

# THE IRANIAN JEWISH FAMILY IN TRANSITION

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*The Iranian family in America is in transition between the traditional and American models of family life, and the difficulties of coping with this transition will remain a reality for Iranian Jews. Iranian young people want more independence and envy the open communication and freedom of American families, yet they still value the support and close involvement of the traditional Iranian family.*

In the introduction to her influential collection of studies, *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, Monica McGoldrick called attention to the importance of understanding ethnic background when doing therapy with families: "Ethnicity relates family processes to the broader context in which it evolves" (McGoldrick, 1982, p. 9). Different ethnic groups have different values and styles, and ethnic differences can persist for several generations beyond the initial migration (p. 10). Thus, she argues (p. 4):

Just as family therapy itself grew out of the myopia of the intrapsychic view and concluded that human behavior could not be understood in isolation from its family context, family behavior also makes sense in the larger cultural context in which it is embedded.

An understanding of family ethnicity is advantageous for professionals who work with any of the three important immigrant groups in the Jewish community: Soviet Jews, Israelis, and Iranians. Of these three, Iranian Jews have been studied the least. Although none of these groups has been studied exhaustively, substantial articles

and even some important monographs have been published on Israelis and Russians (Gold, 1992; Shokeid, 1988; Simon, 1985). About Iranian Jews, however, little research has been published.

In a Jewish community such as Los Angeles, research on Iranian Jews is particularly important. "Irangelos," as it is nicknamed by Iranians, is a major Jewish and non-Jewish Iranian population center (Bozorgmehr & Sabagh, 1988, 1989). In this article we make a modest contribution to understanding Iranian Jews by examining the impact of migration on what is arguably the most important institution in the Iranian Jewish community: the family.

Fifteen years after the Iranian Revolution, a new generation of Jewish immigrants is emerging. The children who came with (and sometimes without) their families after the 1979 revolution are now entering adulthood and starting their own families. Having grown up in both Iran and the United States, these young adults have been socialized in both cultures. They grew up in traditional Iranian families, but spent at least part of their adolescence growing up in the intensity of American youth culture. What kind of family will they choose to form then? What will they take from the traditional Iranian Jewish model, and what from the American model they find all around them?

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## THE IRANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN LOS ANGELES

There are no hard data on the Iranian Jewish population in Los Angeles. Unlike Soviet Jews who were resettled by the Jewish community, there has been no official tracking of Iranian Jews. Extrapolation from the small subsample of Iranians found in the Council of Jewish Federations 1990 National Jewish Population Survey produces an estimate of about 6,000 Iranian Jews in Los Angeles. The combination of small sample size and possible language difficulties probably makes this an underestimate.

The Los Angeles Jewish Federation Council estimates there to be 30,000 Iranian Jews in Los Angeles (Tugend, 1994). In the past, however, the Los Angeles federation has grossly overestimated the size of other immigrant populations. The federation estimate of the number of Israelis in Los Angeles, for example, is roughly four times too high.<sup>1</sup> If the same is true for its Iranian estimates, dividing by a factor of 4 produces an estimate of 7,500 Iranian Jews in Los Angeles, which is consistent with the NJPS estimate. A high-end estimate would be about 15,000 Iranian Jews in Los Angeles.

The impact of Iranian Jews on Los Angeles far exceeds their numbers. They make up one-quarter of the membership of Sinai Temple, the oldest Conservative congregation in Los Angeles, located in affluent Westwood. Their sizeable attendance at Friday night services there in the 1980s was a source of tension with the American-born congregants.

They have changed the physical presence of two Los Angeles neighborhoods. Almost every block of Pico Boulevard in Beverlywood, just south of Beverly Hills, has a grocery or other store with large signs in Farsi. Westwood Boulevard, about a mile west of Beverly Hills and a mile south of UCLA, has an equally visible Persian presence (including some large restaurants). On warm weekdays and almost all weekends, gatherings of Persian Jews are to be found in Roxbury Park at the southwest corner of Beverly Hills. Easily a dozen picnic tables will be occupied by extended Persian Jewish families. The exotic smells of Middle Eastern cooking waft over Little League games, tennis matches, and pick-up basketball games.

## METHODOLOGY

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults who were born in Iran, but had spent at least part of their childhood or adolescence in the United States. They were selected from the researchers' network of friends and acquaintances in the Los Angeles Iranian Jewish community. They ranged in age from 20 to 38. Ten of the respondents were single, and ten were married with children. In addition, we interviewed six mental health professionals, educators, and psychologists who work primarily or exclusively with Iranian Jews. They corroborated the material we heard directly from the respondents and provided information about the more acute tensions that bring families into therapy. The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Respondents were asked a variety of questions about the families in which they grew up and the families they had formed or planned to form themselves. Three questions elicited the most interesting and most paradoxical information: (1) conflicts that respondents had/have with their parents; (2) their own expectations for the kind of family they will have; and (3) differences they discern between American and Iranian families. What our respondents admired

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<sup>1</sup>The senior author's 1979 survey of the Los Angeles Jewish community closely agrees with an analysis of Immigration & Naturalization Service data conducted by Dr. Pini Herman, research coordinator for the Los Angeles federation. These two analyses in turn are consistent with an extensive analysis conducted by Dr. Herman and the author of the Israeli population found in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. Our research on Israelis is further consistent with estimates made by Israeli demographers.

about the Iranian family, they also found objectionable. The same is true for the American family.

At first we found this pattern of seemingly paradoxical answers confusing. As they recurred in every interview, we realized that our respondents were ambivalent about both the American and Iranian family models. From these seeming contradictions there emerged a picture of the Iranian Jewish family in transition between traditional Iranian Jewish and contemporary American models of the family. While seeking to recreate traditional Iranian Jewish families, our respondents were nonetheless attracted to several aspects of the American family of which they were otherwise quite critical. They wished to emulate the freedom of the American family without sacrificing the closeness of the traditional Iranian Jewish family.

### THE TRADITIONAL IRANIAN JEWISH FAMILY

The traditional Iranian Jewish family in both Iran and the United States is typically Middle Eastern. It is tight knit, governed by strong parental (especially paternal) authority, and closely linked to a network of extended kin. In Iran, families typically lived near other relatives and visited each other regularly, a pattern that is repeated in Los Angeles. The father expects respect and obedience from all family members. At times his authority extends to children who have already entered adulthood.

"Marriages are between families" is a familiar Iranian saying, and indeed marriages are a family concern. In both Iran and the United States, potential spouses are typically introduced in the presence of multiple members of the extended family, who might be called upon later to render an opinion. Once the parents select a mate for the son, negotiations with the bride's family begin. Marriages among cousins are not uncommon and are considered a way to strengthen ties within the extended family.

Wives in traditional Iranian Jewish fami-

lies are subordinate to their husbands. The marry young, between 16 to 18 in Iran, and 22 to 25 in the United States (Jalali, 1982). They are typically 10 to 20 years younger than their husbands. This custom reinforces the authority of the husband and also ensures that the bride will be cared for adequately. A woman gains status when she marries, no matter what her age. An Iranian female is referred to as a girl (*dokhtar*) until she is married and is called a woman (*zan*) only after marriage. Her status increases further with the birth of her first child. Even greater status is accorded her if the first child is a boy (Jalali, 1982).

Because of the nature of the Iranian migration, Iranian Jews are strongly attached to the traditional Iranian family. The bulk of Iranians emigrated to the United States during and after the Islamic Revolution. Many planned to return home when the situation in Iran returned to normal. An Iranian family therapist explained that "the immigrants kept their suitcases ready, thinking that they are going back soon. This stopped assimilation."

In this respect they are fundamentally different from the Jews who came from Eastern Europe during the great migration of 1881 to 1924. Those Jews came from the poorest and least educated strata of Jewish society. Consequently they were the least attached to Jewish tradition (Hertzberg, 1989). Iranian Jews, by contrast, were forced out of Iran and hoped to return. This expectation has kept them particularly attached to their traditional culture and values.

### Positive Assessments of the Iranian Jewish Family

Our respondents described the traditional Iranian Jewish family in positive terms. They expressed warm approval of the closeness and support within the traditional Iranian family: "Iranian families are close-knit" was a common refrain. Respondents pointed out, for example, that older children are expected to take care of younger sib-

lings. All family members, even teenagers, are expected to eat dinner together. As they did in Iran, Iranian families in Los Angeles tend to live near other relatives. Adult children are expected to live near their parents.

The Iranian family is the locus of emotional satisfaction. Respondents stressed that Iranians will put the well-being of the family ahead of their own desires: "Parents do not go out as much or travel. They take pleasure in watching the children enjoy themselves and go out."

Our respondents uniformly endorsed the traditional Iranian family over the model presented by the American family. They did so along several dimensions. First, they felt that Iranian parents are more concerned than American parents with the welfare of their children. One respondent, for example, commented, "We protect the children from getting hurt or experiencing pain. Americans expose their children to the hardships of life."

Our respondents argued that Iranian parents are more willing to sacrifice themselves for their children. Iranian parents continue to repeat to their children a classical Iranian expression: "I want to be sacrificed for you" (*ghorbunet beram*). One type of sacrifice for children is financial. Parents provide financial support to their adult children, even when those children are in their thirties.

The importance of family to Iranians was another oft-repeated theme. Respondents typically made points such as the following: "Iranians respect and value family togetherness. They are more forgiving and ready to help each other [than are American families]." And, "families travel across country to help other relatives and offer financial support as well as emotional."

Respondents typically described American parents as selfish. They criticized the emotional distance among American family members. Whereas Iranians want their adult children to remain connected with the family of origin, respondents stressed that "American families expect children to leave

the house at age 18 and become independent." One respondent imagined that "American parents tell their children: 'I no longer need to support you now that you are 18 years old.'" Another opined that "Americans let go of their children too easily."

Iranians regard American families as less willing to make sacrifices for the good of the family: "Americans do not care as much for each other and are very independent. They move depending where the job is." And, "Americans mind their own business and their own happiness comes first."

Respondents attributed the lower rate of divorce in the Iranian Jewish community to the greater value Iranians place on keeping the family together: "Wherever there is a difficult time in the family, they [Americans] want to get out of it and get a divorce." In contrast, "Iranians try so hard to keep the family together."

In comparison with Iranian families, American families are seen as overly permissive. They do not preserve the boundaries of the parental role: "They are even using drugs in front of the children," exclaimed one respondent. In Iranian families, by contrast, "The relationships between the parents are very private and are not discussed with children."

Respondents pointed to care of elderly parents as another example of family closeness. They contrasted the Iranian expectation that grandparents would join the household when they could no longer take care of themselves with the American custom of putting their parents in nursing homes. One therapist observed that "if American families were more like Iranian families, there would not be any nursing homes."

#### **Reservations about the Traditional Iranian Family**

Given the previous endorsements of traditional Iranian family values, one would expect our respondents to be wholeheartedly committed to preserving the traditional Ira-

nian family. This was not the case, however. Our respondents also found positive aspects to the same American family traits of which they were critical. While disapproving of what they saw as the detachment of American family members from one another, they also envied the relative freedom enjoyed by the American family: "Americans let the individual be who they want to be." And, "American families give their children freedom and a chance to be more independent and be able to survive on their own."

At the same time that they criticized Americans for not enforcing parental role distances, our respondents also envied the "open communication in American families." They observed that in Iranian families "children are not even allowed to listen to adult conversations," whereas in American families, "the parents are very open to discuss in front of the children."

After exposure to the American family, the closeness of the Iranian family can at times seem oppressive and intrusive. Some of the same respondents who disapproved of the isolation of the American family also expressed misgivings about the degree of control in the traditional Iranian family. A typical complaint among respondents was that Iranian families were too intrusive. One person, for example, observed that "they [Iranian families] are intrusive to the point that they can break up marriages or can get in the way of two people getting married. Americans mind their own business."

A young woman in her late twenties related that she found growing up in America with traditional Iranian grandparents to be an onerous experience: "I hated being forced to kiss an older family member and it was considered rude and disrespectful if I would refuse to kiss her."

Still another young woman recalled that her parents forced her to put curlers in her hair all the way through high school because her hair was straight and they felt she "did not look Iranian enough."

All the therapists confirmed that Iranian families often seek therapy for conflicts arising out of the issue of parental control:

Individuality is not respected and the choices and decisions made have to be approved by the parents. Some children listen to parents out of fear....Parents do not listen as much to their children, and are very reactive and use punishments as a way of discipline. Some of the punishments include hitting and insulting.

They [Iranian-born parents] view children as property, that they need to tell them what to do.

The children feel more powerful because parents do not have much knowledge about the United States community and culture.

The parents tend to blame tensions with children on the influences of the surrounding American culture:

Parents tend to blame it on the American culture, or their children having relationships with American children, which can cause problems in the families. Also the respect toward parents has lessened....Parents feel that the children are learning a lot from TV, which is not always good.

The therapists also observed that conflicts arise out of the intrusiveness of the extended family into the affairs of the nuclear family. In Iran this involvement was expected. In America it can be a source of conflict: "Family problems consist of intrusion of the extended family; for example, comments made by the relatives of the husband or relatives of the wife." This intrusion "creates all different kinds of pressure on the married couples."

## **DATING**

Iranian Jewish practices of dating and courtship reflect the same ambivalence that

was expressed about the family. Iranians have adopted the American practice of social dating without having abandoned the Iranian practice of formal courtship and semi-arranged marriages.

#### **Dating Americans versus Dating Iranians**

Almost all respondents agreed that dating Iranians is different than dating Americans. They indicated that if they dated Americans, it was "just for fun," whereas dating Iranians was serious and intended for marriage.

When going out with Americans, our respondents expected to "have a good time," but they planned to marry other Iranian Jews. They explained that in American culture, dating is a social experience meant for enjoyment, as opposed to the more serious business of finding a spouse. Because dating is a social activity, Iranians usually had more fun going out with Americans than with other Iranians. One married man in his thirties recalled, "When you date Americans it is more relaxed and comfortable. They are more open and it's easier to communicate when dating Americans."

Because marriage is not an expectation of dating in American culture, there is also less pressure when dating Americans:

It is more relax[ed] and comfortable to date Americans. There is no obligation to get married.

Dating Iranians causes more pressure to get married and makes the situation uncomfortable. It is very formal.

The individuals who date American men are very casual with no commitment.

Dating experiences are different for men and for women. Most of the female respondents had not dated Americans at all because there is more pressure placed on women either to date only Iranians or not to date at all. Iranian-born parents discouraged their daughters from dating Ameri-

cans. For the most part this is because they wanted them to marry other Iranians, but they were also nervous about the sexual freedom associated with American dating. A single female participant in her early twenties related that her parents would only allow her to date Iranian men with the intention of marriage. Her parents feared that if she dated American men her reputation would be damaged and that she would have less impetus to get married: "My father said, 'If you go out too much no one will marry you.' He is also worried that when you spend too much time with others for fun you will not feel the need to be married."

Another recently married woman in her late twenties explained that "in Iranian families girls are constantly told that they need to remain a virgin. They should wait to get married and then have fun."

Men on the other hand have fewer constraints, and most of the male respondents had dated non-Iranians. Several confided that they dated American women "for sexual purposes."

#### **The Family Role in Mate Selection**

As Iranian young adults become more serious about the prospect of marriage, they tend to date other Iranians. They explained that they do so because of the involvement of the married couple with the extended family. The prospect of marriage to an American can create problems in this regard. Several of the female respondents explained that since their male dates would be expected to interact with their Iranian parents, the dual problems of a different language and culture would make communication difficult. Both men and women agreed that dating other Iranian Jews presented fewer problems:

They [other Iranians] have the same language and culture, and the families know each other's backgrounds.

In dating non-Iranians I felt very removed from the Iranian community.

Many Iranians do not want to get married with an American because their parents will not be able to communicate with the in-laws.

In the United States the practice of arranged marriage, which was the norm in Iran, has evolved into families finding suitors for their children. One of the therapists explained that "Iranians have a hierarchical social system. In order to date other Iranians, the family needs to have information about the socio-economic status, and they want to know the other person's family."

Instead of arranging the marriage, Iranian parents play an instrumental role by arranging formal introductions to potential spouses, which take place in the bride's parents' home. Often the suitor is selected from the family's friendship network:

All the family friends and family members are involved to get phone numbers and introduce the singles to each other in order to speed up the process of getting married.

They want to make sure that their children chose the right person and if their families are compatible, the two of them decide to get married.

The majority of dates for women are blind dates.

All the female respondents who were married had met their husbands through the family, and a few had even married the first suitor they had been introduced to in this way.

The importance of the family is exemplified by a very Americanized Iranian woman in her late twenties. She had dated Americans exclusively since high school, but now that she was ready to marry, she had turned to her parents to begin the practice of formal introductions to potential suitors. This seeming inconsistency in her own behavior is in fact consistent with another popular Iranian saying: "marriages work out better when the parents are involved."

Given the importance of ties with extended family, intermarriage with non-Jews is rare. An "intermarriage" for Iranians is most likely to be marriage with an American Jew. Even the most rebellious of the single Iranians assumed they would marry another Jew: "Why do I have to be limited to only date Persian Jews? I date American Jewish men and if it works out, we will get married."

## CONCLUSION

The Iranian family in America is in transition between the traditional and American models. Iranian young people want more independence, but they still value the support given by the traditional family. Traditional involvements with extended kin, while valued, are nonetheless often experienced as intrusiveness by young couples. The difficulties of coping with this transition will remain a reality of the Iranian American family. One young Iranian therapist, herself a graduate of the Hebrew Union College School of Jewish Communal Service, summarized our research succinctly when she observed: "The younger generation wants more autonomy, but yet want to have a relationship with the [extended] family."

The research presented here has implications for understanding American-born Iranians as both clients and supporters of the organized Jewish community. American-born Iranian Jews struggle to reconcile Iranian norms with American culture. For the therapist, the normative power of the traditional Iranian Jewish family should be utilized as a cultural context in which to understand the individual and/or family.

What is a source of conflict for the individual Iranian Jew may also be a source of renewal for the Los Angeles Jewish community. The family is pivotal to Iranian Jewish life, and the value of tradition is closely associated with family. Thus it will be harder for Iranian Jews than for Eastern European Jews to jettison traditional ways in the process of Americanization.

Although Iranian Jews do not have the experience of Jewish community organization peculiar to Eastern European Jews, they do have an attachment to traditional Jewish values and hence place a value on community. As assimilation and intermarriage take their toll on fourth- and fifth-generation American Jews of Eastern European descent, American Jews of Iranian descent will take up some of the slack. At UCLA, for example, American-born Iranian Jews are disproportionately enrolled in Jewish studies courses. While Jews and white non-Jews alike continue to migrate to the exurban hinterlands, Iranian Jews have shown an affinity for established areas of high Jewish density. They therefore will help anchor urban Jewish neighborhoods, such as Beverlywood and Pico-Robertson.

The senior author's own neighborhood where there are two construction projects underway is a good example. The larger project is the reconstruction of a shopping center burned down in the Los Angeles riots almost 3 years ago. A block away, a sizeable addition is being built to what was a small Iranian day school.

Iranian Jews are part of a much larger group of non-Jewish Iranians made up of Shi'i Muslims, Armenians, Assyrian Christians, Bahais, Kurds, and Zoroastrians. The estimated 500,000 Iranians in Los Angeles are as large and possibly larger than the Korean population (Kelley & Friedlander, 1994). Persian Jews will be a bridge to the large and internally diverse Iranian population, and possibly to the rest of the Muslim population in Los Angeles, which includes Asians as well as Middle Easterners.

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