jewish life in Mashad was revitalized. The Jews of Mashad who had been disguised as Moslems for over a century, began with new excitement to lead a productive Jewish life.

Unfortunately, this freedom also had to come to an end. During World War II, anti Jewish sentiments once again flared up in Mashad. Through radio broadcasts, the Jews were accused of spying for the enemy, and were blamed for the hardship that was brought upon the nation.

Again in the month of Nissan in the year 1946, another mob attacked the Jewish neighborhood. The Jews finally realized that they would no longer be safe in the city, and the time had come for them to move to another city. By this time, the Jewish population of Mashad had reached 3000, and many of them had established business contacts in Tehran. Therefore, their relocation was not as difficult. The mass migration of the Mashadi Jews to Tehran started in 1946 and in a few years almost all the families had left the city.

In Tehran and during the rule of the Shah, the Jews enjoyed a period of freedom and religious tolerance. Jews became prosperous during this period and started trade with other countries. More than 10 Mashadi synagogues were established in Tehran and a number of Jewish schools opened during this period. Mashadi Jews, following a tradition of isolation, remained very close to each other even in the free society of Tehran.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, many Mashadi Jews emigrated to the Jewish State, and today the majority of the Mashadi Jews, nearly 10,000, live in Israel. Later on some Mashadis went to Europe and established Mashadi communities in Hamburg, Germany, in London and in Milan, Italy.

The recent history of the Mashadi Jews took another turn with

the Islamic Revolution in 1979 which brought the majority of the remaining Mashadi Jews to the United States. At first they settled in Kew Gardens, Queens, and as their businesses developed, they started migrating to the Great Neck area.
The entire history of the Mashadi community spanned only two centuries and the size never exceeded a few hundred families. And yet the community has a unique significance among the communities of Jewish Diaspora. Unlike the original Marranos, who after one generation lost touch with their Jewish past, the Marranos of Mashad survived as Jews. Today there are 3700 Mashadi Jews living in New York. Every member of this cohesive community is proud of his or her unique history. Every member takes pride in belonging to a group of people whose ancestors fought the pressure of their surroundings, and, against all odds, did not abandon Judaism.