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# Judeo-Persian Literature

## Vera Basch Moreen

Jews have lived in Iran for almost three millennia and became profoundly acculturated to many aspects of Iranian life. This phenomenon is particularly manifest in the literary sphere, defined here broadly to include belles lettres, as well as nonbelletristic (i.e., historical, philosophical, and polemical) writings. Although Iranian Jews spoke many local dialects and some peculiar Jewish dialects, such as the hybrid lo-Torah[i] (Heb. + Pers. suffix of abstraction), meaning “non-Torahic” (a dialect that combines both Semitic [Hebrew and Aramaic] and Persian elements), their written, literary language was Judeo-Persian (Farsi in Hebrew script), which was close to the *dari* (Pers., court, house) language of classical Persian literature, despite the fact that it retained some Middle Persian (Pahlavi) features in its early phases and some colloquial features throughout its development.<sup>1</sup>

### Vera Basch Moreen

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### Earliest literary traces

Fifty-four tomb inscriptions from Afghanistan dating between the eighth and thirteenth centuries represent not only the first traces of written Judeo-Persian but of New Persian as well.<sup>2</sup> Because many of the Jews of Iran and the broader Persianate world (including Afghanistan and Bukhara) had been literate since biblical times, they maintained the Hebrew alphabet for written communication in the vernacular as Jews had done in all parts of the world. The earliest available documents are two commercial letters from Dandan-Uiliq (East Turkestan) from the eighth century,<sup>3</sup> two letters in the Cairo Geniza from the tenth and eleventh centuries, and a law report from Ahvaz (Khuzistan) dated 1020–21.<sup>4</sup> They demonstrate that Judeo-Persian orthography was fully developed well before actual “literary” texts appeared. Clearly, Iranian Jews remained close to the Torah, as fragments of biblical books in Hebrew dating from the ninth century were discovered in Iran. These, in turn, led to the rise of Judeo-Persian commentaries intended to explicate the Torah in the peoples’ vernacular. Among these (most only in fragments) are commentaries on the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, Proverbs, Ruth, and the Song of Songs. In addition to preserving important linguistic Middle Persian (Pahlavi) features, several of

these commentaries display the Karaite leanings of their anonymous authors.<sup>5</sup> The oldest-known Judeo-Persian manuscript of the Pentateuch dates from 1319, while the oldest Judeo-Persian translation, that of Jacob b. Joseph Taus, dates from 1556.<sup>6</sup> Many fragments of Bibles and Apocrypha were collected by Giambattista Vecchietti in the seventeenth century from Iran's major Jewish towns. Two important lexicographical works connected with the Bible, Talmud, and Midrashic literature have come to light thus far: Solomon b. Samuel of Urganj's (Khwarizm) *Sefer ha-Melitsa*, composed in 1339, and Moses b. Aaron b. She'erit Shirvani's *Agron*, composed in 1459.<sup>7</sup> Judeo-Persian literature as belles lettres appeared only at the beginning of the fourteenth century, although the lack of earlier texts does not necessarily prove their complete absence. Western Judeo-Persian manuscript collections (more such manuscripts no doubt still exist in Iran) include a great variety of genres, such as translations of the Bible, secular and religious poetry, chronicles, rabbinical works, lexicography, translations of medieval Hebrew poetry, transcriptions of classical Persian poetry, and original epics; belles lettres, especially poetry, appears to dominate every collection, thus confirming that Iranian Jewry shared the love of this genre with their Muslim compatriots.<sup>8</sup>

### Epics

Judeo-Persian manuscript collections include a fairly large number of popular Persian mystical epic romances transcribed into the Hebrew alphabet, such as Nizami's (d. 1209) *Khosrow va Shirin* (Pers., Khosrow and Shirin) and Jami's (d. 1492) *Yusuf va Zulaykha* (Pers., Joseph and Zulaykha). Although no Judeo-Persian copy of *Shah-nama* (Pers., The Book of Kings), Iran's great national epic by Firdawsi (completed in 1010), has surfaced thus far, it is, along with the romances, the major literary model that inspired the writing of original Judeo-Persian epics. Mowlana (Pers., "our master") Shahin-i Shirazi (fl. 14th century) was the first—and undoubtedly the best—Iranian Jewish poet. He wrote several *masnavis* (romance epics in rhymed couplets) based on various episodes from Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, Job, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah. By recounting sacred Jewish narratives through exclusively Persian rhetorical and literary motifs, he endeavored to create a Jewish "national epic" in the spirit of Firdawsi's masterpiece. Shahin's Pentateuchal epics, the so-called *Bereshit-nama* (Pers., The Book of Genesis), composed in 1327, *The Tale of Job* (based on the book of Job), and *Musa-nama* (Pers., The Book of Moses [based on Exodus]), composed in 1358, describe and endow biblical heroes with many characteristics emblematic of Persian epic heroes. Similarly, in *Ardashir-nama* (Pers., The Book of

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Ardashir [Ahasuerus]) and *Ezra-nama* (Pers., The Book of Ezra), composed in 1333 and based on the biblical books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, respectively, Shahin reimagined Queen Esther's marriage to Ardashir (Ahasuerus) as a loving union that came to be divinely rewarded by their engendering Cyrus the Great, the future savior of Babylonian/Iranian Jewry. Despite his acculturated approach, Shahin's poetry possesses a clear Jewish ethos.<sup>9</sup>

Imrani (1454, after 1536) was Shahin's best imitator and perhaps more versatile than his model. He set to verse much of the books of Joshua, Ruth, 1 Samuel, and parts of 2 Samuel in *Fath-nama* (Pers., The Book of Conquest), his most important epic. Among his other works were *Ganj-nama* (Pers., The Book of Treasure), which versified part of the Mishnaic tractate Avot, *Hanukkah-nama* (Pers., The Book of Hanukkah), and *Asara haruge ha-malkut* (Heb., The Ten Martyrs of the Kingdom) and *Qisse-yi haft baradarn* (Pers., The Story of the Seven Brothers), also

known as *Musibat-nama* (Pers., The Book of Calamity), all based on well-known rabbinic narratives. His *Vajibat va arkan-i sizdahgani-yi iman-i Isra'el* (Pers., The Thirteen Principles of Israel's Faith) is based on Maimonides's (d. 1204) foundational study of the same. Additional minor didactic poems display Imrani's thorough familiarity with a wide range of Jewish learning, colored, however, by Sufi expressions and concepts that he appears to have identified with Jewish parallels.<sup>10</sup>

Poets such as Khwajah Bukhara'i, who set to verse the book of Daniel in 1606, and Aaron b. Mashiah, who versified the book of Judges in 1692, continued the tradition of setting biblical books into Persian verse.<sup>11</sup>

### Religious and lyrical poetry

Iranian Jewish poets also wrote numerous religious and lyrical verses, mostly in Judeo-Persian, but quite a few are Hebrew or bilingual (Hebrew-Judeo-Persian, Aramaic-Judeo-Persian) poems with highly diverse themes, such as *Purim-nama* (Pers., The Book of Purim), the poem written expressly for the beloved Iranian Jewish holiday



The ground swallows Korach and his rebellious companions (Numbers 16:32). Judeo-Persian miniature in the *Musa-Nama* (*Book of Moses*) from the poet Shahin, fourteenth century. Jerusalem, Israel Museum, ms. 180/54, fol. 138 (verso).

of Purim Mullah Gershom's (seventeenth century?), and Benjamin b. Misha'el's (whose pen name was "Amina"; 1672/73, after 1732/33) various poems on the *'Akeda* (Heb., The Sacrifice of Isaac), the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and a bilingual (Judeo-Persian-Hebrew) reworking of Solomon Ibn Gabirol's (d. ca. 1058) *Azharot* (Heb., Warnings). Some Judeo-Persian poets also wrote panegyrics in honor of God (Shihab Yazdi, eighteenth century?), the Messiah (Siman Tov Melammed [whose pen name was Tuvya]; d. 1823 or 1828), and a number in honor of Moses (Benjamin b. Misha'el, Yusuf Yahudi [eighteenth century]) and the prophets Ezekiel (Yehezqel Khwansari; eighteenth century?), Ezra (anonymous), and Elijah (Babai b. Lutf; seventeenth century).

Numerous *ghazals* (short lyrical poems) and *ruba'iyat* (quatrains) by the greatest Iranian poets, such as Sa'di (d. 1292) and Hafiz (d. 1389), were transcribed into Judeo-Persian. Although Judeo-Persian imitations and original creations are difficult to distinguish because they are often anonymous, use pen-names not necessarily identifiable as belonging to Jewish poets, and focus on traditional Persian lyrical themes, such as the beauty of the beloved, his/her absence or presence, and his/her fickle nature, some that are identifiable, such as the lyrical verses of Benjamin b. Misha'el, are remarkable.<sup>12</sup>

### Historical writings

Iranian Jews produced few historical documents as far as it is known. Two Judeo-Persian chronicles of vital importance for their history and for Iranian history as a whole in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially given the scarcity of historical documents produced by Iranian minorities, are *Kitab-i Anusi* (The Book of a Forced Convert) of Babai b. Lutf and *Kitab-i Sar-Guzasht-i Kashan dar bab-i 'ibri va goyimi-yi sani* (The Book of Events in Kashan concerning the Jews; Their Second Conversion) by Babai b. Farhad (Babai b. Lutf's grandson). Both of these works are sound historical documents that recount a number of internal Jewish communal events, and also several external events that affected the Jews. The first chronicle covers selected events between 1617 and 1662, and the second between 1721 and 1731. They tend to emphasize persecutions, at times detailing their causes, extent, and duration, as these were experienced by the chroniclers themselves, particularly in Kashan, their hometown. Both chronicles are written in the popular Persian *masnavi* form, and the later one shows a marked deterioration in language and literary style.<sup>13</sup>

A short narrative poem from Bukhara, known as *Khodaidad* (Pers. for the Hebrew name Natan'el, "God gave"), is of unclear authorship. It was probably written at the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century and recounts movingly the martyrdom of an ordinary cloth merchant persecuted by local Muslims.<sup>14</sup>



### Philosophy, polemics, and mysticism

Only one major Jewish Iranian text with philosophical-polemical content is known thus far, Rabbi Judah b. El'azar's *Hobot Yehudah* (Heb., The Duties of Judah), written in 1686. The author was a physician from Kashan, and he displays considerable learning in medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, as well as traditional religious sources. He discusses the principles of the Jewish faith as propounded by Maimonides (d. 1204) in a Judeo-Persian prose style full of Hebrew words and quotations. Polemical arguments against various Muslim charges defending, in particular, the eternity of the heavenly Torah and the superiority of Moses's prophecy form an interesting dimension of this work.<sup>15</sup>

Although traces of "practical Kabbalah," in the form of amulets, spells, and prognostications, appear frequently in Judeo-Persian manuscripts, it is not yet possible to know the extent of the spread of Kabbalah in Iran. Some involvement is to be presumed from the name of Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan, who was active in Castile at the beginning of the fourteenth century. What is more certain is that many Iranian Jews were strongly attracted to and influenced by Islamic mysticism (Sufism). A mystical-philosophical treatise by Siman Tov Melammed known as *Hayat al-ruh* (Ar., The Life of the Soul) is based on the works of Maimonides and on Bahya b. Paquda's (ca. 1050–1156) *Hobot ha-levavot* (Heb., The Duties of the Heart). A grand amalgam of Jewish and Muslim mystical and philosophical concepts, it is written in both Judeo-Persian and Hebrew, and in both prose and verse.<sup>16</sup>

Writing in Judeo-Persian has meant that Iranian Jews severed themselves perhaps deliberately, but probably more on account of their tradition to preserve the script of the Torah, from the mainstream of Iranian literature, which is hardly aware of this body of work to this day. This "graphic barrier" was not, however, entirely unbridgeable, as the great variety of Judeo-Persian literary works attests to the distinctly one-way influence of their non-Jewish literary environment. The Judeo-Persian literary heritage remains largely unexplored. Much work needs to be done in the field in order to assess its merits for both the Persian and Jewish literary canons.

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1. Gilbert Lazard, "La judéo persan, entre le pehlevi et le persan," *Studia Iranica* 6 (1987): 167–76.
  2. Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz, *From the Lost Tribes in Afghanistan to the Mashhad Jewish Converts of Iran* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1992), figs. 53–67.
  3. Only one such letter had been known until now, but now see Zhang Zhan, "Jews in Khotan in Light of the Newly Discovered Judaeo-Persian Letter," in *Irano-Judaica* 7 (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, forthcoming).
  4. Tamar Gindin, "Judeo-Persian Literature. 1. Early Period," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3:64–65.
  5. Shaul Shaked, "Two Judaeo-Iranian Contributions: 1. Iranian Functions in the Book of Esther; 2. Fragments of Two Karaite Commentaries on Daniel in Judaeo-Persian," in *Irano-Judaica: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1982), 292–322.
  6. Walter J. Fischel, "Judaeo-Persian. 1. Literature," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, 4:308a.

7. Vera Basch Moreen, "Judeo-Persian Literature. 2. Medieval Period," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, 3:66.
8. See, for example, Amnon Netzer, *Manuscripts of the Jews of Persia in the Ben-Zvi Institute* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1985), and Vera Basch Moreen, *Catalogue of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, forthcoming).
9. Vera Basch Moreen, *In Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 26–119.
10. *Ibid.*, 119–43.
11. *Ibid.*, 143–58.
12. *Ibid.*; see chapters 11 and 12.
13. Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of Babai Ibn Lutf's Chronicle (1617–1662)* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1986), and *Iranian Jewry during the Afghan Invasion: The Kitab-i Sar Guzash-t-i Kashan of Babai Ibn Farhad (1721–1731)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990).
14. Carl Salemann, "Chudaïdat: Ein judisch-bucharisches Gedicht," *Memoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Pétersbourg* 42 (1897): 1–30.
15. Amnon Netzer, *Duties of Judah by Rabbi Yehudah Ben El'azar* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1995).
16. Moreen, *In Queen Esther's Garden*, 260–67.

## Illuminated Judeo-Persian Manuscripts

Just as they emulated the language and rhetoric of classical Persian literature, Iranian Jews imitated the book arts of the Iranian tradition of illuminated manuscripts, which flourished especially in the Timurid and Safavid eras (ca. 1400–1700). Only thirteen Judeo-Persian illuminated manuscripts have come to light thus far; the earliest dates from the second half of the seventeenth century.

By content, illuminated Judeo-Persian manuscripts fall into three categories: (1) Hebrew transliterations of popular Persian *masnavis* (epic romances; narrative

poems in rhymed couplets), such as Jami's (d. 1492) *Yusuf va Zulaykha* (Joseph and Zulaykha), Nizami's (d. 1209) *Haft Paykar* (Seven Portraits), and *Khosrow va Shirin* (Khosrow and Shirin); (2) individual album leaves of verse with various portraits; and (3) original Judeo-Persian epics based on biblical themes that also include much Jewish and Muslim legendary lore. The third category is the most interesting by far. Judeo-Persian miniature paintings imitate the miniature paintings that adorn manuscripts of the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi (the most famous epic of Persian literature, completed in 1010) and Persian epic romances. The most notable Judeo-Persian miniature paintings illustrate the biblical epics of Mowlana Shahin (fl. fourteenth century), especially his *Musa-nama* (The Book of Moses) and *Ardashir-nama* (The Book of Ardashir),<sup>1</sup> and 'Imrani's (1454, d. after 1536) *Fath-nama* (The Book of Conquest).<sup>2</sup> Judeo-Persian miniature paintings cannot be compared with their Persian counterparts produced by royal workshops; they resemble more closely provincial and bazaar imitations of the royal workshops. The similarity of figures, backdrops, decorative elements, and the use of inferior pigments suggests that illuminated Judeo-Persian manuscripts emerged from a more impoverished material environment. They also tend to be the work of one painter per manuscript rather than the collective effort of a workshop. The identity of the painters cannot be determined, as all Judeo-Persian miniature paintings are unsigned. The paintings may have been Jews or they may have been Muslims especially commissioned, as some of the discrepancies between a number of inscriptions within the paintings and the paintings themselves, as well as the widespread use of painterly clichés of Judeo-Persian, suggest. On the other hand, it is also likely



In this triptych miniature, Zulaykha (top right), on the roof with her nurse, longs for the imprisoned Yusuf (Joseph); Yusuf (left, largest panel) meditates in his cell; Ya'qub (Jacob, bottom right) mourns his son Yusuf. From *Yusuf va Zulaykha* by Jami, New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, ms. 1496, fol. 8 (recto).



that Jewish painters, like their Muslim colleagues, simply took significant liberties with the texts they illustrated. If the painters were Muslims, illuminated Judeo-Persian manuscripts may represent striking examples of Jewish-Muslim cooperation.

Most Judeo-Persian manuscripts, including illuminated ones, were copied by owners for their private use, as colophons indicate. Calligraphers who worked for patrons are also generally anonymous. At least two manuscripts were copied in the excellent hand of Nehemiah ben Amshal of Tabriz, of whom we have no further information.<sup>3</sup>

Just like the identity of the painters and most calligraphers, the identity of the patrons of illuminated Judeo-Persian manuscripts remains unknown. It would stand to reason that these manuscripts were made for important members of larger, more prosperous Jewish communities, such as Isfahan and Kashan, and that they were treasured heirlooms. While the originality of Judeo-Persian illuminated

manuscripts, both in terms of style and content, is less obvious in the Iranian artistic context that they imitate, it is particularly arresting when the miniature paintings are compared with illuminated Jewish manuscripts from medieval and Renaissance Europe. ●

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1. Israel Museum (IM) 180/54; Hebrew Union College (HUC) 2102; Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) Or. Oct. 2885 and SPK Or. Qu. 1680 Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA) 40919, respectively, and 'Imrani's (1454, d. after 1536) *Fath-nama* (The Book of Conquest), BL Or. 13704; BZI 4602.

2. BL Or. 13704; BZI 4602.

3. IM 180/54 and SPK Or. Oct. 2885.