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From Ocean Parkway to Rodeo Drive: The Communal Organization of the Syrian & Iranian American Jewish Communities

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From Ocean Parkway to Rodeo Drive:

*The Communal Organization of the Syrian &
Iranian American Jewish Communities*

by

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**Submitted in fulfillment for honors requirements
for the Department of Judaic Studies
Dickinson College, 2011-2012**

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Abstract

Around 1900 Syrian Jews immigrated to the Lower East Side to create new economic opportunities. Today they live in Brooklyn in an established ethnic and religious enclave from the surrounding American and American Jewish community. They have maintained their unique identity through separate institutions, which have borrowed institutional models and programming from the larger American Jewish community. The Syrian American Jewish population has been able to adjust these models to foster a strong, separate Syrian American Jewish community.

Far away from Brooklyn, the Iranian American Jewish community has created their own separate enclave in Los Angeles. After the formation of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, many chose or were forced to leave Iran. They quickly established a separate community from the greater American and American Jewish community. Similar to the Syrian American Jewish community, they too have borrowed American Jewish programming models in an attempt to preserve their identity. Unlike in the Syrian American Jewish community, the Iranian American Jewish population is struggling to find a balance between preserving the old customs from Iran and the rapid Americanization among the youth.

Introduction

First Vignette: Syrian American Judaism

After Googling “Sephardic Community Center” the first option reads, “Sephardic Community Center, Brooklyn, NY,” linking the Internet user to <http://www.scclive.org>.



At the top of the page there are links to various age groups/activities with pictures rotating below, advertising services the center can provide, such as gym memberships and birthday parties. The various age groups/activities allow the user to easily find the activities and programs offered. When I click on the “Young Adult” tab, the three program directors’ names and contact information are listed at the top. Following the names, there is a description of the mission and opportunities provided by the young adult community at SCC.² The page reads:

Grab the opportunity.

¹ <http://scclive.org/>

² *Ibid.*

Take trips to great places you might never have ventured on your own while meeting new people. Adventure to places that guarantee a remarkably good time while providing a learning experience teeming with Jewish heritage.

Consider joining LIT Leaders in Training for the young adult who is into social action and wants to become a future leader of this community, or any other.

Young Adult Sports Leagues: Leagues catering to guys and girls who want to have a competitive game with their peers right here at the SCC. We are in the process of forming new sports opportunities for all. Please let us know what type of teams you want and we will try to make it happen. Registration is open for the guys basketball B-League now.

Participate in special events, sports leagues, cook offs, fashion shows, and more; join other Young Adults for fun. Meet and mingle.

Finally, your chance to get involved. Join one of our committees to help plan events, parties, LIT, sport activities, outings, trips and whatever else your imagination can take you to....

It's your opportunity to grab the opportunity.³

The message is focused on leadership, opportunity, and the ability to meet new people.

It is understood that this age group has left their family's home, no longer viewed as children, and it is relating to their newfound sense of independence. Additionally, the SCC realizes that these are the future leaders of the community. For example, they advertise a Leadership in Training (LIT) program, as well as encourage members to join the committees that organize the social events for the age group. The main section of the page explains the fun social opportunities and how they relate to the community's Jewish experience. It reads, "Adventure to places that guarantee a remarkably good time while providing a learning experience teeming with Jewish heritage." Finally, the webpage emphasizes the chance to

³ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/67/young-adults>

meet new people. The website reads, “Participate in special events, sports leagues, cook offs, fashion shows, and more; join other Young Adults for fun. Meet and mingle.” At the end, the webpage reiterates the original message about opportunity and independence. It says, “It’s your opportunity to grab the opportunity.”⁴

Second Vignette: Iranian American Judaism

Across America from the SCC on Ocean Parkway, in the heart of Beverly Hills, the Iranian American Jewish community has created their own separate community. The Nessah Synagogue, Southern California Nessah Education and Cultural Center web page (<http://www.nessah.org>) has a basic layout. Once I arrive to the homepage a symbol is drawn in the center. It is a circle divided in fourths, the right half is a menorah with the middle candle’s flame colored blue and the other six are colored red. The bottom left fourth has a Jewish star and the text “established 1980” written underneath it. The final top right fourth has a picture of the synagogue. The words “Nessah Education and Cultural Center,” outline the entire circle. On the right hand of the web page it lists the times (according to Beverley Hills) and parsha for Shabbat and below it lists the upcoming events. On the left hand side there is a long list of links for more information: “About Nessah, Contact Info, This Shabbat, Daily Services, Tzedakah, Calendar, Nessah Groups, Lectures, Seminars, and Events, My Bershert LA, Memorials, Education, Photo Galleries, Video Lectures, Membership, Ballroom ‘Simcha Hall’,” and Home.”

⁴ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/67/young-adults>

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If I click the link “Nessah Groups,” it brings me to a page and list of the Groups at Nessah, such as N.I.Y.P.⁶

N.I.Y.P. is geared towards young adult leaders and professionals in the Iranian Jewish community. N.I.Y.P “fosters leadership and fuels the light of Judaism in the hearts of future generations through educational seminars and social events.” The group wants to create leaders who will guide the Jewish community for generations to come. These are the members who will one day have a family and need to understand the importance of maintaining “Jewish roots.” In conjunction with training leaders, the individuals interested in being role models in the community can also meet each other and form connections and relationships that will strengthen the community.⁷

⁵ <http://www.nessah.org/>

⁶ N.I.Y.P. stands for Nessah Israel Young Professionals

⁷ <http://www.nessah.org/nessah-groups.shtml>

Nessah Groups

Young Professionals (N.I.Y.P.)

Nessah Israel Young Professionals fosters leadership and fuels the light of Judaism in the hearts of future generations through educational seminars and social events. Our goal is to unite the young Jewish community, and to bring them closer to their Jewish roots.

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The two vignettes demonstrate the importance of the young adult population in both communities. By creating young adult connections, leaders, and potential marriages, the communities are insuring the continued identities in the future Syrian American Jewish and Iranian American Jewish populations. Both the Syrian and Iranian American Jewish communities have created enclaves within the surrounding American Ashkenazi Jewish community. Within the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, the community's Sephardic Jewish Community Center is borrowed from the American Jewish "community center" model. The community has maintained a highly Syrian Jewish identity, however there is little evidence of such in the public Sephardic Community Center. Unlike the SCC, the Iranian American Jewish community has maintained a synagogue as the center of their community, while borrowing programming successes from the American Jewish community. The Iranian American Jewish Nessah Synagogue has tried to balance both the older generation's memories of Iran and the newly Americanized younger generations. Both institutions have maintained Syrian and Iranian American Jewish identity in separate communities from the American Jewish population.

Waves of Immigration: 1900 to 1980

⁸ *Ibid.*

The Syrian Jewish community arrived at the turn of the 20th century, while the Iranian Jewish community came between 1979 and the early 1980s. Primarily emigrating for economic opportunity, the Syrian Jewish community arrived when many Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews were early immigrants to America as well.⁹ Today's American Jewish community is composed of Ashkenazi Jews (descendants of Eastern Europe), who lived among the original Syrian Jewish community on the Lower East Side in New York City. From the beginning, the Ashkenazi community viewed non-Ashkenazi Jews as second-class citizens because they were not from Europe, including the Syrian Jews.¹⁰ During this wave of immigration, the mindset among the majority of immigrants was one of Americanization; it was important to be part of American culture.¹¹ Just as the American Jewish community succeeded and advanced within the American economy, so did the Syrian American Jewish community. However the Syrian community maintained an ethnic and religious enclave among Americans and the greater American Jewish community.

The Iranian Jewish community arrived 80 years after the Syrian community. Unlike the Syrians who arrived when immigrants were focused on Americanization, the immigrant waves after the 1960s celebrated their diversity within American society.¹² The combination of the Civil Rights movement and the various non-European immigrants who arrived encouraged the acceptance of diversity.¹³ Also, unlike the Syrian Jewish men who arrived around 1900, the Iranian Jewish population arrived with their families, with higher educations (which many received in America), and with capital. The difference between the

⁹ Charles Hirschman, "Immigration and the American Century," *Demography* 42, no. 4 (2005): 599-600.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 601.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Syrian and Iranian immigration waves is an important factor to consider when analyzing the current state of the communities and their relationship with the American Jewish community.

Methods and Sources Used

Originally I had intended to do ethnographic fieldwork to research material for this thesis, however access to both communities was surprisingly difficult. The Iranian American Jewish community has an archive project with interviews from community members, but the interviews were conducted in Farsi without transcripts, and translation was not available. I emailed both the SCC and the Nessah Synagogue's programmers, trying to make a connection allowing me to create a form of ethnographic work, but neither replied to me. Not only was a personal narrative missing, but also information about membership and demographics at both of these institutions, leaving me with only the websites, articles, and books to answer my questions about the communities.

Many of the scholarly works from the Syrian Jewish community are from the 1960s-1980s, causing some of the information on the population to be dated, making me qualify their relationship to the current community. Walter Zenner's, *A Global Community: The Jews from Aleppo, Syria*, was originally published in the 1960s. While researching using Zenner, it was important to remember that some of his information was from the 1960s. I had to consider that if the information was true in the 1960s it might not be factual. Joseph A.D. Sutton wrote *Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in-Flatbush* as a community observer. His conclusions provide a more personal narrative and insight about the community. I used websites to gather information about the current communities. The websites answered some questions, but did

not necessarily provide concrete answers to my questions. My research left me with questions about the current nature of the communities.

Syrian American Jews in Brooklyn

The Jews in Syria

The Syrian Jewish community in present day Syria was composed of two groups: the Jews who have been living in the region now known as Syria since ancient times and those who left the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisition in 1492. The Syrian Jews identify strongly with their cities of origin. The primary origin city of the Brooklyn Syrian community is Aleppo, who arrived during the Inquisition.¹⁴ By the beginning of the 20th century, there was emigration within the Jewish community. Two primary factors influenced the Jews decision to leave Syria. First, in 1907 the Young Turks rose to power with the goal of reforming the absolute monarchy of the Ottoman Empire. They ruled from 1908 until the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Under the Young Turks, the Jewish community could no longer be exempt through a small tax from army service. Many did not want to serve because they believed it violated Jewish law.¹⁵ Second, there was economic hardship. The silk trade was struggling and it affected the amount of trade in Syria.¹⁶ The Jews were beginning to advance economically in Syria before the economic hardship, causing some members of the community to purchase tickets for their family to move to places such as Egypt, England, Latin America and New York.¹⁷

At the beginning of the 20th century there were three Jewish neighborhoods in Aleppo. Harat-al-Yahud was the ghetto, and the residents were too poor to leave Syria during this time. The middle class Jewish community occupied Darej Sahah and Bab al-Foreage, and Jamaliyeh was occupied by the French speaking upper class.¹⁸ The Alliance Israelite

¹⁴ Joseph A.D. Sutton, *Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in-Flatbush*. (NY: Thayer-Jacoby, 1979), 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Dianne Esses and Yael Zerubavel, "Reconstructions of the Past Syrian Jewish Women and the Maintenance of Tradition," *The Journal of American Folklore*, no. 100 (1987): 528.

Universalle schools provided the upper class with a French education. The access to a French education, along with the opening of the Suez Canal, enabled the French speaking upper class in Syria to move to Egypt during the time of economic crisis.¹⁹ After 1967, when the remaining Jewish community was forced to leave Egypt, many of the descendants from Syria joined the Jewish Syrian community in New York. Because the Syrian Jewry moved around the world, the Syrian Jewish community maintains these connections today.

The Syrian Jewish community entered New York through Ellis Island steadily from 1908-1924.²⁰ In 1924, the United States implemented a quota system allowing only 100 immigrants a year from the Syrian region.²¹ It was typical that the Jewish Syrian men arrived first in America and after making money for some years, they would send away for the women and children of the community. By 1979, there were 12,000-15,000 Jewish Syrian residents of the New York community from Aleppo. Additionally, there were 20,000-25,000 Sephardim that identified as members of this community. This included Jews from Aleppo²² and Jews from other cities in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon.²³

The community in America started as a minority within a minority; they were the Jews on the Lower East Side who were not from Eastern Europe.²⁴ Once the Jewish Syrian women arrived in America, the community began to separate themselves from their Ashkenazi neighbors, moving further away from the Lower East Side and deeper into Brooklyn. It has taken many years, and many neighborhoods, for the Syrian Jewish

¹⁹ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 5-6.

²⁰ Walter P. Zenner, *A Global Community: The Jews from Aleppo, Syria* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2000), 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Jews from Aleppo called themselves Halabi.

²³ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, ix.

²⁴ Zenner, *A Global Community*, 138-9.

community to attain autonomy from the surrounding American Jewish community and to form their own institutions. Joseph A.D. Sutton identifies six characteristics of the community in the 1960s: they lived in close proximity, worshiped in synagogues, attended Syrian-Jewish day schools, married among themselves, pursued similar economic pursuits, and vacationed together in the same locations.²⁵ Before the community was able to adapt these separate qualities, they first had to live among non-Syrians on the Lower East Side.

Newly arrived in America on the Lower East Side

The Syrian Jewish community first arrived to the Lower East Side, to an area that already had American Jewish institutions and structures. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid and Sheltering Society on the Lower East Side, which had assisted many Ashkenazi immigrants for years, helped the Syrian Jewish men. They found them rooms in Ashkenazi Jewish homes, where many of them lived until they could afford to bring their families to New York.²⁶ Sutton observes, “The Syrian Jews in the New York of 1910 lived among perhaps more than a million ‘alien’ Jews; most of them from Eastern Europe. The cultural differences may have left a permanent mark upon the Aleppan and Damascene immigrants, and may help later to better understand their present-day insularity.”²⁷ The Ashkenazi immigrants viewed the Syrian Jews as second-class citizens.²⁸ They were not of similar European descent. European ideas of superiority and racism defined their relationship with the newly arrived Syrian Jewish immigrants. These negative feelings from the Ashkenazi community towards the Syrian Jewish population forced the Syrian Jewish community to separate

²⁵ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, xi-xii.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

²⁸ Zenner, *A Global Community*, 139.

themselves and once they gained enough capital the Syrians moved away.²⁹ One of the primary differences between the Syrians and Eastern European Jewry was language.

Unlike the European Jewry, the Syrians did not speak Yiddish. This language barrier caused the Syrians to feel like outsiders from the Eastern European Jewry.³⁰ This was true during prayer services. Just like the Syrian men who lived with Ashkenazi families, the Syrians originally prayed in Ashkenazi synagogues. However, the Ashkenazim had a different accented Hebrew than the Syrian Jews from the Middle East. Some of the prayers sounded completely different.³¹ This encouraged the Syrians to create their own worship spaces, sometimes in the backrooms of Ashkenazi synagogues. These backrooms became small Jewish Syrian enclaves that offered social hours and also Syrian Jewish religious education, which further separated the Syrian Jewish population. The difference in language was a factor that caused the Syrian community to isolate themselves from the surrounding established Eastern European Jewish community religiously and also economically. Also separating the two communities were the jobs and industries that the Syrians entered and advanced in. When the Syrians arrived on the Lower East Side, the Eastern European Jews worked primarily in garment factories. Instead the Syrians became peddlers of lace, lingerie, and other garments. The peddling profession was a better fit for the Syrians. They did not need to know Yiddish, and they had previously worked with garments in Syria.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

³⁰ Victor D. Sanua, "A study of the adjustment of Sephardi Jews in the New York Metropolitan Area," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* (1967): 25-6.

³¹ *Ibid*, 23-24.

Some Syrians did work in a sewing plant on Canal Street, which eventually made items that would be distributed to large discount stores owned by Syrian Jews.³² The Syrian Jews who were successful peddlers pooled their resources and eight Syrians created the first wholesale warehouse on 54 Allen Street, called “Oriental Jobbers.”³³ Other Jewish Syrian wholesale garment warehouses appeared, such as the Sha-yah Shalom warehouse that provided items for the souk³⁴ located on Allen Street under the 2nd Ave. train.³⁵ The souk was created to mimic the souks in Syria and was a common area for the Syrian Jewish community to socialize. The fact that it was called a souk and that the wholesale warehouse’s had non-American names was evidence that the Syrian community was not only influenced by America but also deviated from the American community to maintain their own insular identity. It was important to still use the Arabic name which they associated markets with in Syria, proof that the community embraced and preserved their unique identity in America.

During WWI there was a shortage of goods that allowed the Syrian peddlers to advance and gain the capital to become shopkeepers, which many still are today.³⁶ Sutton writes, “The commercial life of the Aleppans had improved but the circumstances of their estrangement from the Eastern European Jews remained unchanged.”³⁷ The Syrian Jews separated from the Ashkenazi Jews on the Lower East Side because of the language difference, religious difference, economic difference, and because they did not feel welcome or equal in the Ashkenazi community. Finally, the Jews experienced anti-Semitism from the surrounding Gentile community. Since the Syrians looked and sounded different, they could

³² *Ibid*, 15-6.

³³ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁴ Souk is an open-aired market in Arabic.

³⁵ Sanua, “Sephardi Jews”, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

distance themselves from the American Gentile hate towards the American Jew.³⁸ The poor manner that the Ashkenazi Jews treated the Syrians and the additional different cultural factors led the Syrian Jewish American community to choose to separate. With the increased separation and improved economic conditions, the Syrian Jewish community moved out of the poor Lower East Side.

Secondary Migration to Brooklyn

The Syrian community made three or four moves within Brooklyn, but the first was in 1918-1919, when the majority of the community moved over the Williamsburg Bridge to the Ashkenazi middle class neighborhood of Williamsburg. They were still living in an Ashkenazi neighborhood and influenced by the American Jewish community's institutions surrounding them. This move was significant for two reasons. It represented the improved socio-economic position of the Syrian community, which would continue to have a large influence on their identity. Secondly, even though it was an Ashkenazi neighborhood, the Syrian Jewish community created their own synagogue, instead of meeting in rented rooms.³⁹ The establishment of a synagogue was evidence of the growing nature of the community and the importance of maintaining their own Syrian Jewish identity.

Despite centuries of living in one neighborhood in Syria, the Syrian community continued their pattern of secondary migration within Brooklyn. By 1919-1920, the Syrian community wanted more "country" and because of their continuing improved economic position, moved further into Brooklyn to the neighborhood of Bensonhurst. For the first time

³⁸ Zenner, *A Global Community*, 139.

³⁹ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 34.

“Syrian-Oriental stores” opened such as butchers and barbers.⁴⁰ These stores targeted the specific needs of the Syrian community and enhanced the separateness of their ethnic enclave. After two moves within Brooklyn, the community had its own stores and synagogue. By the 1950s, the wealthier Syrian families moved to Flatbush and established Synagogue Sha’are Zion, still a prominent synagogue in the community.⁴¹ Sutton describes the life in Flatbush: “The community life in Aleppo-in-Flatbush incorporates and modifies America life to the community’s own needs and style.”⁴² Even though the community has experienced Americanization, they have also conserved their unique identity. Eventually the community moved further down Ocean Parkway, however the establishments created in Flatbush are still used today.

The Syrian Jewish community lived, prayed, owned businesses, and also vacationed together. In 1938-1940 the community began to vacation together at Bradley Beach in New Jersey. They would rent or own homes and spend the summer socializing together. Many times the summers ended with engagements between members of the community; marriage to other Syrian Jews is very important in the community to maintain their unique culture.⁴³ The Syrian community had a “keeping up with the Joneses,” mentality and eventually in the 1960s they left Bradley for Deal, New Jersey’s larger mansions.⁴⁴ Some members of the community have made permanent homes in Deal and have established their own synagogue there. The Ashkenazi Yeshiva in Deal, Hillel Yeshiva, as of 1980 had even included more

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 42.

⁴² *Ibid*, 82.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

“Sephardic-oriental” teachings into the curriculum because of the large Syrian presence in the town.⁴⁵

Community Identity Today: An Ethnic and Religious Enclave

As mentioned previously, the Syrian Jews had to adjust to American culture, and more specifically the unwelcome feelings from the American Jewish population. Because the Syrian Jews were part of the early waves of immigrants, their adjustment to American culture happened simultaneously with many other immigrant groups. As America progressed during 100 years of history, the Syrian community acclimated to that change. For example, the Syrian Jewish community integrated into America by attending public schools, paying taxes, speaking English (by the second generation) with a New York accent, and joining the army.⁴⁶ Today, it is evident that they are “acculturated” by the language they speak and the clothes they wear.⁴⁷ Zenner explains:

Syrian Jews are upper-middle-class consumers and they maintain a “comfortable” lifestyle that has kept pace with suburban American standards. Thus, in addition to local synagogues and schools for the community, a separate culture has emerged that preserves social boundaries within a limited geographic area of a city and for a specific population.⁴⁸

The Syrian community is comfortable in American culture, but because of their continued connection to their unique Syrian Jewry, they have separated from American Judaism.

The community’s separate nature is primarily apparent through their economic circles and their religious identity. Syrian Jews live with other Syrian and Middle Eastern Jews, not other Syrians or Arabs. There is some commercial interaction between the Syrian Christian

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

⁴⁶ Zenner, *A Global Community*, 140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 156.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 173.

community and the Syrian Jewish community, however the Syrian Jewish businesses themselves stay within the community and usually the family unit.⁴⁹ Zenner writes, “The main form of economic organization continued to be the family firm, which was supported by a kin and ethnic network.”⁵⁰ This began when the Syrian Jews lived on the Lower East Side, and today it continues through businesses that mainly sell electronics, tourist souvenirs, and infant wear in Times Square, Union Square, Harlem, and the Upper West Side.⁵¹ As time has passed, more members of the community attend college, but first they usually run the family business.⁵²

Within the community, there is a different standard between the men and women. Typically, the men marry after mastering the family business and attending school, while women are expected to marry at a young age, between 18-22. There is still a strong association with the private sphere being a “women’s work sphere,” while men are part of the “public sphere.” This is traditional in many Muslim countries and a custom that still has influence on the community today.⁵³ Many in the late 1980s still believed that if women worked, it would cause great embarrassment for the family.⁵⁴ The acceptance of male and female “spheres” has not stopped the Syrian Jews economic success. The capital created through their economic endeavors has allowed the community to create their own institutions that help maintain their cultural and religious identity.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 128.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 129.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 155.

⁵² *Ibid*, 160.

⁵³ Esses and Zerubovel, “Reconstructions,” 533.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 532.

The Syrian Jewish community's communal organization may mirror the surrounding American Jewish communities, however they have unique religious rituals and customs. Unlike within American Judaism, which has movements such as Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, the Syrian Jewish community would be categorized as the Orthodox movement, however that label is not used.⁵⁵ Certain practices by the Syrian community are strange to the Orthodox Ashkenazi community, like that some Syrian Jewish business owners work on Shabbat, while a traditional Orthodox Jews would never consider that an option. Additionally, some will have parties on Shabbat or will not always eat Kosher meat when out of the house.⁵⁶ Also, a senior rabbi has "autonomous authority" over the community and leads the synagogue, the center of religious ritual.⁵⁷ It is important to have strong Jewish Syrian leadership among the community, to instill Syrian Jewish identity. The community desires Syrian rabbis over Ashkenazi, and after the establishment of Sephardic Yeshivas in Israel, it was easier to find Sephardic rabbis for the Syrian community.⁵⁸ These differences and characteristics created religious insularity among the Syrian Jewish community from the American Jewish community and have encouraged the Syrian community to establish their own institutions.

There is a large emphasis and pressure to marry a member of the community. Sometimes people even marry cousins in the family to stay connected and maintain business partnerships.⁵⁹ As mentioned previously, the economic connection with marriage is important. Men in the community wait until they are economically established before looking

⁵⁵ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 86.

⁵⁶ Zenner, *Global Community*, 134.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 135-6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 130.

for a wife. The importance of marrying within the community is another reason for separate Syrian institutions, where men and women can meet each other. Both non-Jews and Ashkenazi Jews surround the Syrian community, and there is temptation to marry outside of the community. However, unlike Ashkenazi Jews, there is a decree against marrying converts to Judaism and the community does not accept adult converts. Zenner explains, “The decree against marriages between Jews and converts to Judaism is a mark of Syrian Jewry in the U.S.”⁶⁰ Marriages between Ashkenazi American Jews and Syrian Jews are also looked down upon because the Ashkenazi community does not share Syrian ancestry.⁶¹

The pressure to marry another Syrian Jew can push some members of the community to marry an Ashkenazi mate, and typically these couples leave the communities in Brooklyn or Deal and move to Manhattan or the suburbs.⁶² Even though there are some members who do not marry within the community, Sutton explains the situation in the 1980s: “Less than a handful of marriages with Ashkenazi girls did take place, but most men sought on diversion and did not consider the possibility of marrying the girls, Ashkenazim or others, who they met – only a Syrian mate qualified.”⁶³ The importance of marrying within the community is one of the primary reasons that the Syrian community has created their independent institutions. Other factors, such as their tightly connected economic status, their long history of tension with the American Jewish community, and their unique community identity have caused the institutions to arise that will solely serve the community – such as the Sephardic Community Center.

⁶⁰ Zenner, *Global Community*, 168-70.

⁶¹ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 35.

⁶² Zenner, *Global Community*, 130 & 166.

⁶³ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 18.

The Communal Organization of the Community Center

In order to comprehend the creation of a separate Sephardic Community Center, it is first important to understand how and why the American Jewish Community Center was created. The initial model of today's Jewish Community Center (JCC) was the Young Men's Hebrew Association, which first opened in 1854 in Baltimore to support new immigrants, "ensure Jewish continuity," and "provide a place for celebration."⁶⁴ These centers and similar associations spread to other communities of new immigration, such as New York City. As the number of immigrants increased at the turn of the 20th century, these organizations wanted to help immigrants adjust to American life. By "'Americanizing, educational, social and humanizing' activities" through services like teaching language, "assisting their acculturation to new customs," and understanding their new democratic country, these centers provided exposure to American life through a Jewish lens.⁶⁵ In the 1920s, as Jews gained more capital and moved from the Lower East Side, the Jewish Community Center was another avenue for religious life in addition to the synagogue.⁶⁶ While the American Jewish population was moving from the Lower East Side, so was the Syrian Jewish community. The Syrian Jewish community, after establishing synagogues, was able to use their capital to create a center of their own.

The Syrian community has divided from the surrounding American Jewish community, however the cultural diffusion of institutions is apparent. Zenner explains, "Many of the forms utilized by the Syrians in NY had been adapted from the local Ashkenazi

⁶⁴ <http://www.jcca.org/about-jcc-association/>

⁶⁵ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 136 & *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Diner, *The Jews*, 247.

Jews, including the forms and functions of contemporary synagogues.”⁶⁷ As mentioned above, the synagogue is the home of Syrian Jewish ritual practice, however the community center provides the foundation of social and secondary educational facilities. When the Syrian Jewish community moved to Brooklyn, the American Jewish community invited the Syrians to join their Jewish community center. The Syrian community rejected the invitation and decided to create their own building in 1950-51, but ironically it was not created near any neighborhood (Bensonhurst or Flatbush) with a large Syrian Jewish population.⁶⁸ It failed because of its illogical location and it did not “attract the youth.”⁶⁹

After some years passed⁷⁰, The Sephardic Community Center was restarted. It shared many characteristics with other American Jewish centers, such as gymnasiums, athletic activities, and programs for both the young and old. The center was later rebuilt in 1979 on 1901 Ocean Parkway. The Syrian Jewish community center borrowed the American Jewish community’s institutional form in order to respond to the American experience. However the Syrian community also used these institutional forms to create their own ethnic enclave among the American Jewish community: creating a community that lives, works, prays, and marries each other.

⁶⁷ Zenner, *Global Community*, 131-2.

⁶⁸ Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, 41.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ The sources are not clear when the Sephardic Community Center restarted. Sources have different dates but all agree that the initial idea conceptualized around the 1940s with the first building built in 1950.

The Sephardic Community Center (SCC)

The SCC provides programming for all ages, fostering connections among generations and across generational lines. The SCC does not often publically mention its connection to Syrian Jewry, however the programming is created to fulfill the needs of the community identity that exists privately. It is interesting that the SCC does not make more connections to its membership's Syrian Jewish identity. Is this already implied within the community? Has the community's isolated nature and 100 years of history in America

caused the Syrian Jewish identity to understand that their identity is Syrian, different than their American Ashkenazi Jewish neighbors?

The first tab on the SCC's website, is titled "Sports & Fitness," and includes five departments with "something to offer for every member of the family." This includes youth and adult sports leagues, a fitness center, group exercise classes, aquatics, racquetball, and a health club/spa.⁷¹ The health center is an example of an infrastructure that can serve all factions of the population, from young to old. Additionally, the health center can support other aspects of the SCC's programming. For example, the early childhood center can use the facility for activities or for the day camp. Also, the health center is an example of similarities between the Ashkenazi American Jewish model of a Jewish community center and the SCC. When the Syrian Jewish community first moved to Brooklyn and was invited to join the American Jewish Community Center, the center had a gymnasium. This was an early model of a fitness center and shows the influence the American Jewish community center infrastructure had on the Syrian community.

The SCC built a new building for their Early Childhood center that is now running a "30th Anniversary Special." The website explains that the center has a "solid framework of child development" and thus is the "top early childhood center in the community." It does not mention the surrounding competition. Are the other preschools functioning out of Syrian Jewish institutions, other American Jewish institutions, or other preschools in general? In

⁷¹ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/23/sports-and-fitness>

addition to school hours, the early childhood center also offers Sunday programs, afterschool/enrichment programs, and Friday programs.⁷²

A strong Early Childhood center indicates many things about the community. The Early Childhood Center's new building signifies that the SCC believes it is an important aspect of the community to invest in. Not only does a strong Early Childhood program, which the SCC claims it has, invite young families to become acquainted with the SCC and hopefully join, but it also instills morals in children and young families that the community believes are important. Even though the website does not explicitly say that the Early Childhood program is teaching children about their Syrian Jewish identity, does it need to mention the importance of fostering a Syrian Jewish identity? Since the SCC is in a Syrian Jewish and Sephardic neighborhood, it would be interesting to see the percent of children from Syrian and Sephardic families. If the numbers were high from Syrian Jewish families it would make sense why the Early Childhood program does not need to advertise that they instill Syrian Jewish identity. The Early Childhood program provides a source of membership to the SCC as well as molding the identities of children in the community.

After the Early Childhood Center, many children attend yeshivas (Syrian or Ashkenazi) or public school in the area. Unless they attend a Syrian yeshiva, children are interacting with American and/or American Jews. The SCC provides programming for kindergarten through 12th grade. The lounge, which is part of the "newly renovated building," is open nightly. The lounge is described as:

If you're like most of the SCC Junior and Teen population, at least some of your free time is spent challenging friends to heated games of Wii, practicing your free-throw

⁷² <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/49/early-childhood>

shot, or perhaps trying to perfect your best ping pong serve. Thanks to the generous space in our newly renovated building, all of these activities and more can be accomplished during an evening spent at the recently opened game room lounge. For the past 2 months, Monday-Thursday nights, and again on Saturday and Sunday evenings, this third floor lounge has been bursting with young members coming to spend a few hours amongst friends, enjoying the thrill of game room activities in the comfort of the center building.⁷³

The lounge's webpage also quotes children who say that they like the lounge because their friends are there.⁷⁴ Social connections, just like with the young adult programming discussed in the introduction, are the foundation of the SCC. By fostering connections among community members, the SCC is maintaining the strength of the Syrian Jewish community. In addition to the lounge, each grade has activities that their parents can register them for. For example, if a child is in 3rd grade, they can participate in "Fun 'n Fitness for boys" on Sundays from 12:30-4:30 PM or 7th graders can sign up for "The Artist's Touch for girls" on Sundays from 12:30-4:30 PM.⁷⁵ Free homework help is also offered to 6th-8th graders, on Monday-Thursday from 4-6 PM. The high school age students have classes and programs, including baking, drum circles, and overnight trips.⁷⁶ These activities nurture connections among same sex members of the community.

Both the Early Childhood and the Youth programs have opportunities to attend summer camps. The SCC explains, "The summer camp experience has become a truly essential part of the child's developmental process. In camp, our children develop socially, intellectually and spiritually."⁷⁷ There is a Day Camp, Center Sleepaway Camp, Teen Travel Camp, and the Early Childhood program. The Day Camp is at the SCC and runs from 9:30-

⁷³ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/522/The-Lounge>

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/609/3rd-Grade> & <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/594/7th-Grade>

⁷⁶ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/756/Programs>

⁷⁷ <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/84/summer-programs>

4:30 PM Monday-Thursday, with campers leaving at 2:00 PM on Fridays. There are programs for ages 3.5 years – entering 10th grade.⁷⁸ The Center Sleepaway Camp is available to boys and girls entering 4th-9th grade and is located on 1250 acres of land with a 100-acre lake, and offers over 30 activities. The camp runs for 8 weeks and children are sent home for Shabbat.⁷⁹ The Youth activities at the SCC attempt to keep the children of the community connected even if they attend different schools. By making the SCC become a place of familiarity, such as the lounge, children associate the SCC as a place of comfort and an important part of their lives. This maintains connections throughout the community.

On the right side of the page on the “Young Adult” section there is an area for “upcoming events” (which was empty on 3/19/2012), “classes, special events and parties,” and “young adult girls’ basketball league.” Underneath the “classes, special events and parties” section there are three activities listed: “culinary classes, date and kish, and the young adult co-ed Basketball Tournament.” Kish is not defined on the webpage, but the program is the SCC’s own “spin” on speed dating. Using the term “kish,” a food that identifies with the Syrian Jewish American identity, is one of the few instances that the Syrian identity is publicly mentioned.

There are two primary conclusions to draw from the Young Adult activities. One, the young adult programming encourages young adults to meet. Whether it is through co-ed basketball, LIT, or a "date and kish," the programming’s aim is for people to meet each other. Secondly, programming is targeted towards young adult females, such as culinary classes or

⁷⁸ <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/553/Day-Camp>

⁷⁹ <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/842/Center-Sleepaway-2012>

the “young adult girls’ basketball league.”⁸⁰ This is because many of the young adult males are working or in college, while the young adult girls are waiting for marriage proposals. The women are making connections within their community, not only with their potential husbands, but also with the women with whom they will be wives and mothers with together in the future. The SCC is encouraging their members to meet, interact, become leaders, and stay within the community.⁸¹

Similar to the Early Childhood and Youth programs, the Young Adult programs nurture relationships among the community. Even though the Young Adult programs may have other intentions, such as encouraging Syrian Jewish relationships or marriage, the purpose of making connections within the community is apparent. By forming these connections, the community is setting the foundation for a continued isolated Syrian Jewish community. If members of the community make friendships, from the age of 2, 12, or 22, these relationships will provide the support system that they need to feel comfortable and part of the community. The preservation of a separate community is the aim of SCC. By encouraging connections and creating the SCC as a home away from home, a place where members have been entering since a young age, this will create the future strength of the community.

The SCC also provides opportunities for adults, both services and cultural programming. The “Adult Services” section advertises a Women’s Center, Social Services (such as the Seminar on Women and Money, Cyber Bullying and Bullying at School, and

⁸⁰ The term young adult girl is used on the SCC website. It is interesting to note the vocabulary used and what it could reveal about gender roles in the community if more information was available.

⁸¹ <http://scclive.org/pages/detail/67/young-adults>

short-term counseling), and Older Adult classes and trips.⁸² Just as the “Sports and Fitness” programming showed, the SCC is a multi-generational center, which can support the community members well into old age. Also, there is a “Recipe” section of the website, in which members can access and submit recipes. Some of the recipes are common American food, such as spare ribs and some are food common to the Arab community, such as Kibbe.⁸³ The recipe for spare ribs does not clarify if the spare ribs are using pork or beef. Does the SCC advertise non-kosher recipes or is it implied that beef ribs are used? A common theme within the Adult Services/programs offered at the SCC is that it is targeted towards women. Women are commonly at home when the men work, which means that women have more time to devote to the SCC. The SCC also provides “Arts & Culture” to the adult community. Currently there is a Comedy Workshop and Ballroom Dancing for Couples offered. The Ballroom Dancing has a special class for young married couples.⁸⁴

This is not the only instance that young married couples get a special mention on the SCC’s webpage. On the membership page, there is a special membership “For Newlyweds.” This is one of the few instances that the website uses a specific Syrian reference. Under the description for the membership it says, “Mabrook & Mazel Tov...” Mabrook is the Arabic word meaning congratulations and it relates specifically to the Syrian Jewish community. The membership is a “gift” to newlyweds –the first year providing a free membership and the second year a membership at half the price. This is only available “to couples who are children of current SCC members.”⁸⁵ Once again this is evidence that the SCC is

⁸² <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/76/adult-services>

⁸³ http://www.scclive.org/recipes/by_category/6/Meat

⁸⁴ <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/73/arts-and-culture>

⁸⁵ <http://www.scclive.org/pages/detail/3/membership>

encouraging a multi-generation approach to the center in order to maintain connections within the community.

The SCC's webpage has a small number of references to specifically a Syrian Jewish identity. This is shown primarily through food and language: the Young Adults page has an event "Date and Kish," some of the recipes within the recipe section have culinary dishes from the Syrian region, and under new membership the word "Mabrook" is used. Other than those three references, there is an absence of markers that indicate a specific Syrian identity. Is this a sign of assimilation and acculturation within American society? Or is the Syrian community's separate nature embedded within their identity so much so that it is not necessary to emphasize their Syrian Jewish identity? It is obvious that the Syrian Jewish American community has maintained a highly Syrian Jewish identity, however that is only in private – the home or the synagogue. In the public institutions there is little indication of this unique identity. Why is the private and public portrayal of their identity different? More specifically, why does the SCC barely make mention of it?

The SCC provides the Syrian Jewish Community with a place that facilitates programming for all generations with structure and programs similar to the surrounding American Jewish community center model. By connecting community members at various stages of life, links within the community are created. These connections provide ties outside of the family structure and encourage the community to maintain their separate nature. There are few references to specific Syrian or Arab cultural traits on the website, however does that need to be stated? Does the community, after 80 years of living as Syrian Jews among a majority American Ashkenazi Jewish community need to explicitly discuss the importance of creating a Syrian Jewish identity? These are questions that are difficult to answer by only

analyzing a website, but questions that are important to consider when determining the nature of the current community.

Iranian American Jews in Los Angeles

The Jews in Iran

The start of the 20th century marked a time of change for Iran and also the Jewish community. More specifically, the Constitutional Revolution in 1905-1911 produced the transition of Iran into a modern nation. However it was the Pahlavi Regime in 1925 that had the strength and the vision to transform Iran and as a result the Jewish community's lifestyle. Russian and European ideas such as freedom, equality, liberty, and a constitutional monarchy influenced the Constitutional Revolution. The Pahlavi Regime formed when Reza Shah

overthrew the last Qajar monarch in a military coup. The Pahlavi Regime continued until 1979, providing the policies that enabled the Jews to advance and become integrated into society. Reza Shah's power provided the Jews with better conditions because he wanted to create a modern, unified nation that did not have differences in dress or language. This made all of the religions (Jewish, Baha'i, Christian) equal, not permitting Islam to control the religious hierarchy. He did not attempt to eliminate religion; rather religion was not going to become an obstacle in the process of unifying the Iranian people.

This allowed the Jews to become equal members of society. Jewish organizations operated freely, Jewish children were sent to Persian school, Jews changed their names to Iranian names, Jews were able to join the middle/upper class because of increased job opportunities, Jews joined clubs, movies, and restaurants, Jews enlisted in the army, and Jews received leave from work for Jewish holidays.⁸⁶ Arlene Dallalgar writes, "The Pahlavi Period created many opportunities for the Jewish Iranian and increased social interactions and intercommunal mixing with non-Jewish Iranians, reinforcing an intrinsic embeddedness in cultural, social, and economic life in the period."⁸⁷ Because of the religious Shi'i opposition to the new "non-Muslim" state, the Pahlavi government needed trustworthy individuals who would not be influenced by religious opposition, making the Jews prime candidates.⁸⁸ The

⁸⁶ Arlene Dallalgar, "Negotiating Allegiances: Contemporary Iranian Jewish Identity," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30, no. 2 (2010): 273-4 & Soli Shahvar, "The Islamic Regime in Iran and its Attitude towards the Jews: The Religious and Political Dimensions." *Israel*, (2009): 47.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 276.

⁸⁸ Leah R. Baer. *Traditions Linger* (California: Mazda Publishers, 2009), 40.

two largest advancements during this period were the Jews flight from the mahallehs⁸⁹ and their economic improvement.

The Jews left the mahallehs by 1940. The contributors to *Esther's Children* explain: “All in all, the adoption of a more secular system and the promulgation of minority rights as part of the cohesive Iranian nation enabled Iranian Jews to begin their advance.”⁹⁰ In the mahallehs they had their own stores and markets and their homes were required to look different than the Muslim homes outside of the mahalleh. In the 1950s-1970s, many Jews moved from towns and other cities to Tehran because Iranians had no “overt regard” for their religion.⁹¹ By leaving the mahallehs and receiving an improved education, the Jews became, “doctors, dentists, pharmacists, engineers, teachers, economists, academics, writers and intellectuals, import/export brokers, travel agents, electricians, social workers, journalists....”⁹² They were no longer fulfilling economic need in the lower class of society. Instead they had occupations in all classes of society, and had the opportunity to join the middle and upper class.⁹³ By becoming members of the middle and upper class, they were exposed to Western ideas of freedom of religion and equality for all peoples in Iran.⁹⁴ They were part of an Iranian nation and economy and no longer viewed as different or outsiders. By the 1960s Jews had fully integrated into Iranian society.

⁸⁹ Mahallehs were a section of the city in which the Jews were forced to live.

⁹⁰ Houman Sarshar ed, *Esther's Children*. (Beverly Hills: The Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), 386.

⁹¹ Baer, *Traditions*.

⁹² Dallalfar, “Negotiating,” 273.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Nilou Mostofi, “Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity,” *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2003): 681-703.

From 1963-1979, Iran Jewry lived in the “Golden Era.” Sarshar explains, “During this period Jews enjoyed almost total cultural and religious autonomy, experienced unprecedented economic progress, and had more or less the same political rights as their Muslim compatriots.”⁹⁵ Once the Jews left the mahallehs and lived in not solely Jewish neighborhoods, the Jewish community weakened.⁹⁶ As the Jews gained more wealth in Iran, they did little to enhance Jewish institutions, creating stagnation within the Jewish community. The distancing from the Jewish community could have stemmed from fear of returning to the old ways of anti-Semitism and persecution. Many Jews “relinquished their faith in public but practiced at home,” trying to pass as Muslims in the surrounding societies because of their discomfort with their perceived public Jewish identity.⁹⁷ Saba Soomekh explains that many liked the “modern, secular, and European” Shah identity and thus became “less religious” but still had a Jewish identity.⁹⁸ During the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Jews remembered the centuries of anti-Semitism and persecution and were either forced to or decided to flee Iran.

Reasons for Emigration

The Iranian population in February 1979, frustrated with issues surrounding American policy and the economy, overthrew the Pahlavi Monarchy. By April 1979 Iran became an Islamic Republic, and the Jewish community’s way of life drastically changed. Soli Shahvar explains, “...they had to adjust to their inferior status, concentrate more on their

⁹⁵ Housman, *Esther’s*, 386.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 395.

⁹⁷ Eileen Pollack, “The Jewish Shah,” 57.

⁹⁸ Saba Soomekh, “Integration or Separation: The Relationship between Iranian Jewish and Iranian Muslim Communities in Los Angeles,” (NY: St. Martin’s Press LCC, 2011), 133-144.

own personal and community affairs, and from time to time, their ‘solidarity’ and ‘loyalty’ to the clerical regime.”⁹⁹ Once again the Jews were not viewed as equals with their Muslim neighbors and their religion affected their status.

Hoping it would allow them to continue to have their new freedoms, the Jews originally supported Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. However it quickly became apparent that the Jews were not going to maintain their newly acquired life style in Iran. Already on March 16, 1979, Habib Elghanian, the President of the Jewry was arrested.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Khomeini purged institutions of people who were too Western or did not appear Muslim enough. Many Jews lost their jobs and affluent Jews also were labeled as part of Zionist activity. This resulted in many wealthy Jews being arrested, jailed, and even executed.¹⁰¹ In 1980 Khomeini voiced the new regime’s feelings towards the Jews as: “Nests of intellectual corruption that must be rejuvenated by the Islamic principles.”¹⁰² Khomeini’s policies caused a massive political change in Iran and resulted in the largest emigration of Iranians.¹⁰³ Many parents desired for their children to have the same opportunities that they experienced under Pahlavi, which was not possible in Iran once Khomeini came to power.¹⁰⁴ Those who had some “foresight” left with their life savings, but others who left later lost their businesses and assets.¹⁰⁵ The Jews remembered the situation under an Islamic State, such as the mahallehs and the limited economic opportunity, and despite having a strong

⁹⁹ Shahvar, “Islamic Regime,” 90.

¹⁰⁰ Baer, *Traditions*, 52.

¹⁰¹ Dallalfar, “Negotiating,” 277.

¹⁰² Torbot “Brain,” 275.

¹⁰³ Dallalfar, “Negotiating,” 276.

¹⁰⁴ Baer, *Traditions*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Ron Kelley ed, *Irangees*, (Berkeley: California UP, 1993), 102.

Iranian identity, decided to leave Iran.¹⁰⁶ Iranian Jews emigrated to America, Europe, and Israel, and the largest group moved to Los Angeles.¹⁰⁷

The United States was a popular choice for emigration (for both Jewish and Muslim Iranians) because of the United States friendly relations with the Pahlavi Monarchy. In 1979 70,000 Iranians came to the United States, and as of 2011 there were 100,000 Iranians in LA, 45,000 being Jewish.¹⁰⁸ By the mid-1980s there was a rapid decrease of emigration. Iranian Jews could only leave Iran with restrictions. They were either watched if they left the country, required to leave a family member behind, and/or could not bring any money or items with them.¹⁰⁹ By the 1990s the sanctions placed on Iran by the West limited the number of emigrants as well.¹¹⁰ Even though there has been limited emigration since the mid-1980s, the Iranian Jewish community in LA has become a strong center for the Iranian American Jewish population.

Multiple Identities: Iranian-Jewish-American

There are many elements that compose the Iranian American Jewish Identity – Iranian (more specifically coming from a Muslim country to the US, which is primarily Christian), Jewish (however not Ashkenazi), and finally American. The Iranian Jew in the US is a double minority. Not only are they Jewish, but also come from Iran, a country near the Middle East, which many Americans associate with the Middle East. Because Iranians

¹⁰⁶ Baer, *Traditions*. 54.

¹⁰⁷ Dallalfar, “Negotiating,” 276.

¹⁰⁸ Soomekh, “Integration,” 133.

¹⁰⁹ Baer, *Traditions*, 57.

¹¹⁰ Babak Elahi, “Iranian Diaspora,” 81.

have darker skin, they look different than the majority of white Americans. Even though the Iranians look Middle Eastern, Americanization has occurred in the community. As Nilou Mostofi explains, “A divergence from straightforward American or Iranian identification has occurred through the combination of cultural characteristics, from both ethnicities.”¹¹¹ Not only has there been a combination of American and Iranian characteristics, but also cultural transfusion between Jewish Americans and Jewish Iranians.

When Iranian Jews first arrived to America in 1979, they did not expect their life in America to be permanent. Khomeini rose to power quickly, and no one knew how long his Islamic Republic would stay in power, let alone that it still exists today. Shoshanah Feher explains:

Iranian Jews frequently had one eye on this country and the other on Iran; they sought only temporary refuge from what they regarded as a time-limited resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. This fact helps to explain why the Iranian Jewish experience in the United States has been characterized by segregation, not integrations.¹¹²

By the 1990s the Iranians understood the stability of the Islamic Republic, realized that the conditions in Iran did not allow them to return, and began to “create a balanced life” in America.¹¹³ Once they accepted their new American home the question was asked: “How then has this group of religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people with different pasts constructed an Iranian identity in Diaspora?”¹¹⁴ The Iranians adopted a “diasporic

¹¹¹ Nilou Mostofi, “Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity,” *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2003).

¹¹² Shoshanah Feher, “From the Rivers of Babylon to the Valleys of Los Angeles: The Exodus and Adaptation of Iranian Jews,” in *Gatherings in Diaspora*, ed. R. Stephen Warner & Judith G. Wittner (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998).

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 71-2 & Mostafi “Perplexity”, 686.

¹¹⁴ Feher “Rivers” 685.

mentality” and formed a separate community in order to preserve a connection to Iran and their Iranian Jewish identity.

Mostafi defines diaspora as an ethnic minority who immigrate to various locations, primarily due to forced mass migration, however they still maintain ties to their original country.¹¹⁵ He explains, “Leaving their homeland for any number of years, maybe even the rest of their lives, these immigrants construct a new identity abroad through the use of imagination, nostalgia, and memories.”¹¹⁶ For the purposes of my paper, I am calling this the “diasporic mentality.” More specifically, the Iranian Jewish population connects to their Iranian Jewish identity through memories of Jewish practices, rituals, and cultural customs. When Iranian Jews arrived in America, they felt like outsiders to the American Jewish Community. This separation strengthened their ties to their Iranian Judaism. The Iranian American Jewish community still remembers Iran and their use of “diasporic mentality” has kept and attempts to keep the community unified.

The Pahlavi Era was the “Golden Age” for Iranian Jews, and the rise of an Islamic Republic (which was not unfamiliar to Iranian Jews) was painful. Not only did they have to leave their homeland but also the “Golden Era” of Pahlavi had ended, creating a “nostalgic yearning” for Iran.¹¹⁷ This nostalgia for Iran produced a collective memory within the community, expressed through ritual, stories, language, and the family unit. One aspect of this nostalgia for Iran in general is that the Iranian Jewish community has continued to

¹¹⁵ Mostafi, “Perplexity,” 685.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Baer, *Traditions*, 59.

celebrate “neutral cultural experiences from Iran,” holidays that were not associated with either Islam or Judaism.¹¹⁸

Noruz, an ancient Persian holiday on March 21, celebrates the “vernal equinox” and the greening of the Earth.¹¹⁹ In Iran, the Jews did not feel threatened by the holiday in comparison to Muslim holidays throughout the year. Instead, Noruz symbolizes an ancient Persian tradition and an aspect of their Persian cultural pride. Similar to when they lived in Iran, some LA Jewish Iranian community members build bonfires and jump over them. However now in America some just place phone calls to their family and friends.¹²⁰ Even though both Muslim and Jewish Iranians celebrate Noruz, the Noruz celebrations are done within the Jewish community, separately from the Muslim Iranian community in LA. Even during an Iranian secular holiday, the Iranian Jewish community is separate from the larger LA Iranian community.

The Iranian American Jewish population also maintain a separate community from the American Jewish community, which enables the Iranian American Jews to pass to their children their unique Persian culture and Iranian Jewish rituals.¹²¹ By speaking in Farsi and telling folktales and legends as part of the “fabric of life” within the family unit, Persian culture is passed on.¹²² Once the community emigrated to America, Judaism acquired a stronger emphasis among the community than during the Pahlavi Era.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Mostafi, “Perplexity, 689.

¹¹⁹ Baer, *Traditions*, 170.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 173-4.

¹²¹ Feher, “Rivers,” 75.

¹²² Baer, *Traditions*, 61.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 179.

America, a country that values freedom of religion, has been a drastic change for the Iranian Jews. Baer explains two main obstacles for Iranian Jews in America. One, because of the freedom within politics, economics, legal practices, and education, there is a “reconciling element of Iranian heritage” with American culture.¹²⁴ As much as the community separates themselves, there still are many opportunities to assimilate. Two, even though the Iranian community tries to establish a separate religion and culture there are “fluid boundaries and social freedom of a democratic society.”¹²⁵ The more interaction between Iranian and American culture creates a greater “identity confusion.” However religious identity is still different than American Jewish identity.¹²⁶ Soomekh observes:

...due to the Islamic Revolution and the negative orientation toward Jews at that time, they were forced to flee Iran and become an exiled community. This experience caused them to reexamine their Jewishness. Thereafter they choose to define themselves as Jews, perhaps above anything else. This has also allowed them to develop and maintain their Iranian Jewish Culture.¹²⁷

Some believed that their Judaism allowed them to smoothly transition to America, especially during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. During a time of anti-Iranian sentiment in America, the Iranian Jewish community had the option to identify as Jewish rather than Iranian.¹²⁸ In America in 1980, unlike in pre-Pahlavi Iran, Judaism boosted their self-esteem instead of causing rejection.¹²⁹ Additionally, celebrations and rituals enhance the self-esteem and identity of the community.¹³⁰ The Iranian American Jewish community has a “fluid identity,” where preference towards a specific aspect of their identity is evident. During the Hostage

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 72.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*.

¹²⁶ Mostafi, “Perplexity,” 682.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 141.

¹²⁸ Feher, “River,” 83.

¹²⁹ Baer, *Traditions*, 117.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 122.

Crisis, being Jewish was preferred over being Iranian, however the lines and preference between American, Iranian, and/or Jewish are constantly shifting.¹³¹

Similar to when the Jews lived in Iran, ritual is the primary form of Jewish expression. Baer writes, “In Iranian society rituals are the dominant way to demonstrate piety and knowledge of religious learning, and they became the accepted way for Jews to show their Muslim neighbors that they are a pious people....”¹³² For the majority of their history in Iran, the Jews did not have many learning opportunities. This caused religious texts and doctrines to act as a secondary vehicle while expressing their Judaism. In contrast, American Jews focus a great deal on text study, making it a common way to convey devotion. However, because of the isolation of the Jews in Persia and the years of strict Muslim rule, the majority of Iranian Jews are unlearned in these texts.¹³³ This also causes the American Jews to look down upon the Iranian Jews.

Unlike texts, rituals were taught in the home, emphasizing the importance of the family and the home unit in Iranian Jewish identity.¹³⁴ The home was also important because the knisa¹³⁵ was and is still primarily a male sphere. Even though women’s rights began to progress under Pahlavi and continued in America, the knisa is not an egalitarian religious sphere.¹³⁶ Unlike American Judaism there are no labels in Iranian Jewry, creating “ease”

¹³¹ The idea of a “fluid identity” was influenced by *Yemenis in New York City* by Shalom Staub, specifically the chapter “Ethnic Identity.”

¹³² Baer, *Traditions*, 146.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 141.

¹³⁴ Soomekh, “Integration,” 136.

¹³⁵ Knisa is the Persian word for synagogue.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 110.

among the community about their religiosity. Baer explains that they are defined as “who-you-are” rather than “what-you-did,” not stressing the practice but rather the identity.¹³⁷

The Iranian Jewish community’s relationship with the surrounding American Jewish community in LA is characterized by differences and an uncertainty about the unknown. In Iran, Judaism united the Jewish people, but in America, Iranian Judaism is challenged by another Judaism.¹³⁸ Baer writes, “Iranian Jews not only moved from Iranian culture to the cultural pluralism prevalent in the United States, they became aware that their Judaism is not congruent with the Judaism that they found in the United States.”¹³⁹ This divide is one of the reasons that the Iranian community is a separate community, not only from other Iranians but also from other Jews. Baer explains that Iranian Jews find “certain traits” of American Jews incomprehensible in contrast with their Jewish practice and identity.¹⁴⁰ For example, in Ashkenazi Judaism a spice box is used during Havdalah, however in Iran rose water is used.¹⁴¹ Some American Jewish qualities have been adopted, such as separate dishes to keep Kashrut but for the most part there has been minimal cultural diffusion.¹⁴² The ritual differences, as slight as how one smells spices on Havdalah, cause Iranian Jews to feel like outsiders towards the American Jewish community. Besides the differences in ritual, language is a barrier between the Iranian and American communities.¹⁴³ Not only do the communities speak different languages, they also have differing dialects of Hebrew, causing prayers to sound differently.

¹³⁷ Baer, *Traditions*, 84.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 171.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 178.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 86.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 166.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 90.

A shared history is another factor separating Iranian Jewish and American Jewish identities. The Holocaust influences a large aspect of American Jewish identity, but the Iranian Jewish community feels detached from it. Unlike Jews in America, many of them did not have their families affected by the event.¹⁴⁴ The Iranian Jewish identity has their own shared history, an aspect of their “diasporic mentality”. There is a strong pride in their unique history. The Iranian Jews trace their origin to the time of the Babylonian Exile, millennia before Iran was a country. Their pride in this identity is not only because they are Iranian, but Persian. Their Judaism existed in Persia: Queen Esther¹⁴⁵ saved the Jews in their homeland, and the Babylonian Talmud was compiled there.¹⁴⁶ Because of the divergence between American and Iranian Judaism, Iranian Jewish identity has been heightened: “Nonetheless, since Iranian heritage intertwines religion and ethnicity, the encounter of Iranian Jews with the American Jewish community heightened an awareness of their ethnic identity.”¹⁴⁷

In order to preserve Iranian Jewish identity, the Iranian Jewish American community strongly encourages Iranian Jewish Americans to marry other members of the community.¹⁴⁸ This maintains a strong Jewish Iranian family unit. Mostafi distributed a questionnaire to the community, and he found that the main attributes that the community wants emphasized are: “family, education, hospitality, and artistic traditions.”¹⁴⁹ The family unit provides the foundation for the community to maintain a connection with Iran. Iranian Jews have not

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁴⁵ Queen Esther was the wife of King Ahasuerus in Persia. The Jewish holiday of Purim tells the story of how Queen Esther saved the Jewish people from execution from King Ahasuerus’ royal court member Haman.

¹⁴⁶ Principally, the Babylonian Talmud was written in the territory of Babylon ruled by Persia under King Cyrus. Even though the Babylonian Talmud was not written in Persia, the Persians take ownership of it.

¹⁴⁷ Baer, *Traditions*, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Feher, “Rivers,” 84.

¹⁴⁹ Mostafi, “Perplexity,” 687.

adopted American dating culture. It is important for Iranian men to marry young girls, preferably before they obtain a career, making the girls typically younger than the men.¹⁵⁰ In Iran, both because of traditional Jewish and Islamic law, it was very difficult to divorce; however with the increase of women's rights in America, the rate of divorce among Iranian marriages has doubled.¹⁵¹ Marriage outside of the community is a concern, and there are many events and resources that encourage in-group marriage.

In addition to intermarriage outside of the community, there are other challenges when it comes to maintaining Iranian Jewish identity in America. Many in the older generation find a generational gap with their children who were born in America. The Iranian Jewish American community's younger generations have become accustomed to America and the process of Americanization is apparent and happening quickly. For example, the Bravo TV reality television show, the *Shahs of Sunset*, is proof of the Americanization of the community. Members of the community are accepting that their Iranian identity is part of a larger American identity. Attitudes toward religion, language, and materialism are also examples of Americanization. The older generation finds the younger generation to have a "cynical" attitude towards religion. Furthermore, the younger generation speaks English, which is different than the Farsi spoken by the older generations, further distancing the generations.¹⁵² Finally, the older generation is also concerned with the importance placed on materialism. The community is "alarmed" by the value system that places materialism over family, community, and religious belief.¹⁵³ Baer explains, "Many of them feel that in the United States apparent business success and material assets are admired more than family

¹⁵⁰ Baer, *Traditions*, 181.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁵² *Irangelles*, 103.

¹⁵³ Baer, *Traditions*, 88.

honor, honesty, educating and personal integrity. Family orientation and community closeness with accompanying feelings of warmth and support aren't primary concerns.”¹⁵⁴

The lack of family and the distance between family units (unlike in Iran) is a concern in the community. For example, in Iran it was common for the whole family to be together for holidays. In America, because of the distance between family members, many families try to find central meeting places (not a family member's home), like the surrounding community institutions, to celebrate holidays together.¹⁵⁵ With a weak family unit, there is also a lack of respect towards the family that is trying to preserve the Iranian identity.¹⁵⁶ This is why community institutions, such as the Nessah Synagogue, are important. Even if families are far apart, they foster connections among members of the community and instill Iranian Jewish values.

The Iranian Jewish community's "diasporic mentality" and differences in ritual, customs, values, and language separate the Iranian American Jewish community from the American Jewish community. The Iranian Jewish American community could not separate if they did not possess "financial and human capital" to create their own institutions.¹⁵⁷ Iranians left successful jobs in Iran and brought them to America. Unlike earlier immigrant groups, they entered America with capital and/or the opportunity to advance quickly in the American economy through professions such as education, engineering, medicine, and professional services. As of 1998 in LA, 82% of Iranian Jews were self-employed, with college degrees, in industries such as technology sales, administrative support, and wholesale and retail of

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 176.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁵⁶ Baer, *Traditions*, 83.

¹⁵⁷ Soomekh "Integration," 134.

jewelry and apparel.¹⁵⁸ That is the highest rate of self-employment in immigrant groups in LA.¹⁵⁹

The prominence of self-employment enables the community to maintain separateness from American Jews but not from American daily life. Even though they interact with people of all national and religious backgrounds, the businesses within the community employ Iranian Jews. This also encourages in-group marriage, because by inheriting or marrying into the family business, the family maintains its comfortable life style. The success of their businesses has enabled them to live in wealthy neighborhoods in West Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, where many of their Jewish institutions are located.¹⁶⁰ As each generation becomes more Americanized and exposed to different ideas and beliefs, it is important for the Iranian community to create a community structure that maintains a “diasporic mentality” and pride for Iran, as well as continues to educate and practice Iranian/Persian Judaism that has existed for thousands of years.

Community Institutions

Already by the 1980s the Iranian Jewish community created their own knisat and schools. Even if the families were not pious in Pahlavi Iran, they wanted their children to know Jewish traditions and values. Though the home was the primary place to instill Jewish values, the knisa and school reinforced what was learned at home.¹⁶¹ In the 1990s, Iranian American Jews had four schooling options. They could attend private school, the public Beverly Hills High School (the majority of Iranians in West LA live in that district), non-

¹⁵⁸ *Irangelles*, 74, 102 & Feher, “River,” 73.

¹⁵⁹ *Irangelles*, 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Irangelles*, 102.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 93.

Iranian Jewish schools (usually Ashkenazi), or a Persian Day School that taught both religious and secular education.¹⁶² The Persian Day School has the capability to provide the education that many parents wanted their children to have. However it is expensive to run and attend, and even though the Iranian Jewish community is well off, it can be a financial stretch. Beverley Hills High School has a large community of Iranian Jewish students. The knisat provides programming and education for Iranian Jewish students to interact in a Jewish environment outside of private or public school. Iranian knisats “focused the cultural and religious activities of Iranian Jews.”¹⁶³ Baer writes, “They are centers for social activities as well as religious services; each has a multi-purpose room that serves as a sanctuary and a banquet hall, several classrooms, and kitchens...they are a source of pride and self-esteem for Jews of Iranian heritage.”¹⁶⁴

In 1980 Rabbi Shofet emigrated from Iran and created the Nessah Synagogue to provide a place to pray and maintain “the traditions and way of life as they [the newly arrived immigrants] had in Iran.” Once the congregation grew, Rabbi Shofet’s father, Hakham Yedidia Shofet¹⁶⁵, the Chief Rabbi of Tehran, joined his son in Los Angeles to lead the community. Nessah website’s “About Us: History of Nessah,” explains, “From the beginning, education was emphasized – the key to the continuation of Iranian Jewish history and traditions -- and so a supplementary Hebrew school was established. Soon to follow was a nursery school and future plans include a day school.” Nessah moved into its current building in Beverly Hills in 2002.¹⁶⁶ These institutions have borrowed programming ideas

¹⁶² *Irangleles*, 103.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Baer, *Traditions*, 115.

¹⁶⁵ Hakham is the honors used by Persian Jews to indicate a chief rabbi.

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.nessah.org/nessah-history.shtml>

from American Jewish institutions, but have also attempted to slow the pace of Americanization within the community. The Nessah Synagogue provides programs and groups that are directed towards creating, encouraging, and maintaining an Iranian Jewish identity with the goal of preserving the identity from generation to generation.

The Nessah Synagogue

Nessah has a large variety of services and programs that provide insight into the current nature and needs of the Iranian American Jewish community. Nessah associates with the American Orthodox Jewish movement. They offer daily prayer services. For Shaharit¹⁶⁷ there is both a Farsi/Hebrew and English/Hebrew service that run simultaneously. For Mincha there is one service and it does not state the language spoken with the Hebrew.¹⁶⁸ Farsi is used because there are still members of the community whose native tongue is Farsi. However, the option for an English service is evidence of the Americanization of the community's younger generations and their familiarity with English over Farsi.

On Shabbat, there is an increase of options for the members of the community. Similar to the daily prayer services, there are either Farsi/Hebrew or English/Hebrew prayer

¹⁶⁷ Jews are commanded to pray three times a day. Shaharit is the morning service. Mincha is in the middle of the day.

¹⁶⁸ <http://www.nessah.org/daily.shtml>

services available on both Friday night and Saturday day. Additionally, there is a teen minyan, which meets on Saturday morning. This is available to both boys and girls ages 13-18. After the service a lunch of “cholent” and Subway sandwiches is served. Cholent is a Yiddish word, however non-Ashkenazi communities (such as the Iranians) eat dishes similar to cholent.¹⁶⁹ Its purpose, a warm meal that can cook from Friday to Saturday afternoon, is a Jewish concept to meet the Sabbath restrictions on cooking.¹⁷⁰ The combination of cholent, a traditional Ashkenazi titled Jewish food with Subway, an American take out food, provides interesting insight about the community. Could this be a symbol of how the Iranian community has adapted with American and Ashkenazi American customs into their Iranian Jewish identity? Even though the Iranian American Jewish community is separate from the American Jewish community, why is a Yiddish American Jewish term used?

Besides ritual services, Nessah also facilities educational and program opportunities. Nessah Hebrew School offers classes to 2nd-8th graders for two hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The presence of a Hebrew School at an Orthodox style synagogue is rare in American Judaism. However, because of the number of Iranian Jewish students who attend public school, the community clearly has a need to provide a basic Jewish education to this population. The Hebrew School, in addition to Torah and Hebrew reading skills, aims to “...give your children a positive attitude about their Jewish lives, we concentrate on instilling values of kindness and respect for one's parents.”¹⁷¹ This emphasis on parental authority and respect is evidence of the community’s growing concern that the Americanized younger generations are no longer maintaining the family connections that the community stresses.

¹⁶⁹ Steven M. Lowenstein, *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 124.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ <http://www.nessah.org/nessah-education.shtml>

In the adjacent picture to the Hebrew School information, a Torah is shown. It is the traditional Middle Eastern cylinder shaped Torah, different than the rectangular shaped Torah common in Ashkenazi synagogues.¹⁷² There is no mention of Farsi in the Hebrew school program. Along with the information about the English prayer service offered, could this be evidence that the community is using more English than Farsi? What impact will the Americanization of language have in the long run? Will it increase Americanization among the community or will this language compromise slow the pace of Americanization? There is still a strong desire to maintain family connection and the cylinder Torah's are evidence of the continued use of Iranian ritual objects. Even if the language of the community is becoming Americanized, there is still a desire to maintain their own unique Jewish ritual items and family importance. Could the use of Iranian ritual objects with English be a move in the direction of a more "symbolic" ethnicity?

In addition to the Hebrew School, Nessah has the Nessah Nursery School with a summer camp program. The Nessah Nursery School description explains that:

Here at Nessah, it is our belief, that a Pre-School needs to provide a warm Jewish environment, in which children can develop an intense feeling of pride in their heritage. The religious and cultural program at the nursery school, should afford children the opportunity to observe, and participate in Jewish customs, rituals, and holiday observances, so that they can develop their identities as Jews.¹⁷³

Even though the description does not say "Iranian heritage," it is implied that one of the preschool's mission is to foster a strong pride in children about their Iranian Jewish identity. Does the website omit the word Iranian or Persian because it is implied with the community demographic? Is it a sign of Americanization? Or is it a marketing tool to not exclude non-

¹⁷² http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0020_0_19950.html explains the shape and history of the shape of the Persian Torah.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

Iranian members of the community? Because the demographics of the nursery school are not available, it is hard to determine. The education opportunities offered by Nessah show the importance of the community creating a strong Iranian Jewish identity among the younger generation but also accepting the Americanization of the community. Evidence of this balance is the relationship between the Hebrew School and public school as opposed to just yeshiva, or the prominence of English over Farsi in the prayer service.

Nessah offers groups such as the N.I.Y.P., Nessah Lecture Committee, Reach-U-All, LeDor VaDor¹⁷⁴ (ages 19-26), Nessah Sisterhood, NIT – Nessah (Nessah Israel Teens), Scholars Program, Men’s Club, My Beshert¹⁷⁵, and Simcha Hall Services that are programming for various age groups.¹⁷⁶ There are also two groups that program for the teenage population. Because the Nessah Hebrew School only runs until 8th grade, the groups are a way to keep teenagers active in the community and synagogue. Reach-U-All is a group that either creates programs for the youth or is a group composed of youth – the website is not clear. However their mission states:

We are dedicated to bring forth unity and growth to our community regardless of the observance standards. Our commitment is to strive beyond what is expected and our mission is to bring light, awakening and momentum to the great potential of Iranian American Jewish community, specifically our youth.¹⁷⁷

This group is addressing the issue of Americanization and exposure to other forms of Judaism in America. American Judaism does influence the Iranian Jewish American identity, but Nessah is attempting to slow the rate of exposure.

¹⁷⁴ In Hebrew, Ledor Vador means from generation to generation.

¹⁷⁵ Beshert is a Yiddish term meaning fate or destiny and usually refers to a true love in the world of Jewish dating and matchmaking.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.nessah.org/nessah-groups.shtml>

The other youth group is NIT-Nessah (Nessah Israel Teens). This group is the synagogue's youth group and is composed of teens that want to continue to form a connection with their Judaism and Israel through programming. Simultaneously, this group is fostering friendships in a Jewish context that will create connections in the community.¹⁷⁸ Like the Hebrew School, this is an opportunity for Iranian Jewish youth who attend public school to have a relationship with their Jewish identity and other Iranian Jewish teens.

NIT-Nessah's website - <http://nessahteens.webs.com/> - provides more information about the group. The events they have range from a teen Shabbat luncheon to roller-skating. The most recent event was in March 2011. This could mean that the youth group has not been active for a year or that the youth group member who updates the website is no longer part of the organization. They have created a newsletter (that has two volumes on the website) that has articles about being a teenager, covering topics such as college, and advertisements for their events. NIT-Nessah is an option for young Iranian Jewish American teenagers to be together and relate to each other. The group's website has not been updated in a year, which makes one wonder if it is still active? Does this group have success in the community? It is hard to determine from only viewing a website, but the desire to have this group shows the importance among the community to have programming that will cultivate relationships and community identity among the youth.

N.I.Y.P., LeDor VaDor, and My Beshert are all groups that aim to enhance young adults. This is done through offering leadership training, continuing connections to their Iranian Jewish identity, and encouraging relationships in order to maintain the community in the future. LeDor VaDor is specifically for ages 19-26, and it is not clear if the membership

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of the N.I.Y.P and LeDor Vador is shared. This group not only fosters leadership but also embraces the aspects of the American Jewish Iranian identity – “Activism, Zionism, Social, and Philanthropy.” The group wants the young Iranian community to not only feel connected to their Iranian identity, but also to their Judaism. It says, “Ledor Vador is here to embrace the inherent connection we all have to our heritage and further its development from generation to generation.”¹⁷⁹ Their connection to Judaism is important in maintaining an Iranian American identity. By grooming young professionals who are future leaders financially or have already inherited financial wealth within the family business, N.I.Y.P. and LeDor VaDor are encouraging young people to meet and make connections. Some of these connections could end in marriage, however it is just as important that these members make social connections in order for an Iranian American identity to be passed down from generation to generation.

My Beshert is a matchmaking service that connects Jewish professionals in Los Angeles.¹⁸⁰ There is a form on Nessah’s website that asks individuals questions on subjects that range from ethnicity (Persian, Sephardic, or Ashkenazi), to religiosity and income.¹⁸¹ Once the form is completed, an email is provided to send the form to. It is not clear if this an Iranian American Jewish person, or if this an American Jew who can assist the Iranian American Jewish community with their dating needs. On the news portion of the Nessah website: “Nessah in the News,” there is an article entitled, “As Persian Jews pray for their souls on Yom Kippur, they scope out potential soul mates,” published on 9/28/2009.¹⁸² The

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.nessah.org/my-beshert-LA.shtml>

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Robert Faturechi. “As Persian Jews pray for their souls on Yom Kippur they scope out potential soul mates.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2009.

article details how many younger community members feel pressure from their family or matchmakers from Iran to marry within the community. The access to My Beshert on the Nessah website is evidence that the pressure to marry within the community continues; however instead of using traditional Iranian matchmakers, the community uses an American Jewish matchmaker.

There are also programs for older adults at Nessah. The Nessah Lecture Committee and Scholar's Program show the importance of continued education. The lecture committee aims to bring speakers that will enhance member's connection to "Judaism and Zionism" while "mentally stimulating" the community.¹⁸³ There is no information about the Scholar's Program provided. Along with continued education, Nessah also has a Men's Club and Nessah Sisterhood. Like the Scholar's Program, the Men's Club is only listed on the website, however there is more information on the Sisterhood. Why do the Men's Club and Nessah Sisterhood offer different amounts of information? Are the women more active in the synagogue than the men? Is this because more women are present in the private home sphere and have started to also become active in the synagogue while the men work? The Sisterhood events are "everything from special entertainers to interesting speakers to day-trips to places like Santa Barbara and San Diego."¹⁸⁴ They claim that the events are popular and well attended. The Sisterhood is evidence of the importance of female connections within the community.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The Nessah Synagogue, as one of Early Childhood brochure reads, is “a home away from home” for Iranian Jews.¹⁸⁵ It provides both ritual and educational opportunities that maintain customs and values from Iran but also address the reality of the current community in America. There is Americanization among the younger generations and Nessah is attempting to balance a strong Iranian Jewish identity while addressing the realities of Iranian Jews adopting aspects of America and American Judaism.

Conclusion

Both the Syrian and Iranian American Jewish communities have created institutions that borrow from the greater American Jewish community’s communal organization and programming with the goal of maintaining a strong Syrian/Iranian Jewish identity. While attempting to create a separate identity and Jewish community from the greater American Jewish community, the Iranian and Syrian American Jewish communities have faced Americanization culturally and Jewishly. Americanization has differently influenced the Syrian and Iranian American Jewish populations because of their differing immigration history and time in America. The Syrian community arrived when many Ashkenazi Jews were also new immigrants. The negative sentiment from the Ashkenazi community towards the Syrians, in addition to the Syrian community recognizing through language, food, and commerce, that they were different than the majority of the Ashkenazi American Jewish population, encouraged the Syrians to separate themselves. After 20-30 years in America on the Lower East Side they moved into their own neighborhoods and started to create their own institutions.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.nessah.org/PreschoolBrochure.pdf>

Today, one hundred years later, the community has their own community institutions, like the SCC. What is interesting is that the SCC website makes very little reference to maintaining a Syrian American Jewish community. One has to wonder if it is implied? Has their existence as a separate community created an assumption about the preservation of their identity? Americanization is not an obvious concern on the SCC's website. Did the initial process of Americanization occur for the Syrian Jewish community on the Lower East Side, as many other immigrant groups also struggled with Americanization? Why is there a difference between private versus public portrayals of their identity?¹⁸⁶ The Syrian American Jewish community is established and has been separate from the greater American Jewish community for years. Their community structures are strong, the preservation of their identity is implied, and besides the fear of marriage outside of the community, the community does not need to state their identity; it is known.

The Iranian American Jewish community share similarities with the Syrian American Jewish community. The fact that they have only been in America for 30 years is obvious when analyzing their community institutions and programming. The Iranian Jewish community arrived to an already established American Jewish community. From the beginning, because of their well-off economic position, they separated themselves from the greater American Jewish establishment and created their own institutions. Unlike the Syrian community, who gradually came to America for primarily economic opportunity, the Iranian community came from Iran in a mass exodus. Their "diasporic mentality" shaped their identity within America. As evident on the Nessah Synagogue's website, the Iranian

¹⁸⁶ Kay Kaufman Shelemay's book *Let Jasmine Rain Down*, and her study of the active maintenance of the distinctive pizmonim (songs) in the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community influenced my conclusion regarding private versus public portrayal of Jewish Syrian identity as well as collective memory.

American Jewish community connects to their past in Iran. For example, they offer services in Farsi/Hebrew because there is still a generation that was born in Iran. With the challenge of Americanization, the preservation of their connection to the nation of Iran and Persian culture is an important part of their identity.

The question, which the websites cannot give a definitive answer to, is why does the Iranian Jewish American community have to explicitly state the importance of maintaining an Iranian Jewish identity and the Syrian American Jewish community's identity is implied? If this were 1930, after the Syrians were in America for 30 years, would the Syrian American Jewish community have the same concerns as the Iranian American Jewish community today? Can this difference be explained only because of the difference in immigration? Are there other factors that shape the differences between the community's programming?

Unlike the SCC, which does not explicitly address a Syrian Jewish identity or fears of Americanization, Nessah does make reference to the preservation of an Iranian Jewish identity as well as Americanization. The Nessah schools and groups aimed towards youth discuss the importance of maintaining an Iranian Jewish identity that will be passed down from generation to generation. When reading the Nessah website, I see evidence of a fear of rapid Americanization among the youth, causing an increased effort to preserve Iranian core values. With rapid Americanization to both non-Jewish and Jewish populations, the Iranian Jewish American community knows their values are disappearing.

Compared to the Syrian American Jewish community, the Iranian Jewish American population's values are disappearing quickly. This is probably due to the different historical periods. Today information and ideas travel much faster than when the Syrians first arrived

to America. That is why Nessah is a “home” for Iranian American Jews, while the SCC does not call itself a home to even Sephardic Jews. That is why there is an emphasis on instilling values among the youth. And that is why, even though Nessah offers programming for the older generation born in Iran, they are also offering programming relatable to the younger, Americanized generations. Nessah’s challenge is finding a balance between preserving an Iranian Jewish identity that many remember in Iran with the Americanization of the youth in the community.

Both the Syrian American Jewish and Iranian American Jewish communities are minorities within minorities: they are non-Ashkenazi Jews among a predominantly Ashkenazi American Jewish community. The two communities have contact with non-Jewish and American Jewish neighbors and yet have maintained separate Jewish identities in the face of Americanization. By aiming programming towards the youth, through education and strong young adult programming, both communities hope to instill a strong identity among the youth that will encourage the community members to marry within the community. Both the SCC and Nessah promote connections among the young adults in the community that will create ties in the future but also support marriage within the community. By encouraging marriage within the community, both the Syrian and Iranian Jewish Americans are continuing their separateness in the next generation. Americanization, both in general and with the American Jewish community, have influenced both communities, from their communal organization to their use of Yiddish. Even with Americanization, both communities continue to reject the Ashkenazi American Jewish identity, celebrating being a Syrian or Iranian American Jew separate from the greater American Jewish community.

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