

IRANIAN JEWS: DEJA VU?

Most community relations councils around the country have committees entitled: "On Oppressed Jewry," not a cheerful note. Even less cheerful is the fact that their agendas have become ever fuller: Jews in Arab lands, Argentine Jews, Ethiopian Jews -- and now there is probably added another: Iranian Jews.

There have been Jews in Persia (renamed Iran in 1935) since at least the 8th century B.C.E. Jews were deported to that land by the Assyrians and others. When the "Cyrus Declaration" of 538 B.C.E. proclaimed that they could return to their own land, many who had already established themselves, preferred to remain.

Persian Jewish communities grew, and by and large, the relationships between the Jews and the Persians were quite tolerable. Persia was conquered by the Muslim Arab empire in the 7th century C.E., and thereafter conditions for the Jews became more spotty. There were long periods in which the Jews had freedom of movement and fairly extensive economic opportunity. Persian Jewish artisans flourished, and certain periods developed highly placed Jewish financial figures.

But there was always smoldering a basic Muslim intolerance of Jews, especially by the Shi'ite Muslims who consider Jews religiously unclean. A Muslim merchant of that persuasion would typically not let Jews pick out their own fruit, lest they despoil the whole stock by touching it.

This intolerance of the Jews severely marked the Persian society during the Kajar Dynasty which lasted from 1794 to 1925. At the time, the Pahlevi Dynasty began, of which the current Shah is a part, perhaps the last part. The Pahlevi Dynasty broke with the Shi'ite clergy. The conditions for the Jews changed sharply for the better. In fact, Iran was in recent years almost singular as a Middle East country in which Jews and Muslims could live harmoniously with each other.

Now that seems to be coming to an end. Shi'ite Muslim fundamentalism is the main force which is toppling the Pahlevi Dynasty. This force is not only dead set against Israel, but constant in its religious hostility towards Jews in general. Its political ascendancy is already reported to be affecting popular attitudes. It is again becoming more common for Muslims to refuse to eat in a restaurant where Jews have eaten.

In the wings are the various leftist forces also bent on removing the Shah. They expect to take over someday from the religious fundamentalists. Their hostility towards the Jews is political rather than religious, but no less virulent. The current interim regime will survive only if it bends in the direction of these forces.

So, one way or another, for whatever reason, Persia/Iran promises to be no place for Jews. About 30 thousand Iranian Jews emigrated to Israel in the first five years of Israel's existence. It took 25 years for that emigration figure to be duplicated. Actually, conditions improved for Iranian Jews in those 25 years. The number of Jewish professionals has grown, and, at last count, the percentage of Jewish students in Iranian universities was disproportionately greater than that of any other group. That era is coming to a close.

There are still around 70 thousand Jews in Iran. Israel has prepared for a mass influx, dispensing with standard restrictions and check-ups. The Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency have prepared for the necessary transportation. But as of last week no mass influx had taken place. As of this moment, the Iranian Jews are free to leave. But they are not yet choosing to leave. Deja vu.