

Hanukah in Iran Conversations With My Father

During most of my adult life in Iran, I dreamt of leaving my country of birth, finding a place where the words Jew and woman were not derogatory terms. My father, however, loved Iran. He never imagined a day that he would have to abandon the country of his ancestors. We had heated debates in Iran and later in his new home, Israel. Last year, he passed away on the last day of Hanukah, still dreaming of Iran, his views shared by many other Iranian Jews both in Israel and in the United States. Here are my conversations with my father.

Yeki bood, yeki nabood. Once upon a time my daughter you and I yearned to return to Shiraz after a brief journey. Through the dessert, over the Zagross Mountains, through the arched gateway adorned with blue tiles, passing underneath the lithely words of a holy book we entered our forefathers homeland for over 2500 years. There was a time my daughter that your eyes, like mine, sparked with joy to see our city of roses and nightingales, its air spiced with jasmine and orange blossoms; the city of Hafez and Sa dèe, of poets and writers.

*Once upon a time, my father, winter came, the ground froze, the trees died; ice caps dropped on **your** city & mountain tops. Walking on the streets I felt the invisible yellow patch on my chest for being the daughter of my mothers 'religion. The holy book nested on top of the gate to Shiraz protected other travelers but did not give us, the Jews, security.*

I felt the burning of a scarlet letter on my forehead for saying salam to a young man, a college classmate. Nice girls don t talk to men.

Dokhtar-e man, my daughter, scant were those who scorned our beliefs. People of Iran were decent and God-fearing; I saw goodness among the shopkeepers, among those in the bazaar, at the hospital, and the farm. Wherever you go, there are always the good and the bad. I saw kindness, respect; I was **somebody** in the land of my fathers.

Remember how an Iranian king, Cyrus the Great, freed us from our bondage in Babylon, today's Iraq, in 537 BCE. He sent Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The tomb of Prophet Daniel in Susa is a reminder of our respected position. Our forefathers remained in Persia because we felt safe under the king's benevolent rule. Cyrus was a second Moses; Persia, our new Promised Land. We entered its borders as free men and not slaves.

And haven't I told you to be modest, never to speak to men on the streets even if they are your brothers? Why create suspicion? Why churn the wheels of gossip?

Baba joon, dear father, didn't you tell me of dark nights in the Jewish ghetto of your youth? Of pogroms? Of beatings?

One rainy Shabbat morning, your white-bearded father, the community rabbi, returning from services, avoided the muddy alleyways of the mahalleh, the Jewish ghetto. He was beaten by the passersby for daring to disobey the rules of the dhimme, the rules of

subservient Jews under Islam. A bloodied nose and a torn kippa, his humiliation in front of his teenage son, were his punishments.

*And **what about** the tomb of the Prophet Daniel? We never visited. Blocking its ancient dome is a mosque that encapsulates the holy site. No longer ours, the Jews fear making ziarat, a pilgrimage. In his shrine, the prayers are recited in Arabic now—no words of Hebrew.*

What are you saying dokhtaram? Those were the old days, the days of ignorance and fanaticism, of melee and mayhem —and even in the dark days, kindness seeped through. Once, after a long night of bedlam in the mahaleh, a Muslim mullah reached out to us with warm blankets, hot tea, bread and grapes.

My father, your grandfather, Mola Meir Moshe, was a holy man to the Muslims as well as to the Jews. The prominent Muslim families called him to perform circumcision on their sons. When we lived in the mahaleh, the bank overlooked my father's poverty and gave him a loan to build his house. Don't look at the ugliness, dokhtaram. See the good in people. Don't go so far back in time. We were better off than the Jews of Europe, where the so-called civilized Germany murdered six million of us. We were better off than the Jews of Russia, where they were killed during pogroms far worse than the Jude-koshi anywhere in Iran.

And what is wrong with the Muslims revering our Prophet Daniel?!

Baba-joon, we were never allowed to become six millions. Whenever we found an oasis in the Iranian history to grow into healthy forests, axes of fanaticism chopped us down to feed the fires of anti-Semitism. We suffered in silence. Our history not recorded and published until now, our murdered ancestors have died repeatedly in the elimination of their names, their faces, and their stories. The Jews of Tabriz, men, women and children, were slaughtered; the Jews of Mashhad were forced to convert in the 18th century. Baba, don't help erase the past because you still yearn for your farms and orchards in Shiraz, because after such a long period of emotional and financial despair, from a poor Jew in the ghetto you became a prosperous zamindar, a land owner, under the Shah's rule.

Oh, Persian apricots, so sweet! That orchard was paradise on earth. I created it from dust and boulders, from a land untamed and dry. And the farm ...I used the latest American technology to provide chickens and eggs, items of luxury for the people of Shiraz at that time. I invested all the money I had and didn't have, all my time, all my sweat, all my love. Such amazing endeavor! Such remarkable achievement for someone who had not finished high school! I was invited to lecture university students. I was a member of the city's agricultural board. Don't tell me about your adopted country, Amrika, being the land of opportunity. I had it all in Iran.

Baba-joon, and then in 1979 the tornado of the Iranian Revolution tore part your life, your farm, your house, your dreams, and your respected place in society. You had to escape in a hurry and leave them all behind. Baba, you forgot the lessons of Jewish that

if you invest in property, it anchors you to the land, the land you can't secure in your pocket or in the hem of your daughters' dresses as you run. Baba, how can you long for your life in Iran when they took it all away? How can you? Iran is done; it is finished for all of us.

Yes, I suffered during those years of Revolution and chaos. Yes dokhtaram, I suffered under a regime that tortured me and took my livelihood away, a government that reduced me to the broken man you see today. But, I didn't suffer alone. The Muslims, the Bahais, the Christians, the Zoroastrians suffered as much if not more. We were in this together. I am not the only displaced and wandering Iranian.

Don't criticize me for feeling comfortable in my own country. Have you not bought a piece of your Amrika? Have you not trusted your money to American banks? America has its own history of bigotry and anti-Semitism. Aren't you afraid of an uprising against the Jews? No? As you have allowed yourself to grow roots in your new country for just a few decades, I gave myself permission to invest in the land of my fathers for millennia.

This Iranian government, made of ruthless power-hungry men, is just another invading force that Iranians will eventually overcome, the same way they resisted the Turks, the Mongols, and the Arabs.

As for the Jews, remember how we have survived other perilous times. When King Ahasuerus' vizier set to destroy all Iranian Jewry, a Jewish Man, Mordekhai saved us,

you and me included —for it is said that the one who saves a person, saves generations. Wise and caring for his Jewish community, he placed his niece Esther in a position to become the Queen. He informed Queen Esther of Haman's plan and encouraged her to expose him to save the Persian Jewry. The King punished Haman and, in his place, appointed Mordekhai. Persian kings have been good to us. For centuries, this country, this Iran of ours has bestowed upon us its protection.

Baba, you tell me not to step back in time but that is what you do. A story of 2000 years ago doesn't testify to today's Iranian Jewish history. From 100,000, Iran's Jewish population has plummeted to 25000—a token kept under the thumb of another Haman, another ferocious Iranian, a holocaust denier, a Jihadist with an impending atomic bomb to destroy Jerusalem, the entire Israel—the country that took you in-- to kill another six million Jews; and, as collateral damage, he is willing to destroy even the Muslim Arabs who live side by side with you.

Baba, you talk of Queen Esther's story as our story, of the story of Iranian Jews. You are right, it exemplifies our position in Iranian history, as a people who had to tread gingerly around our rulers as Iranian Jews do today. The King gave Haman the power to do as he wished with a powerless people. And what did our people do? They sat at home; they sat passively around the cemeteries, wearing sack cloths, putting ashes on their heads, fasting, praying, getting ready for death. Esther, even though a queen, trembling and expecting her own death, approached the king in order to save her people. Like Scheherazade of One Thousand and One Nights, she had to approach the king in

circuitous ways — maybe not telling him stories to put him to sleep so she could live for one more night — but similarly arranging banquets to mellow him with wine before revealing her religion and the massacre awaiting her people.

Baba joon, a part of me prefers the story of Hanukah over Purim. I can't imagine Iranian Jews being brave enough, like the Maccabees, to rise up against those who try to destroy us, to assimilate us, to kill our traditions.

Dokhtaram, Hanukah is not our story as much as Purim is. We conquered and survived through **words** and not **swords**. We celebrate Hanukah with lighting candles or oil menorahs, but for Purim —(do you remember?) —we set off fire crackers and rejoiced in celebration of words that saved and preserved us. In your adopted country, Hanukah competes with Christmas; gifts given, a commercial holiday. Don't forget that you are Persian, my daughter. We secure our lives with the wisdom of words.

Baba joon, if we were so free, why do I remember you lighting the Hanukah candles in the corner of the kitchen, where no one could see you from the outside, no neighbors, no passersby? If we were so eloquent in Persian, if we knew how to manipulate the language, why do I remember you mumbling the prayers so that no one could hear you beyond us, your family, who gathered around you, close, even closer to hear your soft words of prayers?

Baba, in Iran, you never stopped being afraid. I never stopped being afraid of my words and actions. In my Amrika, I still celebrate Purim with costumes and merry-making. But for Hanukah, I light the menorah by an unobstructed window. Let the candle light, growing more intense every night for eight nights to brighten my hous, and the faces of those walking by my window. Let the neighbors and passersby know who I am—a Jew in America—no longer afraid. Let them see the light of freedom in my house and in their hearts.

*And, for you, my father, since you are gone and can no longer debate, I will add an extra prayer when I light my menorah this Hanukah. I will pray that once again the Iranian Jews, Muslims, Christians, Bahais and Zoroastrians will have the opportunity to share **your** vision of a free Iran—a light unto other nations.*

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Esghel Dayanim, who passed away on the last day of Hanukah, December 23, 2006.