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# Curriculum Resource Unit

An illustration of two women in traditional Iranian clothing. The woman on the left wears a white turban and a light-colored, patterned dress with a red sash. She is playing a stringed instrument, possibly a kamancheh. The woman on the right wears a green patterned dress with a brown sash and a dark headpiece. She is also playing a stringed instrument. The background features stylized, colorful patterns in red, blue, and gold.

## Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews



# Light and Shadows

## The Story of Iranian Jews

### Materials for Educators

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# About the Exhibition





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# About the Exhibition

*Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* examines one of the world's oldest Jewish communities with some members entering Iran nearly 3,000 years ago. As Iran's oldest religious minority, the Jewish community has confronted numerous challenges, and these have affected the overall character of Jewish life in the country. The succession of dynasties and peoples who conquered Iran impacted and enriched Persian Jewish culture in a variety of ways—as has the fact that this community has now lived under Muslim rule for nearly 1,400 years. These influences are revealed in special traditions and unique beliefs. They are also made manifest in the archaeological artifacts, impressive illuminated manuscripts, beautiful ritual objects, amulets, ceremonial garments, musical instruments, photographs, and documentary ephemera presented in this exhibition. Continuing in the Museum's Goldenberg Galleria, the exhibition examines the modern history of Jews in Iran as well as in Diaspora communities in Israel and the United States. Special emphasis is given to Los Angeles's own large and dynamic Iranian Jewish community.

The exhibition attests to the vibrant life of Iran's Jewish community from ancient times to the present day. It is a life marked by times of great cultural achievement and periods of prosperity and also by great hardship, persecution, and even forced conversion—truly a story of light and shadows.

This exhibition was created and organized by Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, Israel.

The lead sponsor is the Y & S Nazarian Family Foundation. Exhibition partnership is provided by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles. Additional generous support comes from the Farhang Foundation, Milken Community High School and Sinai Temple.



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# Background Information





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# Background Information

## History of Iranian Jewry

According to the Bible, the first Jews to settle in Persia were members of the ten tribes exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. Some two hundred years later, following the Babylonian exile, a new wave of Jews from the Kingdom of Judea arrived on the Iranian plateau. When King Cyrus the Great, who ruled between 559 and 530 BCE, established the first Iranian Empire, he annexed the areas of Babylon where Jews who were originally from Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judea resided. As chronicled in the Bible, he decreed that Jews be granted freedom of religious observance and allowed those who had been exiled to Babylon to return to Jerusalem. Many Jews, however, decided to remain in Persia.

In the seventh century CE, Muslims conquered Persia. In the aftermath of the Muslim-Arab conquest, the lives of Iranian Jews became progressively difficult, especially following the institution of Shiite Islam as the state religion in the sixteenth century. The Iranian Jewish community subsequently experienced numerous episodes of persecution and discriminatory edicts, as well as periods of targeted violence.

The living conditions of Iranian Jews and other minorities began to gradually improve in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century with the rise of the Pahlavi monarchs in 1925—Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941) and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979). This period was, however, brought to an end with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. With the establishment of an Islamic state in Iran, most of the country's Jews emigrated to the United States, Europe, and Israel. The Jewish community members remaining in Iran continue to maintain a Jewish lifestyle and to preserve customs and traditions formed in the course of many centuries.

## The Book of Esther and the Forging of a Persian Jewish Identity

The biblical story of Esther takes place in Shushan (which is identified with present-day Hamadan in Iran), home to a large Jewish community. It relates that Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman, is chosen to marry the powerful King Ahasuerus. Advised by her wise cousin and guardian, Mordechai, Esther initially keeps her faith a secret from the king. In the course of the story, Esther, working with Mordechai, manages to thwart the plans of Haman, the king's advisor, to exterminate the Jewish community. She does so at great risk to herself and by revealing her faith to Ahasuerus. The Jewish festival of Purim commemorates these events.

This story had great significance for Persian Jews, who faced persecution and periods where they had to endure forced conversions or otherwise conceal

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# Background Information (continued)

their religion. The tombs of Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan were regarded as holy sites, and the name of Esther was often inscribed on amulets. In the fourteenth-century epic *Ardashīr-nāma* (Book of Ardashīr), the great Iranian Jewish poet Shāhīn created a noteworthy variant of the story of Esther, replacing Ahasuerus with the figure of Ardashīr, the founder of the Sassanian dynasty. In fusing these two figures, the poet transposed the story from a religious context to a historical one. Shāhīn also suggested that Esther was of royal standing prior to her enthronement as the king's wife. In addition, he made the historical figure Cyrus the son of Esther and Ardashīr. Thus he related the Jews' return to their homeland (which Cyrus would permit after conquering Babylon) and the construction of the Second Temple to the Jewish identity of the king, a messianic figure in the Bible (Isaiah 44:28–45:1). Shāhīn's unique narrative resulted in the creation of a new Judeo-Persian epic that presented the members of the Jewish minority as descendants of the founder of the ruling dynasty. This redefined their collective identity as inseparable from that of the Iranian nation and positioned them as equal members of Iranian society.

## Life in the *Mahale*

Iran has been a mosaic of different ethnicities, religions, cultures, and languages since ancient times. This same variety was characteristic of its Jewish communities. Jews interacted freely with their non-Jewish neighbors in some areas, but those communities in which they were restricted to the *mahale* (Jewish quarter) became more insular. The works in this section portray Jewish life within the *mahale* and some of the restrictions imposed upon those who lived there. It also highlights the special case of the Jews of Mashhad, who were forced by edict to deny their religious heritage and, as a result, lived double lives.

## The Jews and Iranian Society: Discriminatory Edicts

In the early sixteenth century, the Safavid kingdom rose to power in Iran. By establishing Shiite Islam as the state religion, the Safavid kings transformed the country's religious life, governing institutions, society, and culture. A rift was created between Iranian Shiites and the Sunni majorities in neighboring countries. According to Shiite law, religious minorities, including Sunni adherents of Islam, were perceived as ritually impure, and any physical contact with them or with materials they had touched was to be avoided.

Conditions for all of Iran's religious minorities deteriorated during this period, and the Jews suffered from discriminatory prohibitions and episodes of persecution, with some communities forced to convert to Islam. Shiite religious laws also had a detrimental effect on the economic and professional status of the Jews. Most were constrained to practice professions disdained by the Shiite populations.



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# Background Information (continued)

## **Jewish Professions**

Because they were perceived as ritually impure, most Iranian Jews could no longer earn a living in trades that they had traditionally specialized in, such as banking or working as wholesale merchants and middlemen trading in silk, spices, raw materials, and precious stones. Under the restrictions created by Shiite law, they were pushed toward working as peddlers, used-clothing vendors, musicians and entertainers at Jewish and Muslim festivities, jewelry makers, dyers of cloth, and producers and sellers of wine and other alcoholic beverages (a profession strictly forbidden to Muslims according to Shiite law). At the same time, since they were considered to be "People of the Book," and acknowledged for their valuing of literacy and education, a small number of Jews were still able to engage in more profitable and respectable professions, working as doctors and folk healers, clairvoyants and talisman makers, apothecaries, midwives, and middle-rank merchants.

## **The Jews of Mashhad**

On March 26, 1839, the Jewish inhabitants of the city of Mashhad were forced to convert to Islam. Mobs attacked the community, burning down the synagogues, looting, and killing between thirty and forty people. Jewish leaders were forced to proclaim their allegiance to Islam, and in order to save the town's 2,000 inhabitants, they acceded to the order that all Jews in the city convert to Islam. Most people did so and stayed in Mashhad, adhering to Islamic practices in public while secretly observing Jewish traditions. These newly converted Jews to Islam came to be known as *jadid āl-Islam* (Persian for "new to Islam"), Crypto-Jews, or anusim (Hebrew for "forced converts"). Some immigrated to Afghanistan and Bukhara, where they could openly live as Jews. Nearly a century passed before Mashhad's Jews could again practice their faith in public, with the coming of the Pahlavi dynasty. After World War II, many settled in Tehran, Israel, and Great Neck, New York. Today there are some 15,000 Mashhadis worldwide, of which 10,000 live in Israel.

## **Preserving Traditions of Music and Poetry**

It is ironic, based upon their history, that the Jews of Iran became guardians of musical and poetic traditions in the non-Jewish Persian sphere. Following the rise of Shiite Islam, Muslims were forbidden to compose and play secular music, but this prohibition did not extend to minorities. The Jewish community thus came to play a key role in preserving the legacy of classical Persian music. As for poetry, because Jewish religious ritual is centered upon the reading of the Torah, Jews historically tended to be literate and were exposed to religious and secular literary sources. Secular and liturgical poems were integral to Jewish community life, and poetry was also given expression in Persian-Jewish epics, which were copied and preserved in manuscript form for hundreds of years.



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# Background Information (continued)

## Ceremonies and Rituals

Iranian Jewish religious observances, ceremonies, and rituals served to set the community apart from the non-Jewish population and confirm its distinctive identity. Jews in Persia were not, however, oblivious to the larger culture in which they lived, and they both adopted elements of it and were influenced by it. This explains the hybridized essence of Iranian Jewry.

## The Synagogue

The synagogue is a consecrated space that is used for worship, community gatherings, and education. All synagogues contain: the Torah Ark (a cabinet in which Torah scrolls are kept), which faces Jerusalem; a teivah (an elevated platform with a table from which the Torah is read), and a lit lamp or lantern called the *Ner Tamid* (Eternal Light), which serves as a reminder of the menorah in the Temple in Jerusalem. A synagogue may be decorated with artwork.

## Weddings and Fertility

Weddings among Iranian Jews were based on Jewish traditions but influenced by local, non-Jewish rituals and customs. They thus differed somewhat from place to place within Iran. Generally speaking, however, weddings were designed to ensure the young couple's fertility and economic success and to ward off difficulties and disasters of all kinds, especially those related to the evil eye and to various demons.

In premodern Iranian society, girls were married when they reached puberty. Boys married when they were eighteen or older and were thought capable of supporting a family. Once the marriage negotiations were resolved, contracts signed, and bride-price established, a series of special events led up to the actual marriage ceremony.

The bride's dowry was presented to family members, friends, and neighbors; her eyebrows were groomed for the first time; and the bride and groom's feet and hands were colored with henna—all to the accompaniment of performances by professional singers and musicians. The extent and elaborateness of the wedding festivities were dependent on the wealth and status of the family. Once married, the bride and groom departed from the groom's father's home in a festive procession, accompanied by singing, dancing, and feasting. On the Saturday following the ceremony, the groom read from the Torah at the synagogue and the congregation rejoiced.



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# Background Information (continued)

## The Modern History of Iranian Jews

From the sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century, Iran was ruled according to strict Shiite Islamic doctrine, and this had powerful implications for the lives of Jews and other minorities. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, the country underwent a gradual process of westernization and secularization, accelerated under the reign of the Pahlavi monarchy, which commenced in 1925. Another dramatic turn followed in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution, the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, and the establishment of a theocracy under the Republic's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (in office 1979–1989). The past three decades of Islamic rule have led to radical changes in Iran's internal and foreign policies, which have had far-reaching effects on all ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, including the Jews.

Today, about 25,000 Jews remain in Iran, where many are allowed to practice their religion provided they pay allegiance to the Republic. Glimpses of their lives are captured in the documentary images taken by photographer Hasan Sarbakhshian. Some historians estimate, however, that nearly 70 percent of the Jewish community left Iran at the time of the Revolution to begin new lives in communities far from their ancestral homes. The Goldenberg Galleria portion of *Light and Shadows* ends by focusing on those who settled in Los Angeles, and highlights the art of Shelley Gazin and Jessica Shokrian.

## The Opening of Iran to the West

With the visits by the Qajar-dynasty monarch Nasser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896) to Europe in 1873 and 1889, Iran began to become slowly receptive to Western influence. European Jews reminded the shah of the generous actions of King Cyrus toward the Jews of Judea who were exiled in ancient Babylonia, and they also informed him that they had learned of atrocities being committed against Iranian Jews in contemporary Iran. The shah promised to improve the living conditions of the Jews and allowed European organizations and schools to come to Iran and help the community.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 opened the way for cataclysmic changes in Iran with the establishment of a parliament, greater freedom of the press, and the writing of a constitution that guaranteed equal rights for Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. In February 1921, Reza Khan, commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, staged a coup d'état, renamed himself Reza Shah Pahlavi, and became the ruler of Iran (r. 1925–1941). The reign of the Qajar dynasty thus came to an end in 1925. It was followed by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979), which continued to encourage the westernization of Iran.



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# Background Information (continued)

## Iran and Zionism

Like the members of other Jewish communities worldwide, Iranian Jews felt a deep spiritual connection to the land of Israel and experienced a sense of longing for it over the course of many centuries. These feelings were given expression in prayers, poetry, and traditions, including pilgrimages to the cave of Serah Bat Asher, near Isfahan—where, according to local lore, a secret tunnel led directly to Jerusalem.

Overt Zionist activities, however, only began to take place in Iran following the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which signaled Great Britain’s support for the “establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” The Central Committee of the Zionist Federation in Iran was established a short time later in 1919, followed by the creation of chapters elsewhere. For the first time, Iranian Jews had a central body to which they could appeal for help in the face of persecution by Muslims.

During the 1940s and 1950s, ties with international Jewish organizations continued to grow stronger. Meetings with these representatives and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 endowed Iranian Jews with a sense of national pride and a desire to participate in building a new life in an independent Jewish state. Although no precise data are available, it is estimated that 60,000 of the 100,000 Jews living in Iran were preparing to immigrate to Israel in 1948.

## Life under the Pahlavi Monarchy

The reigns of Reza Shah (r. 1925–1945) and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979), although authoritarian and oppressive in many respects, paradoxically provided stability and allowed for increasing modernization, secularization, and westernization. The worldview upheld by the Pahlavis was based on an ideal of national, rather than religious unity, and this enabled religious minorities to aspire to the status of equal citizens for the first time since the rise of Islam in Iran in the seventh century. Jews experienced a new sense of security with the establishment of Israel in 1948, its rapid rise to power, and its victories over Arab neighbors. New alliances were forged between the two countries, which were deepened with cooperative arms and intelligence policies as well as oil sharing. Such cooperation angered the conservative Islamic clergy, and this would later contribute to the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy.

In 1963, however, the shah’s “White Revolution” produced a series of reforms that led to a period of expanded rights and benefits for many. These included a secular dress code, granting the vote to women, abolishing the country’s feudal system, redistributing land, and privatizing factories, which contributed to the hope for a “golden age” of prosperity for all. At the same time a number

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## Background Information (continued)

of controversial policies were enacted, including the banning of the communist Tudeh Party and a general suppression of political dissent enforced by Iran's intelligence agency, SAVAK.

### **The Diaspora: Jews Who Stayed in Iran**

A dramatic turn occurred in 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the formation of the Islamic Republic. The vision of the new leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (who ruled from 1979 until his death in 1989), required strict adherence to Islamic culture and religious values. Jews and other minorities were once again accorded *dhimmi* status (protected, but second-class citizenship). Initially, the beliefs upheld by the Islamic regime led to growing hostility toward Jews, aggravated by the connection of Iranian Jews to Israel and Zionist initiatives. Once stability was achieved in the wake of the revolution, attacks against Jews and other religious minorities (except the Baha'is) gave way to more balanced and tolerant viewpoints.

Today some 25,000 Jews live in Iran—in contrast to an estimated 85,000 to 100,000 on the eve of the revolution—and superficially their lives seem to have continued undisturbed. As long as they conform to the norms of personal conduct required by the Islamic state, do not show support for the state of Israel, and discreetly practice their faith, Jews are tolerated and are allocated one seat in the Iranian Parliament. Today, Tehran has eleven functioning synagogues, two kosher restaurants, a home for the elderly, a cemetery, and a large charity hospital.

Ironically, the crisis in the life of the Jewish community in Iran was also the starting point for the flourishing of Iranian Jewish communities outside of Iran.

### **The Diaspora: Iranian Jews Who Came to Los Angeles**

Approximately 50,000 Jews are believed to have left Iran within a year of the formation of the Islamic Republic. The largest group came to the United States with the majority settling in Los Angeles. Great Neck and Queens in New York became home to the second largest community of Iranian Jews. These immigrant communities faced many of the same challenges that others had experienced on arriving in the United States. Few spoke English or had the skills or job experience required to join the American workforce, and American liberal social values clashed with traditional ways of life for many. Some financially successful families had preemptively moved their wealth outside Iran, however, and these funds supported the reestablishment of the community in the diaspora, as well as the development of charitable organizations and new business ventures.

Today Iranian Jews reside throughout Los Angeles County with larger concentrations on the Westside and in the San Fernando Valley. The Orthodox Iranian



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## Background Information (continued)

Jewish community has settled in traditionally Jewish neighborhoods, such as Fairfax and Pico/Robertson. The community is socioeconomically and religiously diverse. Some Iranian Jews have become more “Americanized,” and others have maintained their insularity. Many have embraced the Reform and Conservative movements, while others now practice Orthodox Judaism.

While the community uniformly shares pride in its identity, Iranian Jews straddle two cultures—maintaining traditional Iranian familial and social traditions while participating in the dominant American culture. As with many immigrant communities, intergenerational friction may present significant challenges for Iranian Jewish children raised in America and their parents. Thus the community continues to navigate and negotiate its Iranian, Jewish, and American identities in its adopted country.



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# Curricular Connections





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# Curricular Connections

Teaching about a community with an almost three thousand-year history will certainly give teachers many opportunities to correlate lessons with California State Standards. Although the teaching units primarily are directed to middle school students, many of the lessons have components that will be pertinent to studies in the earlier grades and also can be extended for use in high school classrooms.

The following excerpts from Frameworks for California Public Schools list some of the many significant goals addressed by these materials:

## History-Social Science Framework

### Goal of Knowledge and Cultural Understanding

Historical Literacy:

- Develop a keen sense of historical empathy
- Understand the reasons for continuity and change
- Understand the importance of religion, philosophy, and other major belief systems in history.
- Recognize the interrelatedness of geography, economics, culture, belief systems, and political systems.

Cultural Literacy:

- Understand the rich, complex nature of a given culture: its history, politics, literature, art, religion, philosophy, science, education, social structure, and economy.
- Learn about the values and beliefs of a people.
- Develop a multicultural perspective that respects the dignity and worth of all people.
- Recognize that literature and art reflect the inner life of a people.

Ethics and Belief Systems:

- Recognize the importance of religion in human society and its influence on history.

Geographic Literacy:

- Develop an awareness of place.
- Understand human and environmental interaction.

Sociopolitical Literacy:

- Understand the close relationship between society and the law.

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# Curricular Connections

## **Goal of Democratic Understanding and Civic Values**

- Understand the unique experiences of immigrants from Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Latin America.
- Develop an appreciation for the multicultural, pluralistic nature of U. S. society.

## **Goal of Skills Attainment and Social Participation**

- Participation Skills: Develop social and participation skills.
- Critical Thinking Skills: Judge information related to a problem.
- Study Skills: Read and interpret maps and globes. Organize and express ideas in writing and speaking. Understand, use, and create graphic information (timelines, etc.).

## **English-Language Arts Framework**

### Reading Comprehension

- Distinguish between cause and effect and between fact and opinion.
- Use popular media, e.g., newspapers, magazines, online information.

### Literary Response and Analyses

- Analyze the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical period.

### Listening and Speaking Strategies and Applications

- Identify how language usages, e.g., sayings and expressions, reflect regions and cultures.
- Ask thoughtful questions and respond to relevant questions with appropriate elaboration in oral setting.

## **Visual and Performing Arts Framework**

### Artistic Perception Component

- Use the senses to perceive works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment.

### Creative Expression Component

- Create original artworks based on personal experiences or responses.

### Historical and Cultural Context Component

- Explore the role of visual arts in culture and human history.

### Aesthetic Valuing Component

- Derive meaning from artworks through analysis, interpretation, and judgment.



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# Curricular Connections

**Following are some representative grade-level correlations suggested by the History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools:**

Grade One:

- 1.1 Students describe the rights and individual responsibilities of citizenship.
- 1.4 Students compare and contrast everyday life in different times and places around the world and recognize that some aspects of people, places, and things change over time while others stay the same.
- 1.5.3 Students compare the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, traditions, and social practices of the varied cultures, drawing from folklore.

Grade Two:

- 2.1 Students differentiate between things that happened long ago and things that happened yesterday.

Grade Three:

- 3.1 Students describe the physical and human geography and use maps, tables, graphs, photographs, and charts to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context.

Grade Six:

- 6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush.
- 6.3 Students analyze the geographic, economic, religious, and social structures of the Ancient Hebrews.

Grade Seven:

- 7.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of Islam in the Middle Ages.

Grade Eight:

- 8.2.6 Students enumerate the powers of government set forth in the Constitution and the fundamental liberties ensured by the Bill of Rights.

Grade Ten:

- 10.1 Students relate the moral and ethical principles in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, in Judaism, and in Christianity to the development of Western political thought.



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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews





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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews

## Background

According to the Bible, the first Jews to settle in Persia were members of the ten tribes of ancient Israel exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. One of the world's oldest Jewish communities—and the oldest religious minority in Iran—the Jewish community has confronted numerous challenges in its almost 2,700 years of existence there. The succession of dynasties and peoples who conquered Iran impacted and enriched Persian Jewish culture in a variety of ways—as has the nearly 1,400 years of living under Muslim rule. These influences are revealed in special traditions and unique beliefs.

The exhibition attests to the vibrant life of Iran's Jewish community from ancient times to the present day. It is a life marked by times of great cultural achievement and periods of prosperity as well as by great hardship, persecution, and even forced conversion—truly a story of light and shadows.

The following chronology includes some of the historical events that had great impact on the lives of the Jews of Iran.

### 1. First Temple Period—727 BCE to 597 BCE

Conquering Assyrians deported many thousands of Israelite Jews from ancient Israel to parts of what are now Iran and Iraq.

In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great, leader of the Persian Empire, conquered Babylon and permitted exiles to leave and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, later referred to as the Second Temple. Many returned, as reported in biblical texts, but most chose to remain under the benevolent rule of Cyrus and later kings.

### 2. Second Temple Period—330 BCE to 70 CE

Alexander the Great of Greece conquered the Persian Empire. Upon Alexander's death his empire was divided. The largest division, headquartered in Damascus, stretched east to include the Jewish communities in Persia.

In 70 CE the Roman Empire destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The disaster affected Jews throughout the world and ignited hopes of a return to "Zion" and the rebuilding of the Jewish homeland.

### 3. Parthian and Sassanid Periods—3rd Century BCE to 650 CE

Under the Parthian Dynasty, Jewish communities enjoyed greater religious tolerance and autonomy and willingly migrated to settle in Iran and surrounding regions.

A succession of dynasties ruled the region, including that of the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, King Ardashīr (c. 224 CE), who is often associated with the

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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

Hebrew Bible story of the Persian Jewish Queen Esther.

## 4. Early Islamic Period—634 to 1255

The Muslim conquest in 651 led to religiously dictated repressions of all non-Muslims, and the relegation of Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians to a lower class position in society, the status of *dhimmi*. During the 9th century, under Caliph Al Motevakel, Jews were forced to wear special clothing as religious identification, a practice that ended in the late 19th century.

## 5. Mongol Period—1256 to 1318

A Mongol invasion, led by Genghis Khan, conquered northern and eastern Iran and destroyed many Jewish communities, including those bordering modern-day Afghanistan. They also abolished *dhimmi* status, but later Mongol leaders converted to Islam and reimposed the secondary status of *dhimmi* upon Jews and non-Muslims.

## 6. Safavid and Qajar Dynasties—1502 to 1925

Safavid Dynasty adopted Shiism as the state religion with its strict adherence to the idea that all religious minorities (including Sunni Muslims) are ritually impure. Subsequent laws created extreme hardships—economic, professional, and religious—for the Jewish community. In some cases, entire communities were forced to convert to Islam.

The first Jewish school in Persia (for boys only), the Alliance Israelite Universelle, opened in response to pressure from international Jewish organizations and the European community.

Large numbers of Persian-speaking Jews from both Persia and surrounding countries migrated to Eretz Yisrael (then Ottoman-controlled Palestine).

## 7. Pahlavi Dynasty—1925 to 1979

A military coup overthrew Ahmad Shah Qajar and declared Reza Shah (who subsequently added the name Pahlavi) as the new king of the Imperial State of Persia. Under the Pahlavi regime Jews and other non-Muslim groups were not discriminated against and were able to rise in social and economic status.

World War II brought a reluctant Iran into contact with the warring powers. In August, 1941, the Soviet Union and Britain invaded Iran and sent the Shah into exile. In 1942, they allowed the Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, to take the throne on condition that he would have Iran join the Allies.

On May 14, 1948 the state of Israel was created. Iran was the second Muslim nation to recognize Israel as an independent state (Turkey was the first) and



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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

Israelis viewed Iran as a non-Arab ally on the rim of an unfriendly Arab world. Relations between Iran and the Jewish state of Israel were good, extending to trade and even joint military operations.

## 8. The Islamic Revolution of 1979

On January 16, 1979, the Shah of Iran and his family fled to Egypt. The leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, took power and declared the nation to be the Islamic Republic of Iran. This led to increased power for the *mullahs* (Muslim religious leaders) and the consequent subjugation of both non-Muslims and non-Shiite Muslims to strict Islamic law.

Approximately 85% of Iranian Jews emigrated from Iran to the West, primarily to Israel and the United States, in fear of repression and intolerance from the newly empowered Islamic led government.

Immediately after the Islamic Revolution, the new government of Iran severed ties with Israel. Iran maintains ties with Islamic organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas and does not recognize Israel as a nation.

## Activities

### Lesson 1: Travel through Time on a Timeline

By drawing and using a timeline students will be better able to understand the situation of Persian Jews during specific periods and to compare the relationships of a period to the previous or subsequent one.

Have students construct a timeline for the period 800 BCE to 2200 CE. They will use a 30” long piece of butcher paper or three sheets of letter-sized paper, taped together along the shorter edges to make a sheet that measures more than 30”.

With a yardstick draw a line halfway up the 30” sheet. Mark the line at each inch mark.

Number the inch marks for each century beginning with 800 BCE (followed by 700, 600, 500, 400, 300, 200, 100, 1). Continue with the CE (common era) marks 100, 200, 300 ....2100.)

Be sure that for discussion purposes, students understand the duration of a decade, century, and millennium. After examining the list of significant dates in the above background to this unit, students should transpose the information onto the class horizontal timeline that they have constructed. This information will help them compare the relationships between, and the relative

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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

length of time of, the significant periods cited.

You may have each student do further research on any of the periods listed on the timeline or on an event within the period. If your class is learning about any other civilization as part of your social studies curriculum, students could note (using a different color pen or marker) relevant dates on the same timeline to place them historically in comparison with periods in Persia/Iran.

Keep the timeline posted for reference as your class continues its study of Iranian Jews.

Students may also illustrate people or events (with a suitable poster or postcard-sized drawings) and display them near the timeline with a piece of string or yarn connecting the correct placement on the line to the drawing.

## Lesson 2: Mapping a World with Moving Borders

A. What dictates the borders of empires, nations, or states? Is it geography, population, culture, language, war? Do other factors come into play? Students will examine physical and cultural (geopolitical) maps of the region that today encompass the Middle East and surrounding areas and compare these to the ancient empires of Assyria, Greece, and Persia.

1. How many nations inhabit these same regions today?

Using an outline map of the region, locate contemporary modern Iran and its neighbors, and compare these to borders of the ancient empires of the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Seleucids.

Explain to students that they will compare maps of the Middle East at various points in history. Utilizing either wall maps or globes, and outline maps available online, ask students to carefully examine the maps from different time periods and, working independently or in small groups, highlight borders that have remained consistent over time. Use a different color to highlight political or nation/state borders that have changed significantly. (If possible, make map transparencies so one map can be overlaid upon another to illustrate changes). Note how long one empire lasted versus the reign of another and focus on the following empires: Assyria, Greece, Mongol, and Persia.

2. Ask the class if any geographic features have changed over time. Physical features such as mountains, deserts, and rivers might not change drastically, but the human ability to conquer physical elements has changed and may have contributed to the rise and fall of empires. Ask students for examples. *(Trains, planes, and ships have replaced donkeys and camels for transport.)*



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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

*Deserts once uninhabitable can now be populated because of piped-in water and can be crossed via roads, trains, and planes. Engineering innovations have made mountains passable and damming has altered the course and navigability of waters.)*

Look for geographical features that consistently show up as a “border.” Do these physical features explain the border stability? Why or why not? (*For example: a river or a mountain range may serve as a border in one country but not in others. Or perhaps a mountain range can slow or block the spread of a language or a religion.*) Coming closer to home, the class can examine a map of the United States to see if any states have borders that are defined by geographic features.

3. Discuss whether cultural changes might lead to political border changes and vice-versa. Have political borders led to cultural changes within the population? In addition to the Middle East consider border changes from the former state of Yugoslavia to the current countries of Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina; border changes between the U. S. and Mexico; etc.

The lesson can provide opportunities for students to examine other parts of the world, including those of their own ancestors, to better understand the fluidity of ever-changing borders.

B. Read the following quote from Anwarul K. Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi diplomat and an Under-Secretary of the United Nations:

"The first step towards examining the road to peace should start with an appreciation of the changing nature of conflicts. Gone are days of war between states for conquest, extension of spheres of influence in the name of ideology... Today's wars are about settling border disputes...."

What does Chowdhury mean by “extension of spheres of influence in the name of ideology”?

Do you agree/disagree? Find examples in current affairs to support your conclusion. In today’s world a number of nations are involved with their neighbors over rights to natural resources, particularly water rights. Since water is necessary for human survival, do you have any suggestions as to how these border disputes should be solved?

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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

## Lesson 3: Human Rights for All

The earliest known declaration of human rights was written by Cyrus the Great of Persia in the 6th century BCE, more than 2500 years ago. Inscribed onto a clay cylinder housed today in the British Museum in London (and featured, along with other Cyrus imagery in the *Light and Shadows* power-point for teachers on the Fowler Museum website), Cyrus's *Charter of Human Rights* states that all humans have universal rights without regard to their religion, ethnicity or nationality.

The ethnically Persian Cyrus considered himself the guardian of the thousands of peoples from various nations who lived in his kingdom and he considered all people to be members of one human family.

Unlike most conquerors, he allowed the diverse ethnic and religious groups to remain loyal to their own heritage while at the same time joining with others as citizens of his kingdom. Fifty years after Cyrus captured Jerusalem from Assyria he decreed that the thousands of Jews who had been captured by the Assyrians and brought against their will to Babylon could return to their homelands. They could return to their homes in ancient Israel and rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. Many did return while others chose to remain in Persia. They formed the beginnings of new Jewish groups—one of these evolved into what we know today as the Iranian Jewish community.

Cyrus's policy of human rights no longer exists in the land where he once ruled. Attacks against Jews and other religious minorities (except the Baha'is) gave way to more balanced and tolerant viewpoints. Full liberty is still not a reality for all Iranian citizens.

A. Lead discussions based on the following questions:

- What is a “universal human right”? Define “universal” / “human” / “right.”
- What is the difference between a “right” and a “privilege?”
- Are “rights” something all individuals are due simply for existing, or are they, as many believe, given to us by a higher power?
- Can rights be bestowed upon individuals by a government or a ruler?  
(If that is the case, can these rights also be taken away? If they can be taken away, are they really “rights” or merely “privileges?”)

B. Using a map, locate nations that are “free” according to the Democracy index: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Democracy\\_Index\\_2011\\_green\\_and\\_red.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Democracy_Index_2011_green_and_red.svg)

What is the ranking of the United States? Of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

C. On December 10, 1948, after the horrors of World War II and many years of effort by U. S. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the purpose of which was to state and protect the rights of all people everywhere.

Obtain copies of Cyrus's Declaration of Human Rights, the United States Bill of Rights, and the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all accessible on the Internet.

Compare and contrast the declarations of human rights. Do they have similarities? Differences?

Present some "Articles" from the U.N.'s Declaration (Official Version) to the class and have them rewrite them in their own words. We have selected the following, but others may be particularly relevant to your studies: Articles 1, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19, 26. [www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml)

As part of a follow-up discussion, let students compare their rewritten versions with the "Plain Language Version," rewritten in everyday language. [www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/plain.asp](http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/plain.asp)

## Lesson 4: A Question of Refugees

What is a refugee? The United Nation's website states that a refugee is *"someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group."*

One of the oldest recorded stories of a people being led into captivity is about the thousands of Israelites (Jews) captured about 2700 years ago by the ancient Assyrians. Forced to march eastward to the land then called Babylon, the Hebrew Bible records that the refugees sat down on the banks of the "rivers of Babylon" and wept as they remembered their lost homeland of Zion. Many Iranian Jews are direct descendants of these refugees.

A. A popular hymn was composed based upon the experience in words written over 2500 ago in Psalm 137:1-4. The original text reads: *"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion... they carried us away in captivity and require of us a song. Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"*



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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

The hymn has been given new voice in popular songs, rounds, gospel and reggae, and featured television programs. The lyrics vary somewhat, but all refer to the forced exile of 2700 years ago. Students can find several versions on YouTube.

- Find the river Babylon on the map. How far is it from “Zion” (one of the biblical names for Jerusalem)?
- How many miles/kilometers would one have to walk from Jerusalem to Babylon?
- Why is this song particularly popular with African American churchgoers? Are there other songs or poems reflecting the topic of refugees that you can find (or write)?

B. Over the centuries Jews were continuously persecuted for their religious beliefs and often forced to leave homes in many lands, among them Israel, Spain, Portugal, England, Russia, France, Germany, Eastern Europe, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, Morocco, Uganda and the nations of the U.S.S.R. (Students can locate these countries on a map or globe).

History repeated itself many times, including the 1979 exodus of thousands of Iranian Jews from the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran to new homes in Israel and the United States. These Jews may have left behind their homes but they took with them their memories, their faith and their traditions that they planted in new soil in new lands. History is filled with similar stories—the sad tale of the refugee is not unique to Jews.

C. Explain to the students they will research stories of refugees from different eras and different lands. They should compare the mass deportation of Jews to Babylon in the 6th century BCE with other forced migrations in history. (Note: Many such stories can be found at the library and on-line.) Students should address questions as the following:

- Were they deported as a group or as individuals?
- Where did most of the refugees settle?
- Why was this group of people persecuted?
- Were they eventually permitted to go home?
- Is the expulsion memorialized in any way today by the group?
- How do the nations to which refugees have fled respond? What are the cultural, legal, and economic issues?
- In the U.S., what are the official positions that Immigration Services take in regards to specific groups of refugees? How does the U.S. “classify” refugees and how does this affect their status?

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# Unit 1: History of Iranian Jews (continued)

Assign one of the stories, or the story of other refugee groups not listed here, to a student or a group of students. These should be reported on to the class and be the impetus for sharing reasons why people become refugees, experiences of refugees in their new homes, and the responsibilities to be assumed by governments and by individuals for welcoming and aiding refugees.

Some stories:

- The expulsion of Jews from Spain during the Spanish Inquisition (1492)
- The “Trail of Tears” relocation of members of the Cherokee and other Native American nations during the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1831–1838)
- The expulsion of Armenians from their homes in Turkey (1914)
- Jewish refugees from Arab lands (1930s–1950s)
- Jewish refugees who survived World War II (1945)
- Albanian refugees from war in Kosovo: (1998–1999)
- Refugees from the Partition of India and Pakistan (1939–1947)
- Arab and Jewish refugees (1948)
- The struggles of the Hmong following the Viet Nam war
- The Lost Boys of Sudan (1983–2005)
- Tutsis refugees from Rwanda (1994)
- Syrian refugees fleeing into neighboring Turkey (present day)



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# Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale*





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# Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale*

## Background

A large number of groups lived in ancient Persia and in the surrounding region. Their practices often differed widely from those of their neighbors but there was much cultural exchange—not always the result of interactions that were peaceful—and one group frequently took on the practices and languages of another. For many centuries, Jews have been among the ethnic, religious, and cultural mix.

In some periods and in some areas, Jews interacted freely with their non-Jewish neighbors. There were times, however, when their living conditions deteriorated drastically and Jews were restricted to the mahale (Jewish quarter). Prohibitions, persecutions, religious edicts, and enforced conversion to Islam had a marked detrimental effect on their economic and professional status. The many severe restrictions placed on them and other non-Muslim groups, also denied them social and political equality. These restrictions occurred even though Jews, along with Christians, were regarded as “People of the Book,” all followers of monotheistic religions and even though several statements in the Koran promote tolerance towards People of The Book, including, “To you your religion, and to me mine.”

Before the Safavid dynasty, beginning in the early sixteenth century, Jews had worked in a variety of fields as merchants and middlemen, printers and producers of cloth, and traders in spices and precious stones. In the new kingdom, most Jews were limited to practicing professions that were disdained by the Shiite Muslims and forced to work as peddlers, vendors of used clothing, musicians and entertainers at Jewish and Muslim festivities, metal workers, cloth dyers, and producers and sellers of wine and other alcoholic beverages (a profession strictly forbidden to Muslims according to Shiite law). (Images of works by Iranian Jewish artists—metal workers, weavers, and dyers—are included in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint on the Fowler Museum website.)

About three centuries after the beginning of Safavid rule, in 1839, in the city of Mashhad, the Jewish inhabitants were forced to convert to Islam. The city’s ruler ordered soldiers to enter Jewish homes, and mobs attacked the community, burning down the synagogue, looting, and killing thirty to forty people. Jewish leaders were forced to proclaim their allegiance to Islam, and in order to save the town’s 2,000 inhabitants, they acceded to the order that all Jews in the city convert to Islam. Most people did so and stayed in Mashhad, adhering to Islamic practices in public while secretly observing Jewish traditions. These newly Islamized Jews came to be known as jaded al-Islam (Persian for “new to Islam”), Crypto-Jews, or anusim (Hebrew for “forced converts”). One of the anusim, Rachel Betsalely, wrote an account of her complicated early life (or duo lives) in a 2007 *Jerusalem Post* interview (search on *The double lives of Mashhadi Jews - Jerusalem Post*)

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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

Nearly a century passed before Mashhad's Jews could again practice their faith openly, as the Pahlavi dynasty began. After World War II, many settled in Tehran, Israel, and Great Neck, New York. Today there are some 15,000 Mashhadis worldwide, of which 10,000 live in Israel.

It is ironic that the Jews of Iran, despite their second-class citizenship, became the primary guardians of musical and poetic traditions in the non-Jewish Persian sphere. Following the rise of Shiite Islam, Muslims were forbidden to compose and play secular music, but this prohibition did not extend to minorities. Jewish musicians, singers, and dancers were permitted to entertain at both Muslim and Jewish celebrations in Iran. Given the restrictions on the occupations that they could enter, many Jews did in fact earn livings as musicians and performers. They specialized in playing traditional Iranian instruments (among them the *tār*, *setār*, and *santūr*). The Jewish community thus came to play a key role in preserving the legacy of classical Persian music.

As for poetry, because Jewish religious ritual is centered upon the reading of the Torah, Jews historically tended to be better educated than the majority population in Iran, and poetry was given expression in Persian-Jewish epics, which were copied and preserved in manuscript form for hundreds of years.

Jews have woven textiles and carpets since Biblical times. In the twentieth century, Jews, including those from Mashhad, were able to benefit from Iran's involvement in the development of Persian carpets as an industry and an export commodity. Some of the Jewish immigrants to America brought their knowledge of the carpet business with them, and today many carpet dealers in Los Angeles and other major American cities are Jews with Iranian roots.

### Activities

#### Lesson 1: People of the Book: Shared Traditions

As noted in the background, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are all monotheistic religions, their followers considered "People of the Book." As such, along with distinct differences, they share many concepts. Let students think about these similarities and differences as they fill in the worksheet at the end of this unit. (Although here we are primarily concerned with the three monotheistic faiths, some students may be more familiar with another faith and may wish to so label the fourth column and answer the questions in that column also.)

After they complete the worksheet, ask students for ideas they may now have for utilizing the information to increase understanding and tolerance. Can they see avenues for connections among different faiths to substitute for arguments over differences?

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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

### Lesson 2: Living a Double Life

A. Introduce students to the 2007 Jerusalem Post interview cited in the background statement. Mashhadi Jews not only concealed their true selves and their religious beliefs, they had to hide ritual objects that would reveal their observances. Displayed in the *Light and Shadows* exhibition (and included in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint for teachers on the Fowler Museum website) are a Ner Tamid (the Eternal Light that always remains lit near a synagogue ark), a Torah with its text typically inscribed on a long, continuous scroll, and a *ketubah* or wedding contract signed by a bride and groom. These were disguised or concealed by Jews in Mashhad. Before viewing the exhibition have students brainstorm ways to hide such objects while still keeping them in ritual use.

You may wish to have students devise methods of concealment or disguise for other such objects or practices. What strategies might they use if they had to hide the ritual objects or practices of their own family?

B. Discuss why Rachel Betsalely responds to questions about missing her former home in Iran with the statement "...for us in Iran, it wasn't our country. We weren't allowed to be part of it. We had to live two lives to survive. So I don't feel the same sense of attachment to Iran as others from more open countries might. For me, Israel is my only home."

### Lesson 3: Poetry and Persia

The various forms of Persian poetry—classical and popular, liturgical and secular—lend themselves to many writing opportunities for students.

Older students can investigate the traditional form, the *ghazal*, which consists of an unlimited number of rhyming couplets (minimum of five couplets) with a specific rhyme scheme AA BA CA DA EA FA.... The last couplet usually includes the poet's name. The form was used by the Persian poet Rumi and musically by more recent Indian musicians such as Ravi Shankar.

Younger students can express themselves in simple "diamante" form, a form with some set requirements, and many variations. Always the poem consists of seven lines:

- Line 1: one-word topic (a noun)
- Line 2: two adjectives
- Line 3: three verbs
- Line 4: a four-word phrase
- Line 5: three verbs
- Line 6: two adjectives
- Line 7: one-word (noun)



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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

Often the topic or subject of the first line is simply renamed in the last line, and all other lines refer to aspects of that subject. Another use of the diamante is to express contrast with the last line naming an opposite of the first line topic. Here the second and third lines refer to the first line; the fifth and sixth lines refer to the last line. The fourth (middle) line acts as a bridge referencing the two contrasting words in lines one and seven.

light  
bright, telling  
opening, enriching, enveloping  
see all, hide some  
hesitating, obscuring, hinting,  
dim, secretive  
shadows

The title of the exhibition, *Light and Shadows*, suggests many possible themes of contrast including light/shadows, concealed/revealed, present/past, ancient/modern, freedom/restriction, Iran/U.S./ here/there, together/apart, fear/security, young/old, and display/hide. Diamante poems can be composed about any of these, and more.

Another poetry form suitable for all ages is the use of more than one language in a poem. Here all students can use the two languages most pertinent to this study: Persian and English. The same activity, however, could be used with their home language by students with other backgrounds, i.e., Spanish, Hebrew, Vietnamese.

To begin a bilingual poem combining Persian and English words, students should collect and build a Persian vocabulary to be posted in the room. Likely categories would be the names of colors, seasons, sounds, numbers, animals, etc. — any words the students decide might be useful to them. They could use Persian-English dictionaries, but it would be better to use this as an opportunity to dialogue with Persian speakers. All poetry forms you assign or class members choose would be suitable. One approach is for students to compose their poems in English and as (or after) they compose their poems, have them substitute Persian words for some of those English words. You might want to further direct them to include at least one Persian word in each line or in every two lines.

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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

### Lesson 4: Create a Chalk Rug

Rugs and carpets from Iran have been exported to most parts of the world. There are many traditional motifs in the carpets, varying with the region; most common are the *botah* (a paisley-like design), stylized flowers, and geometric shapes. Patterns are often symmetrical and a large medallion is featured in the center. Carpets made by and for Jews frequently feature inherently Jewish motifs, including stars of David, menorahs, Torah crowns, and Hebrew writing (see *Light and Shadows* powerpoint for teachers on the Fowler Museum website).

Students can work alone or in small groups to recreate a “Persian” rug on the school playground.

To make planning drawings, students should use sheets of large square graph paper, deciding on a scale (perhaps, two squares on the paper will equal two square feet on the ground. They can make individual “rugs” as small as 1’ x 2’ or work together to make larger scale “carpets.”

Utilizing some of the elements in a Persian carpet, encourage students to outline the design of their carpet onto graph paper and use colored pencils and pens, or pastels to fill in the remainder of the design. By planning ahead and designing with the aid of the grid, students will be able to transfer their design to the outdoor space.

Remind them that each “carpet” design could include some elements of Persian carpets: a boundary or border, a field which may or may not include a central “medallion,” and various motifs such as the *botah*, lotus, flowers and leaves, which can be arranged in a pattern within the boundary and /or scattered across the field.

Students should also preselect the colors of their “carpet,” utilizing between five to ten colors. Too many will make the carpet too “busy.” Remind them that since they will be “painting” with chalk, they can also blend the colors to create subtle shades of bolder colors.

Once the graph paper drawing is complete, they can move outdoors where (on a cleanly swept area) you will need to draw a large grid pattern, probably converting your paper graph to the sidewalk, 2 inches to 2 feet. Students should draw in one square of the grid at a time, copying directly from their paper design.



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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

Prepare in advance. Chalk painting is fun, but can be messy. Make sure all supplies are on hand before you start:

- Use sidewalk chalk or pastels to “paint” the carpet. (Pastels are more expensive, but produce deeper colors and last longer).
- Blue painters’ tape can be used to mark off borders and when removed, leaves a sharp clean line of color.
- Paper towels, sponges, old rags—anything for cleanup that you can discard afterward.
- Oversize t-shirts or smocks to avoid getting clothes dirty.
- Different sizes of paintbrushes and sponges for applying the color.
- Lots of water, both for drinking, but especially for washing hands.
- Something to kneel on while drawing to prevent sore knees, i.e.: rolled up towels, rubber kneepads or gardeners’ pads.
- If working in the sun, don’t forget the sunscreen and hats.
- Don’t forget to bring a camera to take pictures!

The above list is suggested at <http://www.teachnet.com/lesson/art/chalkart061599.html>

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## Unit 2: Life in the *Mahale* (continued)

### People of the Book: Shared Traditions Worksheet

Answer the following questions in the appropriate spaces:

1. Do believers acknowledge one or many gods?
2. Is anyone or any group honored as founder(s) of the religion?
3. Where do groups worship?
4. What is the symbol of the faith?
5. What is the sacred book?
6. Who are the religious leaders?
7. Name any location that may be considered holy to believers?
8. Name any distinctive clothing that may be worn by the members of the faith?
9. Name diet restrictions, if any.
10. What are some of the holidays observed?

	ISLAM	JUDAISM	CHRISTIANITY	_____
1.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____	_____	_____
7.	_____	_____	_____	_____
8.	_____	_____	_____	_____
9.	_____	_____	_____	_____
10.	_____	_____	_____	_____

What similarities, if any, do you note among two or more of the three religions?

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What, if any, significant differences do you note?

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# Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual





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# Unit 3: Order and Organization / Tradition and Ritual

## Background

A regular performance of rituals helps people to order and organize their everyday lives. In the chaotic world of Iranian Jewry, the presence of clear boundaries was a necessity. Religious observance defined them as distinct from their neighbors. To a large extent it also enabled them to shape their self-image as both individuals and as a group—an image that existed in distinction from, and even in opposition to, their image in the eyes of non-Jews. Jews in Persia were not, however, oblivious to the larger culture in which they lived, and they both adopted elements of it and were influenced by it, resulting in a hybridized essence of Iranian Jewry.

The religious center of a Jewish community is usually a synagogue (called a *knisa* in Iran). Worldwide, the structure of this house of worship often reflects prevailing architecture, but the features are traditional: a sanctuary for prayer with Torah scrolls placed in a wall niche or in a cabinet (ark); the *bimah* or *teivah*, an elevated platform with a pedestal on which the Torah scrolls are placed for reading, and an always lighted “Ner Tamid” or “Eternal Light;” traditionally fueled by oil, today by electricity. Participants in services in Iran’s older synagogues sit on wooden chairs or benches placed on both sides of the ark and in a curve along the perimeter of the room. Although in Iran most of life passage rituals are celebrated in the home, others are held in communal settings and of course, in the *knisa*.

The ark holds the Torah, a compilation of Jewish history, laws and moral code, central to prayer. In most *knisa* the Torah is wrapped in an embroidered cloth decorated in gold with a crown and Star of David. When not in use it is stored in a cabinet-style ark often held in a wooden case that is flat-topped, domed, or surmounted by a metal crown. The ornamentation of the case differs from one community to another: with colorful embellishments; covered with leather, fabric, or silver plates; and sometimes wrapped in a rich fabric. Further adorning the Torah are metal finials. They cap the poles on which the Torah is stored or they are placed above the crown or the case. Each city of Iran had its own distinguishing design for Torah finials; sometimes pear-shaped; in the shape of a hand with fingers pointing upward; banner- or flag-shaped; in the form of pomegranates, among others. The choice often was dependent upon the financial resources of the community.

Celebrations of life’s passages and traditions, including those marking transitions, are held in the *knisa*, in community settings, and typically in Iran, at home. A person’s first and major transition is that from the womb to our world. The birth of a child is a joyful event and often a precarious one as well. To ensure a newborn’s well-being, Persian Jews may (as do other groups) call upon amulets that they sew to the baby’s clothing, hang from its cradle, or place in the room.

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## Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual (continued)

Amulets have been used by people throughout time as protection against misfortune, illness, and the dreaded “Evil Eye.” The words that Jewish amulet makers included on amulets often repeated biblical verses, and if drawn images were used, they followed local or popular beliefs and styles. Typically, though, the decoration and shapes used were thought to be helpful for their protective qualities: triangles, squares, rectangles, and hexagrams; a six-pointed star, the menorah or candelabra with seven branches; hands or *hamsa*, (a design shared with other cultures in the Middle East and in Jewish tradition viewed as representing the protective hand of God), and/or “mysterious” variants of Hebrew letters, believed by some to have originated in cuneiform writing. Another popular amulet style is a hollow silver tube made to contain a suitable verse.

The naming of the newborn offers reasons to celebrate as well. A baby girl receives her first name during services at the *knisa* on the first Shabbat following birth and a newborn boy is named as part of circumcision ceremonies on the eighth day of his life. Parties follow the ceremonies.

In premodern Iran, girls were married at a very young age, while boys married when they were able to support a family, perhaps at eighteen. The wedding customs were based on Jewish traditions and influenced by local, non-Jewish rituals and customs. A similar mix of traditions makes up contemporary wedding celebrations. Parties, gift exchanges, ritual baths, lots of music and dance fill the week before the ceremony. In separate henna ceremonies for the bride and groom, the couple’s hands and feet are dyed with henna, either solidly or with ornamental patterns, a practice shared with non-Jewish groups. Another shared (with Muslims) tradition is the signing of the marriage contract (Jewish term, *ketubah*). This richly decorated document delineates the new husband’s obligations to his wife.

For Jews in Iran, holidays are religious celebrations (the only secular holiday is Nowruz, a national recognition of the New Year and the beginning of Spring that is celebrated by all). Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and the Jewish festivals and feast days are all marked with festivities and food (except, of course, for Yom Kippur, a day of fasting). The two most widely celebrated are the holidays of Passover (commemorating the story of the Exodus, in which the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt) and Purim (a joyous commemoration of the time in ancient Persia that Queen Esther outsmarted wicked Haman).

The biblical story of Esther relates that Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman, is chosen to marry the powerful King Ahasuerus. Advised by her wise cousin and guardian, Mordechai, Esther initially keeps her faith a secret from the king. In the course of the story, Esther, working with Mordechai, manages to thwart the plans of Haman, the king’s advisor, to exterminate the Jewish



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## Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual (continued)

community. She does so at great risk to herself and by revealing her faith to Ahasuerus. The Jewish festival of Purim commemorates these events.

Images related to the story of Esther and Mordechai and of Torah cases, finials, marriage contracts, and amulets are included in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint for teachers on the Fowler Museum website.

### Activities

#### Lesson 1: Amulets to Heal and Protect

A. Despite the biblical opposition to divination, amulets were tolerated by the Talmudic rabbis, were used widely and are still used today. Due to proscriptions against idolatry, most Jewish amulets emphasize text and names over figural representations. Persian Jews wore amulets for purposes of healing and to protect themselves from harm. Students should consider additional ways we protect ourselves today. (*i.e.*, *bicycle helmets, knee pads, hats for sun protection, insurance, car seat belts.*)

Persian amulets displayed in the Light and Shadows exhibition are made of metal. Others were made of paper, parchment, or wood, depending upon local customs.

Students may create a personal amulet incorporating symbols and texts that have special meaning to them. They may use any material, or you may supply the material for them: paper (to be folded, torn, glued, painted, decorated, or embellished), fabric, wood, leather, reusable old jewelry pieces, aluminum tooling foil (to be embossed by tracing the design onto it and cutting it into desired shape), or found objects.

They could also design a protective amulet for a real or fictional person that they have encountered in the news; in a fictional book or story read in the classroom; or a movie, television or video game character, etc. In all these media and real life situations, people are encountering imagined or real perils. Could your students devise a protective device to be worn or used by any of them?

B. Amulets were worn to protect people from the “evil eye,” an ancient concept probably dating back to third millennium BCE Babylonia and Assyria. Many cultures developed beliefs that people sensitive to attention, like babies and brides, were especially vulnerable, a factor in increasing the need for amulets at these times. About the works in the University of California, Davis exhibition, *The Shining Cloth*, in 2000, Curator and Author Victoria Z. Rivers comments that since the first glance was considered the most powerful, objects that caught the initial gaze were believed to absorb the negative

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## Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual (continued)

energy from the wearer. Silver gleams both night and day, so it was the metal of choice for engrossing the evil eye. Because mirrors reflect, many people believe they deflect evil with their dazzling light, as do sequins, metal coins, and mother of pearl and other shiny buttons. Some people believe beads can repel the evil eye, because in some ways they look like eyes. (see Rivers, Victoria Z., *The Shining Cloth: Dress and Adornment that Glitters*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, Ltd.)

Have the class consider the power of eyes. Have they heard of sayings where eyes figure prominently? (*If looks could kill, eyes boring through me, I felt the eyes on me, more than meets the eye, with eyes wide open, all eyes are on you, the all seeing eye of god, give someone the eye, look the world straight in the eye, the eyes are the mirror of the soul, seeing is believing.*) Add these sayings to a discussion about the power of eyes. Students may also interpret one of these expressions as part of an art activity, with the eye as the central theme.

### Lesson 2: Henna Hands

Hanabandan (literally, “tying the henna”) is the ceremony in which Persian Jewish brides- and grooms-to-be have the palms of their hands (and sometimes feet), either dyed with, or intricately decorated, with henna. This dye, created from a flowering plant, has been used for thousands of years to temporarily dye hair, skin, leather, and fabric. For the pre-wedding ceremony, henna, in paste form, is brought out in a special brass bowl together with candles, fruits, and sweets—all to the accompaniment of performances by professional singers and musicians.

Students can use brown or red face paints (henna dries to a brownish tone) and a fine brush to decorate each other’s hands (palms and/or backs). An alternative class activity will have students tracing around their hands on light cardboard and then creating a design on the drawn hands. There are books and on-line sources for Persian designs or you may choose to have students create their own. For the hand shapes they should spread their fingers and use a pencil to carefully trace around both the right and left hands. They will then go over the pencil tracing with red or brown marker. With the pencil they should lightly draw intricate designs on the “hands.” Typical simple designs include dots, stars, moons, and cross-hatching. More intricate are flowers, botah (the paisley-like motif), vines, spirals, leaves, water drops, waves, birds, and others.

In designing their drawings, students could address fingers, palms, and wrists separately, keeping in mind the total picture. A good way to start is to draw the finger patterns from the fingertip to the top of the palm, using the same pattern on all fingers, or a different one on each.

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## Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual (continued)

The palm, of course, gives the largest space for creative expression: perhaps an abstract design radiating from the center, like a mandala. (Mandalas generally have one identifiable center point, from which radiates a variety of symbols, shapes and forms, both geometric and organic.) Other designs could come from the students' own likes and experiences. The open hand is a recurring motif in the Middle East and elsewhere, and teachers are reminded here of the hand form on the Torah finials and amulets in the exhibition and featured in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint on the Fowler Museum website.

The wrist and forearm itself is also a good surface for a horizontal pattern drawn across from one side to the other.

### Lesson 3: Purim and Esther

A. Following is a simplified outline of the story of Purim and Queen Esther. (An image of a wall painting [in present-day Syria] that tells this story is included in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint for teachers on the Fowler Museum website.) For younger students, you could present these events in mixed order and have the students put them into proper sequence. Older students will tell the Purim story in their own words using the outline as prompts. You may wish to have students divide up the parts of the principle characters: King Ahasuerus, Queen Vashti, Mordecai, Haman, and Esther, and tell the story from their viewpoint; or role play the story with these characters.

1. King Ahasuerus of Persia held a huge banquet for everyone in his kingdom.
2. He ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to perform at the banquet wearing her beautiful crown.
3. Vashti refused.
4. King Ahasuerus was angry and banished Queen Vashti from the palace.
5. He chose a new queen, the beautiful Esther, niece of Mordecai who told her to keep her Jewish identity a secret.
6. Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He told Queen Esther, and Esther reported it to the king.
7. The king ordered the two plotters to be hanged.
8. Haman, the king's minister, demanded complete loyalty of everyone in the king's service, and ordered all to bow down to him.
9. Mordecai refused to bow down, saying that bowing down to another person was forbidden by his Jewish faith.
10. Haman was angry and he decreed the destruction not only of Mordecai, but of all the Jews of the kingdom.
11. To determine the day for carrying out the decree, Haman cast lots, or purim. The lot fell on the 13th of the month of Adar.
12. Mordecai urged Esther to plead with the king to save the lives of her people.



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## Unit 3: Order and Organization/Tradition and Ritual (continued)

13. Queen Esther summoned all of her courage and went before the king. She persuaded him to grant her wish.
14. She told him about the plot against her people and asked that it be stopped.
15. The king granted her wish and ordered Haman to be hanged. So, on the day intended for their destruction, the Jewish people were saved.
16. To celebrate their survival, Mordecai declared the 14th and 15th days of Adar to be days of rejoicing, from that time forth and for all generations to come.

B. Discussing the holiday may lead to elaboration and discussions about the following topics:

- Sometimes it takes courage to make risky moral choices.
- Laughter can be healing.
- Why might someone choose to hide his or her true identity?
- Is community solidarity always a good thing?
- How we respond to unexpected events can change our lives and the lives of others.

D. Reading the story will explain some of the components of today's celebration of Purim. Have children research the connections of the following practices to the story of Esther:

- the name of the holiday
- wearing costumes
- use of noisemakers
- having fun, playful behavior
- presenting food baskets of food (Mishloach Manot) to others
- special three sided cookies called hamantaschen
- giving to the needy and to charities during Purim
- retelling the story

C. The story had great significance for Persian Jews, who faced persecution and periods where they had to endure forced conversions or otherwise conceal their religion. With Esther as its absolute heroine, the story has particular resonance for women. Students could research the history of the status and rights of women in Persia/Iran and include specific issues such as the wearing of hijab, education rights, marriage and divorce laws, and political participation. They may also learn more about influential women including Shirin Ebadi a former judge and human rights activist (especially in the arena of women's, children's, and refugee rights) who was awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize.



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# Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus





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# Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus

## Background

From the sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century, Iran was ruled according to strict Shiite Islamic doctrine that held powerful implications for the lives of Jews and other minorities. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the country underwent a gradual process of westernization and secularization, which was accelerated under the reign of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979). The year 1979, though, saw the Islamic Revolution, the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, and the establishment of a theocracy under the Republic's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (in office 1979–1989). The past three decades of Islamic rule have led to radical changes in Iran's internal and foreign policies, which have had far-reaching effects on all ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, including the Jews.

Today, about 25,000 Jews remain in Iran, where many are allowed to practice their religion provided they pay allegiance to the Republic. Some historians estimate, however, that nearly 70 percent of the Jewish community left Iran at the time of the Revolution to begin new lives in communities far from their ancestral homes.

In the nineteenth century, Iran slowly began to become receptive to Western influence. The Qajar-dynasty monarch Nasser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896) visited Europe in 1873 and 1889. There European Jews reminded the shah of the generous actions of King Cyrus toward the Jews of Judea who were exiled in ancient Babylonia, and they also informed him that they had learned of atrocities being committed against Iranian Jews in contemporary Iran. The shah promised to improve the living conditions of the Jews and allowed European organizations and schools to come to Iran and help the community.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 opened the way for cataclysmic changes in Iran with the establishment of a parliament, greater freedom of the press, and the writing of a constitution that guaranteed equal rights for Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. In February 1921, Reza Khan, commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, staged a coup d'état, renamed himself Reza Shah Pahlavi, and became the ruler of Iran. The reign of the Qajar dynasty thus came to an end in 1925 and was followed by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979), which continued to encourage the westernization of Iran.

Like the members of other Jewish communities worldwide, Iranian Jews felt a deep spiritual connection to the land of Israel and experienced a sense of longing for it over the course of many centuries. Overt Zionist activities, however, only began to take place in Iran following the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which signaled Great Britain's support for the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The Central Committee of the Zionist Federation in Iran was established a short time later in 1919, followed



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## Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

by the creation of chapters elsewhere. For the first time, Iranian Jews had a central body to which they could appeal for help in the face of persecution by Muslims.

During the 1940s and 1950s, ties with international Jewish organizations continued to strengthen. Meetings with their representatives and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 endowed Iranian Jews with a sense of national pride and a desire to participate in building a new life in an independent Jewish state. Although no precise data are available, it is estimated that 60,000 of the 100,000 Jews living in Iran were preparing to immigrate to Israel in 1948.

The reigns of Reza Shah (r. 1925–1945) and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979), although authoritarian and oppressive in many respects, paradoxically provided stability and allowed for increasing modernization, secularization, and westernization. The worldview upheld by the Pahlavis was based on an ideal of national, rather than religious unity, and this enabled religious minorities to aspire to the status of equal citizens for the first time since the seventh century rise of Islam in Iran. Jews experienced a new sense of security with the establishment of Israel in 1948, its rapid rise to power, and its victories over Arab neighbors. New alliances were forged between the two countries, which were deepened with cooperative arms and intelligence policies as well as oil sharing. Such cooperation angered the conservative Islamic clergy, and this would later contribute to the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy.

In 1963, however, the shah's "White Revolution" produced a series of reforms that led to a period of expanded rights and benefits for many. These included a secular dress code, granting the vote to women, abolishing the country's feudal system, redistributing land, and privatizing factories, which contributed to the hope for a "golden age" of prosperity for all. At the same time a number of controversial policies were enacted, including the banning of the communist Tudeh Party and a general suppression of political dissent enforced by Iran's intelligence agency, SAVAK.

A dramatic turn occurred in 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the formation of the Islamic Republic. The vision of the new leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (who ruled from 1979 until his death in 1989), required strict adherence to Islamic culture and religious values. Jews and other minorities were once again given *dhimmi* status (protected, but second-class citizenship). Initially, the beliefs upheld by the Islamic regime led to growing hostility toward Jews, aggravated by the connection of Iranian Jews to Israel and Zionist initiatives. Once stability was achieved in the wake of the revolution, attacks against Jews and other religious minorities (except the Baha'is) gave way to more balanced and tolerant viewpoints.

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## Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

Today some 25,000 Jews live in Iran—in contrast to an estimated 85,000 to 100,000 on the eve of the revolution—and superficially their lives seem to have continued undisturbed. As long as they conform to the norms of personal conduct required by the Islamic state, do not show support for the state of Israel, and discreetly practice their faith, Jews are tolerated and are allocated one seat in the Iranian Parliament. Today, Tehran has eleven functioning synagogues, two kosher restaurants, a home for the elderly, a cemetery, and a large charity hospital. Ironically, the crisis in the life of the Jewish community in Iran was also the starting point for the flourishing of Iranian Jewish communities outside of Iran. (Imagery focusing on Iranian Jews' status during the Pahlavi regimes and those who remained in the country after the Islamic Revolution are included in the *Light and Shadows* powerpoint for teachers on the Fowler Museum website.)

Approximately 50,000 Jews are believed to have left Iran within a year of the formation of the Islamic Republic. The largest group came to the United States with the majority settling in Los Angeles. Great Neck and Queens in New York became home to the second largest community of Iranian Jews. These immigrant communities faced many of the same challenges that others had experienced on arriving in the United States. Few spoke English or had the skills or job experience required to join the American workforce, and American liberal social values clashed with traditional ways of life for many. Some financially successful families had preemptively moved their wealth outside Iran, however, and these funds supported the reestablishment of the community in the diaspora, as well as the development of charitable organizations and new business ventures.

Today Iranian Jews reside throughout Los Angeles County with larger concentrations on the Westside and in the San Fernando Valley. The Orthodox Iranian Jewish community has settled in traditionally Jewish neighborhoods, such as Fairfax and Pico/Robertson. The community is socioeconomically and religiously diverse. Some Iranian Jews have become more “Americanized,” and others have maintained their insularity. Many have embraced the Reform and Conservative movements, while others now practice Orthodox Judaism.

While the community uniformly shares pride in its identity, Iranian Jews straddle two cultures—maintaining traditional Iranian familial and social traditions while participating in the dominant American culture. As with many immigrant communities, intergenerational friction may present significant challenges for Iranian Jewish children raised in America and their parents. Thus the community continues to navigate and negotiate its Iranian, Jewish, and American identities in its adopted country.

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# Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

## Activities

### Lesson 1: What's in a Name?

A. There have been changes in naming practices throughout Iran's history. Sometimes the change was forced upon them in order to conform to Islamization, other times it was done to help assimilate in a new home, and in still others it was just expedient or desirable. After learning about some of the changes, students will address the origin and significance of their own names.

Until the middle of the last century many Persians (including Jews) did not have last names. When, in 1928, the Shah mandated that all citizens select one, many Jews identified with their father, adding to his name the suffixes *zada*, *zadeh*, or *pur*, all meaning "son of," or adding the plural form, *ian*.

Other sources for the new family name designation included reference to their religion (as Havyem, translated from the Hebrew word for life), geographical origins of their families (typically with the one-letter suffix "i" (so the name Tabrizi means "of Tabriz"), and the fathers' professions (as Kafash for shoemaker).

During Shah Reza's reign, many names given to newborns reflected pride in the traditions of ancient Persia, and names such as Bijan, Darius, and Darab became popular with both Jews and non-Jews. Since the late 1950s there have been many name changes in order to facilitate integration into non-Jewish Iranian society. More recently, some first generation Iranian Jews who immigrated to the United States after the 1979 Islamic Revolution have selected American names for their children, and some changed their Persian sounding names to those easier for Americans to pronounce.

In contrast, their offspring who were born here in the United States (second and third generation Americans) often select "old-fashioned" Biblical names for their babies to reflect a Jewish heritage (i.e.: David, Daniel, Sarah and Rebecca) or they follow the current naming trends of the general population. More rare is the selection of Iranian names for their children.

1. Students will focus on their own names. After they talk with a knowledgeable family member, have them answer the following questions:

- Who chose your name, and why did they make that choice?
- Are you named after someone? If so who, and what do you know about that person?
- Are you known by more than one name? Do you have a nickname?
- Do you like your name? Why or why not?



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## Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

- If you wanted to, and were able to choose a different name, what would it be?
- Does your family name (last name) reflect your family's background, religion, occupation, or location? *Names ending with "ian" or "yan" may reflect Armenian or Persian tradition. Those ending in "ez" may show a Latin culture while those beginning with "Mac," "Mc," or "O" may be a sign of Scotch or Irish heritage. Many groups often name boys after their fathers, reflected in name beginnings "Ibn," and "Ben," and name endings, "witz," "vitch," "son," and "sen," all meaning "son of..."*

2. Ask how many of your students are in the first, second, third (or more) generation to come to America. Have the naming trends in their own families changed from generation to generation? If so, share examples.

3. Names often go in and out of fashion. Ask the students what they think are some of the most popular names today? List the suggested names and follow up with an Internet search to discover the actual answers. Can students determine if the popularity of names varies with different regions in the United States? Are there names that are particularly evident in your school? Naming trends in the U.S. may be explored on the Social Security website (<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/OACT/babynames/>) and your students may find this a fascinating history.

B. Students can research the worldwide, varied traditions and practices of naming children, particularly addressing the customs of their own heritage. They will find many differences in the source of names, the rituals or ceremonies involved, name changes that come about with age or marital status, etc.

They may investigate:

- Are babies named after a parent? If so, is it more often the father or the mother?
- Is there a member of the family who is given the honor of naming the new baby?
- Do all members of the family share the same "family" or last name?
- Is anything special done to protect the baby from "evil spirits"?
- Are babies named when newly born or after a period of time?
- Is the baby-naming part of a special ritual?
- Does the baby's name tell his/her position in society?

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# Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

## Lesson 2: Growing Up in a New Country

Students will acknowledge the many changes experienced by individuals when a family immigrates to a new location, especially a different country with traditions new to them. When families move—no matter the impetus—each member will have a unique reaction to the experience. Many factors play into the differences: age, relationships within the family, acculturation to the new environment, and others.

Have students choose a family to question or observe, particularly one with two generations they can meet. Many will be able to compare the experience and reactions of a first-generation immigrant parent who left his/her family home, to the experience and reactions of a second-generation child (it may well be the class member him- or herself).

Many differences between the two generations may emerge. These may concern the importance of education; social interactions among young people, including dating for older students; attitudes toward religious observances; free-time activities and amount of time devoted to them; continued connections to relatives remaining in the home country; interest in politics and events in the home country; preferences in movies, television, music; food habits and likes.

As a group, compile a list of questions to be answered. They may include those cited above along with questions about their feelings about the original home country; the memories of the first-generation parent and the stories that have become part of the child's background, and the current ties to the original country. Class members should be given time to share and compare their findings.

Members of a community typically share pride in identifying as such. Iranian Jews straddle two cultures—maintaining traditional Iranian familial and social traditions while participating in the dominant American culture. As with many immigrant communities, intergenerational friction may present significant challenges for Iranian Jewish children raised in America and their parents. Thus the community continues to navigate and negotiate its Iranian, Jewish, and American identities in its adopted country.

## Lesson 3: A Case for Values

A. Students will state their values and the standards they feel are necessary to live a good life and to help build a better world. By so doing they will be emulating many Jews who left Iran for Israel and the United States.

When Jewish people move into a new home—one street away or halfway across the world—one of their first activities is to place a *mezuzah* on their front doorframe. The *mezuzah* is a small case containing scrolls of religious

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## Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

text, written reminders to be good and honorable. There is no specific design for the outer case of the *mezuzah*; indeed many are playful, decorative, ornate, simple, etc. Within the box, however, there will always be placed a parchment scroll containing a prayer and a commandment to be a moral person, to always follow what is commonly known as the “Golden Rule.” This was paraphrased by a famous Jewish teacher in the first century, Rabbi Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman; that is the whole Law: all the rest is interpretation.”

Students will make their own scrolls and enclose them in a case to be placed prominently as a reminder of their value statements. Before they do, they should hold small group discussions on the values and/or ethics that they consider important enough to express and to pass on to others, share these with the class, and then perhaps decide on a group statement.

Some questions to consider:

- Can common standards of behavior contribute to a better society?
- Are some morals and values relative only to certain groups of people? Why or why not? Explain.
- Why is it important to be reminded daily of how to behave?
- How might the tradition of mezuzah have eased the immigration of Iranian Jews to their new homes in America?

After the discussion, condense the ideas into a short paragraph. Whether the written text expresses individual thoughts or is a group effort, students should write it, fold or roll it and place into cases of their own design (a *mezuzah* scroll is most often rolled and placed in a tubular case) and of their own decoration.

B. If students study the concept of the “Golden Rule,” they will find it expressed in many religious texts, both ancient and modern. They could compare these, particularly those that have played a role in religious life in the history of Persia/Iran (including, but not only, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Baha’i). Have them discuss why this concept is called the “ethic of reciprocity.”

### **Lesson 4: Still We Conceal, Still We Reveal**

So many times in their history, the Jewish people of Persia/Iran have had to conceal aspects of their identity. Today this is not a necessity for those who live in Los Angeles or elsewhere in the United States. Many young people, however, (and some of their elders, as well), no matter their ethnicity, do not choose to reveal themselves totally to others. Some aspects of their lives are revealed only to family, others shared only with close friends.



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## Unit 4: 2,700 Years since Cyrus (continued)

For this final activity in the *Light and Shadows* resource, students will combine the ancient *hamsa* symbol with its five fingers and the historical small lettering of micrography to tell about themselves in today's world. The completed activity will both conceal and reveal. They will draw the faint outline of a *hamsa*, selecting either the kind with five fingers separated and pointing upward, or the one with two outward pointing curved thumbs (or thumb and little finger), one on each side of three upward pointing central fingers.

On the outline the students then will write about themselves, revealing interests, desires, goals, memories, relationships, etc., so that all the lines of the *hamsa* symbol are covered with words. Individual words and phrases or a narrative or a poem about the writer will all be suitable. The outline of the *hamsa* will now show up as a series of words

As a last step of the activity, using a copy machine, reduce the drawn image until the desired size is reached, so the words appear very small as in micrography. The revealing words now are concealed by their very small size.

As an alternative to the *hamsa* for their outline, students can make an outline of something that represents an activity or an interest for which they are known or is readily revealed (i.e., a soccer ball, a ballet slipper, a symbol of their faith, a video player).



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# Suggested Readings





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# Suggested Readings

**Baer, Leah**

2002 "Life's Events: Births, Bar Mitzvah, Weddings, and Burial Customs."  
In *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, edited by Houman Sarshar, 311-336. Beverly Hills: The Center for Iranian Jewish History.

**Dallalfar, Arlene**

2002 "Worlds Apart: Mothers, Daughters, and Family Life."  
In *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, edited by Houman Sarshar, 403-414. Beverly Hills: The Center for Iranian Jewish History.

**Davidovitch, David**

1968 *The Ketuba: Jewish Marriage Contracts through the Ages*.  
Israel: E. Lewin-Epstein, Ltd.

**Ebtami, Houshang**

2002 "The Impure Jew," In *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*,  
edited by Houman Sarshar, 95-102. Beverly Hills: The Center for  
Iranian Jewish History.

**Kelley, Ron**

1993 "Caught Between Two Cultures: Young Iranian Women in Los  
Angeles." *Iranageles: Iranians in Los Angeles*, edited by Ron Kelly,  
223-232. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

**Kelley, Ron**

1993 "Interview with Homa Mahmoudi, Clinical Psychologist."  
In *Iranageles: Iranians in Los Angeles*, edited by Ron Kelly, 162-174.  
Los Angeles: University of California Press.

**Levi, Habib**

1999 *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the  
Diaspora*. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers.

**Menashri, David**

2002 "The Pahlavi Monarchy and the Islamic Revolution."  
In *Esther's Children*, edited by Houman Sarshar, 379-402.  
Beverly Hills: The Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, Beverly Hills.

**Reichel, Michael**

2004 *Persian American Jewry at a Crossroads: Will the Traditions  
Continue?* New York: LV Press.



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# Suggested Readings

**Sarshar, Houman**

2002 "The Mahalleh." In *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*. Beverly Hills: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

**Sarshar, Houman (ed.)**

2002 *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*. Beverly Hills: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

**Soomekh, Saba**

2012 *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women Between Religion and Culture*. New York, SUNY Press.

**Yeroushalmi, David (ed.)**

2012 *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*. Los Angeles: Beit Hatsutsot, The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles.