

the last word . . .



## Iran on my mind

**Farideh Goldin wonders if she will ever be able to visit her birthplace**

Visiting Iran for the last time in the summer of 1976, I vowed never to return. But during the past few years the temptation slowly crept into me, like a long-abandoned addiction.

I wanted to go back as I heard visitors' tales of beautiful Iran, of its breathtaking and varied landscape, of its many rich archeological sites. But, far more, I yearned to visit my grandparents' graves in Shiraz, to revisit the old neighbourhoods of a home abandoned decades ago and to seek lost friends.

After all, how could I be whole without my culture, without the sights, tastes and smells of the country of my birth? The craving persisted though I tried to kill it, to suffocate it under the comfortable pillow of my new life here in America.

A year ago my family and I had dinner with my uncle. After 40 years of absence, he was planning a trip to Iran for a medical conference. We were celebrating the holiday of Sukkot that recalls our wanderings in the desert, our journey from bondage in Egypt to our freedom in the Holy Land. As I dipped a piece of challah in honey, the idea germinated in my mind. I would go home. I had to.

My husband has never visited the country of my birth. We had planned to spend a year in Iran after he finished his medical internship. But as Iran gave into chaos we instead rushed to help my parents and four siblings into the safety of any country that would accept them.

The year was 1979. America had withdrawn its support of the king, and the Shah of Iran abandoned his country. During the months before the revolution, anarchy ruled. My family members were virtual prisoners at home. The older siblings could not attend school. My father was the only one who would leave to buy provisions and find out the news not broadcast on the radio.

The entire Jewish community feared a mass attack by young angry crowds, carrying the American-made weapons of the Shah's military. Funeral processions of martyrs passed by our house daily. When my family heard chants of 'Allah O Akbar, Death to America, Down with the Shah,' they trembled. As the procession neared our home, men banged on the doors with their fists and threw rocks at the windows. 'Come out, dirty Jews. You are next!' they shouted.

That winter, the revolutionaries attacked the Bahai neighbourhood. They promised that the Jewish community would soon follow. During one of his excursions to the ghetto, my father found out about El-Al planes landing in Mehrabad airport in Tehran to evacuate as many Iranian Jews as possible. So, in an aircraft jammed with frightened and crying Jews, my family left their ancestral home.

The medical conference in Mashhad seemed to be my best chance to introduce my husband to my first homeland. I made the decision to go with much trepidation, however. I am a woman; I am Jewish; I am a writer; each category subjected me to discrimination and suspicion.

That was 21 October 2005. Barely a week later, Iran was in the headlines. Its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, called for the destruction of the State of Israel: every man, woman and child; artist, farmer, scientist, grocer; the young girl whose parents walked from Yemen; my friend who was carried out of Syria in her father's arms, screaming from hunger; the young man from Ethiopia who left everything behind; Israeli Arabs – and yes, my mother, father and sister too. What are they to this fanatic leader but a small price to pay on the road to heavenly redemption?

I am horrified and disgusted that, whilst the poor suffer in Iran despite the country's riches, when earthquakes ravish entire villages because there are no decent roads or building codes in remote areas, when abused women often have no choice but to support themselves through prostitution, the Iranian President obsesses over Israel. Oil money is drained to support terrorist organizations, to create havoc from Iraq to Lebanon to Israel. Mr Ahmadinejad calls the Holocaust a 'myth'.

How could I go back to Iran? I mourn for my parents' loss of dignity, for all the Iranian Jewish refugees still numb with the political earthquake that tumbled their lives. The hands of evil are strong and long, seeking them still – not with daggers and clubs, as when my parents and grandparents lived in the dark ghettos of Iran, when Jew-haters, encouraged by fanatical mullahs, rampaged through their meagre belongings, but now with missiles and atomic bombs.

And the world looks on and merely shakes its head in dismay. ❧

Farideh Goldin is the author of *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*. She has a website at [www.faridehgoldin.com](http://www.faridehgoldin.com)