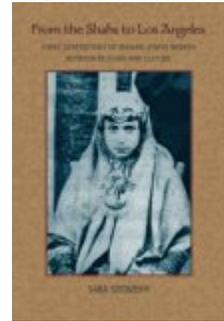


Saba Soomekh. *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. 224 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4383-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-4384-3.

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The Transnational Experiences of Persian Jewish Women

In her book, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture*, Saba Soomekh blends methodologies from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and oral history, to articulate the collective experience of Iranian Jewish women over three generations. Her work attempts to describe the nature of ethnic and religious identity, as well as the social and cultural practices of the Iranian Jewish community in general, and women in particular, in three historically distinct eras and two particular geographic sites (Iran and Los Angeles). Though uneven in its depth of explanation and analysis, at its best Soomekh's study offers some valuable insight into the history, culture, and society of a sometimes insular and somewhat inscrutable segment of Los Angeles's contemporary Jewish community.

Structurally, Soomekh has created a sound and accessible study. The book is divided into six chapters, including an introduction, conclusion, and four chapters in between, that periodize twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Persian Jewish history (in Iran and Los Angeles) into three distinct eras: Iran's constitutional monarchy (1921-41), the westernization and modernization project of Muhammed Reza Shah (1941 to the Islamic Revolution of 1979), and the Persian Jewish experience in Los Angeles (1970s to today). Each chapter blends narrative about the historical events that informed a particular era with the personal experiences and perceptions of Jewish women who lived through those times. Strictly speak-

ing, though, the book is not a work of history. Rather, Soomekh's book is an ethnography of sorts, and each chapter stands alone as a temporally and culturally specific snapshot of the experiences of a particular set of women at a particular time.

The most successful of these chapters are those that recount the experience of Persian Jewish women in Iran. In chapter 2, for example, Soomekh provides a wonderfully textured description of the ways in which Iranian Jewish women used their socially circumscribed gender roles to practice a Judaism based on everyday domestic tasks rather than public ritual practice or the study of Talmud and Torah. Persian Jewish women engaged in this "domesticated Judaism" in numerous ways—through the careful preparation of Shabbat meals and keeping a kosher home, through the spring cleaning rituals surrounding Passover, as devoted wives and mothers, as matchmakers during the High Holy Days, and through their fervent prayers for the well-being of their families. To be sure, the link between women's domesticity and Judaism is not unique to Iran, nor is Soomekh the first person to study this relationship. Indeed, her chapter provides ample references to a host of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and others who have addressed the topic. Still, through her focus on Judaism in the Iranian context, and her oral history interviews, she brings unique texture to this well-documented phenomenon.

Take, for example, Soomekh's exploration of the chal-

lenges that Persian Jewish women faced in preparing their meals and homes for the Passover holiday. Since “Kosher for Passover” food did not exist in Iran, Jewish women had to create ritually pure food from scratch. One interviewee, an eighty-six-year-old woman from the town of Hamadan, makes clear the sheer amount of work and commitment this practice entailed, noting that even providing salt for the holiday required that they “purchase blocks of salt, grind and dry them. We had to do that for the salt, pepper ... all these things.... All we did for weeks was clean the house and constantly clean and grind food” (p. 26). Soomekh explains that Passover food preparation and cleaning served a dual purpose for Iranian Jewish women. It elevated day-to-day tasks into “sacred acts,” thus establishing Persian Jewish women’s religiosity. Equally important, in a Shi’i Muslim society which traditionally “considered Jews as unclean and polluted [as] dogs, pigs, urine and feces,” Passover cleaning rituals served as an explicit rejection of prevailing conceptions of Jewish impurity. Indeed, according to one of Soomekh’s interviewees, Passover cleaning signaled Persian Jewish women’s belief that “their homes were cleaner and more pure” than those of their Muslim neighbors (p. 28).

The kinds of domestic religiosity present in chapter 2 are largely absent in the book’s third chapter, “All the Shah’s Women.” Here Soomekh studies Iranian Jewish women who grew up and came of age during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. Under the shah’s leadership Iran undertook a massive modernization and westernization project. Materially these policies produced significant infrastructure improvements, advancements in health and education, and a focus on land reform. Socially and culturally the move toward modernization brought about a range of changes, including greater educational opportunities for women, as well as women’s suffrage. Equally important, Iranian modernization “entailed the secularization of the state ... [and the] nuclearization of the family” (p. 51). Iranians were expected to assimilate to a new national identity that eliminated, or at least marginalized, previous forms of identity, such as ethnicity and religion. Like their coreligionists at other moments in time and in other places, Persian Jews discovered that meeting the assimilative demands of the modern nation-state required that they be citizens in public and Jews at home.

Ironically, Soomekh argues, this privatizing of religion did not strengthen the domesticated Judaism of an earlier generation of Persian Jewish women. Instead, the push toward assimilation and westernization radically altered Jewish observance in Iran. Persian Jewish ritu-

als, and by connection the identities of Persian Jewish women, would be reduced to a few basic practices: keeping a kosher home; having a Shabbat meal as a family (but not keeping the Sabbath in any other way); and of greatest significance for unmarried, assimilated, and educated Persian-Jewish women, being *najeeb* (translated by Soomekh as virginal purity and innocence).

Najeebness is a recurring topic in Soomekh’s study. It seems that being *najeeb* served different functions for each generation of Persian Jewish women. In the first generation (1921-41), being *najeeb* was a cultural norm, a basic expectation of all Persian Jewish women. In the second generation (1941-79), as Iranian Jewish women were given greater freedom to enter the public sphere and engage with Iranian Muslims, *najeebness* became an important marker of a Persian Jewish woman’s identity, as well as a means of protecting her and her family from accusations of immorality. And in the third generation (Persian Jewish women born in or who came of age in Los Angeles), *najeeb* once again became a cultural norm, an unarticulated, but deeply felt social expectation of young Persian Jewish women in Los Angeles.

Yet despite the assertions of the significance of *najeebness* in her study, Soomekh’s book dedicates little ink to the topic. Each chapter provides a brief assertion about the importance of being *najeeb*, but Soomekh fails to explain in any detail the meaning and boundaries of *najeeb* in any given historical context. What, for example, did it mean to be *najeeb* in the rapidly modernizing environment of 1950s and 1960s Tehran when women were able to join their friends at coffee houses and other public venues? How, in comparison to the Iranian experience, did *najeebness* evolve in the intensely permissive atmosphere of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Los Angeles? In short, are the behaviors and cultural expectations of *najeeb* identical in Iran and Los Angeles, and if not how do they differ? Soomekh does not address these questions in any significant way, and so the uninitiated (including this reviewer) are left to guess at the complexity, texture, and historical contingency of this, apparently, critical aspect of Persian Jewish female identity.

More problematic is Soomekh’s handling of her sole primary source, her oral history interviews. Those familiar with oral histories are no doubt aware of their limitations—the subjective nature of memory, its frailty and inaccuracy, and the ways in which the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee can affect the process, to name a few. While there is value in human memory

as a historical resource, one must approach these sources with caution and a good dose of skepticism. Unfortunately, Soomekh's use of oral histories is largely devoid of any critical assessment. She presents the memories and assertions of her subjects with little comment and no criticism, ignoring the limitations and weaknesses of such source material. Of equal concern is the absence of any discernable systematic approach to the indexing, archiving, and use of Soomekh's interviews. The author fails to indicate whether the interviews have been transcribed and archived (in sharp contrast with the best practices in the field). Indeed, she does not even include the interviews in her notes. But perhaps of greatest importance, at least to this reviewer, it is not at all clear how many people Soomekh interviewed for the book. While the introduction to chapter 3 briefly notes that she interviewed forty women for the chapter, she does not offer similar information for her other chapters. And so the reader is left to wonder just how many (or few) oral histories Soomekh studied to make her claims about the collective identity of Persian Jewish women in Iran and Los Angeles.

Soomekh's problematic use of her sources is most vexing in her fourth and fifth chapters which chronicle the experiences of first- and second-generation Iranian Jewish Angelenos. Here, Soomekh's work departs from scholarly analysis and becomes reporting on a series of topics that affect Persian Jewish women. Indeed, the absence of any in-depth analysis of the issues presented in these chapters (the importance of parties, double standards in gender roles, the importance of beauty, the role of gossip, etc.) makes them seem more like a litany of complaints rather than a scholarly effort to explore and explain the experiences, identities, and, yes, hardships of Persian Jewish women in Los Angeles. The greater disappointment, though, is that I learned so very little in these final chapters. As a Jewish Angeleno somewhat engaged in the community, I was already well aware of the social significance of parties, of the gendered double standard in the Persian community, and of the ways in which the younger generation of women chafe against the re-

strictions of their parents and grandparents. What I did not understand, and sadly still do not, is how these social circumstances developed and/or evolved in Los Angeles. Were they merely holdovers from Iran, or have they taken on a new character in Los Angeles? Is there a hope that these attitudes will change in the third and fourth generations? Do these ideas and behaviors help or harm the community? To my great disappointment, Soomekh neither asks nor answers these questions.

In my first paragraph, I noted that at its best *From the Shahs to Los Angeles* offers valuable insight into the history and culture of the Persian Jewish community, and this is true. Thanks to Soomekh's study, I know more about the history of the Iranian Jewish community and about the way some Jewish women in Iran balanced their identities as Iranians, Jews, and women. In its weaker moments, though, we are witness to a mere listing of the memories, anecdotes, and assertions of interviewees. Rather than an informative and collective assessment of a particular identity or set of identities, Soomekh's source material appears as a set of data points in need of deeper analysis and interpretation. To be sure, individuals experience their identities in different ways, and certainly the memories, anecdotes, and assertions of the women in this book can help us understand something about the individual experiences of an unknown number of Iranian Jewish women. But such categories as Persian, Jewish, and female are collective identities as well, and Soomekh's failure to probe more deeply into the collective meaning of her interviews, to assess the accuracy of their assertions and opinions, and above all to offer her own argument about how these interviews establish the aggregate identities of a particular group of people denies the reader any thoughtful sense of what it means to be a Persian Jewish woman, especially in Los Angeles. As a Jewish Angeleno, I am appreciative to Soomekh for sharing these individual stories, but as a scholar profoundly interested in questions of Jewish identity, I am disappointed that she did not articulate some collective sense of Persian Jewish women's identities in Iran and Los Angeles.

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