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Freedom from a tomb-like existence

By Esther Solomon

"Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman" by Farideh Goldin, Brandeis University Press, New Ed edition, paperback, 220 pages

The upcoming Purim holiday has always had a special resonance for the Jews of Iran. The Book of Esther is set in Persia, and the themes of disguising one's identity, a minority's uneasy coexistence within a majority culture, and the latent and actual threat to life by hostile authorities are historical tropes that have been repeated throughout the history of the Iranian Jewish community.

Until the breakup of the Jewish community following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the festival was celebrated there with particular devotion: the fast of Esther was widely observed, children burned effigies of Haman and set off firecrackers and women made halva ornamented with images from the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther.

Not surprisingly, the tomb of Esther and Mordecai in Hamedan, 400 km southwest of Tehran, were the prime Jewish pilgrimage sites for much of the community's 2,700-year history. But even Esther and Mordecai's legendary eminence could not insulate them from the reality of life in Iran. When Farideh Goldin visits the tombs in the 1960s as a girl of 10, she is shocked by the squalor outside:

"Is this truly the burial site of Esther and Mordecai?" I asked [my uncle] Eliyahou in disbelief. The poor sat cross-legged on the ground ... A few vagrants squatted on the worn-out steps, their greasy fingers extended through the sleeves of their patchy overcoats, gesturing for alms ... My mother covered my hair with a kerchief and pushed me up the broken steps ... The sweet fragrance of rose water surrounded us, mixed with the smoky smell of candles burned in remembrance ... Women crowded around the sepulcher crying, some beating their chests, a few spread more cloth on top; all lips moved in silent requests, quiet prayers ... [The tombs] were hidden under the offerings ... My uncle bent over and told me that those who wished very hard could be transported to Jerusalem through a secret passage

underneath."

Goldin's autobiography, "Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman," brings to life a community and way of life that has largely disappeared. Her description of the town raises a number of issues - poverty, the position of women, and the dream of escape - that are explored in her book, which is full of sharply-drawn recollections and sensuous evocations of the texture of life in her hometown, Shiraz. It is also replete with painful memories of family members and customs that invite little nostalgia.

She draws attention to the poverty of large sections of the Jewish community outside the modern city of Tehran, largely living in mehalehs, or Jewish ghettos, whose basic conditions had changed little over hundreds of years. Although her own family were more comfortably off, and indeed were among the first to move out of the mehaleh, only a generation earlier, Farideh's grandmother was married off at the age of 9 because her family was destitute.

The position of women in the community was complicated. On the one hand, the culture was typically patriarchal, with men holding economic, sexual and ritual power over women. On the other hand, day-to-day life at home was ruled by strong, older matriarchs such as Goldin's paternal grandmother Tavous, known as Khanom-bozorg ("Great Lady"), who may have been confined to maintaining the existing order but who wielded terrifying social and cultural power - particularly over other women.

'Leave this hellhole'

Goldin's book presents a stark view of how these traditional power plays crippled peoples' lives. Her mother, Rouhi, occupies a particularly weak position in terms of the female relationships in her family. Looked down upon by her husband's family for her lower-class origins, lonely and consumed by bitterness toward her own mother, who sent her far away to be married at the age of 14, Rouhi lacks status and was indeed treated more like a servant than a family member.

Farideh grows up as the daughter of an outsider, trapped between the dangers of non-conformity and her mother's burning desire that history not be repeated: "You have to find a way to leave this hellhole," her mother always told her. "Find someone to take you away. Don't allow yourself to get trapped here like me."

Farideh needs little encouragement. She develops an interest in

reading Western fiction early on and is determined to continue her education, deeply alienated from the social and gender order that ruled her family and much of the Shirazi Jewish community. Her feelings of dislocation from her surroundings come to a head on the day of her cousin Ziba's wedding. In an ironic counterpoint, Farideh is sent to pluck chickens while her other female relatives pluck Ziba's pubic hair in anticipation of her wedding night. Ziba's screams are deliberately drowned out by the other women's ululations.

Instead of being entranced by the female culture around her - the private space of women, the solidarity that made the endless household tasks meaningful and manageable, the rapport of a secret initiation rite - Farideh feels fear and coercion:

"The initiation into a culture of conformity appalled me ... Instead of accepting the custom as a show of support and camaraderie, as many women did, I felt lost and feared that my life could spin out of control as I grew older and became a woman."

Eventually, risking her family ties and her marriage prospects, Goldin succeeds in making her way to the United States in the mid-1970s to study at university. Her family leaves Iran in the wake of the Revolution, dispersed and - in the case of her parents - dispirited and financially broken.

Although Goldin describes, in general, the feeling of freedom of leaving Shiraz, there is little detail in the book about the culture shock of moving to the U.S. But the genesis of the book itself is clearly testimony to the influence of American culture: such a detailed and intensely personal work could not be farther from the Iranian tradition of *ab-e-ru* - loss of face, or fear of exposure.

Goldin has violated a strong cultural taboo by recounting stories that were also closely held family secrets, including incidents of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. The taboo is not only personal and familial, but also communal: Over the generations, the Jewish community had internalized the need for self-censorship and a reluctance to speak out for fear of drawing attention to themselves.

In an e-mail interview last week, Goldin disclosed that the fear she stated in her book's introduction, that writing such a candid book would cause a rupture in her family, had indeed come to pass. According to Goldin, family members made "frantic calls to everyone who might listen, for example an uncle who lives close by, to shut me up. The aunt who encouraged my father to burn my books [a formative event in Goldin's childhood, aimed at extinguishing her

educational aspirations], called him again [their last conversation before her father passed away], cursing me and demanding that he should silence me... The same aunt announced that she would have a bonfire with my books in the middle of Santa Monica Boulevard."

In certain cases, Goldin sees the rupture of family ties as an almost positive form of closure. Such is the case with parts of her father's family, those who shunned Rouhi and herself: 'My father's death brought tremendous sadness for me, and I will miss him forever, but it also trailed a freedom, a feeling of relief ... The last bits of our frayed relationship gave up and broke; there is no need for pretences."

Although nostalgia for the old country is a key part of many exiles' lives, "Wedding Song" is an articulate corrective to overly-romanticized depictions of life in Iran. Goldin describes the pervasive nature of anti-Semitism in the street and in school, the fear of the jude-koshi (pogrom) aimed at the mehaleh and the fear of isolation living outside it. Thirteen Iranian Jews were arrested in early 1999 in Shiraz, Goldin's hometown, accused of spying for the "Zionist regime" and of "world arrogance," (the standard Iranian regime term for Israel) and at least 17 Jews have been executed since the Revolution in 1979, most accused of spying for Israel and the United States.

Goldin proclaims: "Enough humiliation, enough humbling of the body and the soul ... [we can live] without the chain of prejudice around our necks. We have managed to rebuild our stories, our history - and all done in exile."

Goldin recounts in the interview that even during the apparently halcyon days for Jews of the Shah's regime in the 1970s, the fear of anti-Semitic attack was not far away. During the Yom Kippur War, Farideh's family desperately sought news of Israel's fate. The Persian broadcasts from Kol Israel were sometimes inaudible:

"We tried to get the regular Iranian station. The happy voice announced that Israel was on the verge of extinction. I remember feeling nauseous. My father looked like a ghost. The women hit themselves on the head. We knew very well how our existence and well-being were connected to that of Israel's ... we finally managed to hear the BBC and to realize that Israel was not quite finished.

"My father met with the other elders of the Jewish community, trying to figure out what to do. Should the children go to school the day after? What if we were harassed and harmed? Would our lives become harsh, would they harm us, calling us Zionists? The Jewish

community, it was decided by the elders, had to fast again and gather at the synagogues, praying, as we had done during the Purim story. Those were frightening days."

For the Iranian Jews of Farideh Goldin's autobiography, Purim was more than a historical event recalled once a year - it was a recurring theme, a current reality. These days, the search for novel children's costumes and for speciality oznei haman (hamentaschen) seems to characterize Purim more than anything else in the Western world. It is a salutary challenge to recall both the texture of life of the Jewish communities of Iran, where the events of the Megillat Esther are set, and the influence of the Purim story on the collective consciousness of the Jews living there. As Goldin explains, "Purim repeated itself, in our lives many times; its lessons were always there."