CHAPTER 10

Synagogues of Isfahan
The Architecture of Resignation and Integration

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With about 2,600 years of history, the Jewish people have been both a minority and an influential community of long standing within Iranian society. The significant number of Jewish holy sites in modern-day Iran, such as the tombs of the Prophet Daniel in the city of Shush, Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, and Habakkuk in Tousarkan testify to this claim. Synagogues in Iran have a history as old as the life of Jews in Iran as well. In Iranian cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd about a hundred synagogues still survive and, because of their antiquity and the richness of their architecture, they have, in recent years, been designated as national historic sites by the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran. The construction of synagogues followed various patterns, but was usually influenced by local or stylistic movements in Persian architecture. Thus the humble exteriors and simple façades of synagogues did not differ in design from other buildings in Iranian cities, but their isolated interiors, hidden from the public gaze, were designed based on a pattern that was rooted in the foundations of Judaism.1

The city of Isfahan, one of the earliest Jewish settlements, was probably established at the time of deportations of Jews by the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian kingdoms in the first millennium BCE. Isfahan, located in the center of Iran, gained its world renown as the capital of the Seljuk (eleventh-century) and Safavid (sixteenth-century) empires. The Jewish quarter in Isfahan, which was in proximity to the Friday Mosque, housed the majority of Jews as well as their synagogues. The Jewish community, their history, traditions, art, and other aspects of social life have been the subject of contemporary research, yet their houses and places of worship have not been seriously studied as part of the history of the city. While there are numerous references to synagogues in historical, social, and anthropological studies, the architectural qualities of Jewish religion and domesticity have not been thoroughly explored in contemporary scholarship.

This chapter explores the design of synagogues in the Jewish neighborhood of Isfahan, Jubareh,2 by examining the physical and non-physical links between the city and synagogues dating from the nineteenth century. By studying the spatial qualities and patterns of use of synagogues, the authors will discuss how synagogues reflect the culture of the minority Jews at macro and micro scales, from the city to the interior. In the absence of archaeological evidence, chronicles, or historical accounts of the construction and development of the individual synagogues, this research is founded on formal and spatial analysis of specific case studies as they appear today.

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2 There are two smaller Jewish districts in Isfahan: Golbahar District, near the Haroon Velayat Street in which one of the synagogues still stands, and in the Dardasht District, near the nowadays Abdul-Razzaq Street. Apart from these, there are three old synagogues in the Jewish Cemetery located in Pirbakran on the outskirts of Isfahan.
1 A Brief History of the Jewish Community of Isfahan

The beginnings of Jewish history in Iran date back to the first mass immigration after 539 BCE, when Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty, freed Jewish slaves and granted them freedom in Jerusalem. As evident in the Cyrus cylinder, Cyrus, unlike the Assyrian and Babylonian rulers, allowed the Jews to practice their religion freely. Following this, the Jews rebuilt their temple in Jerusalem, and some moved to Persia where they experienced a degree of freedom and tolerance until the third century CE. The history of the city of Isfahan is as old as its Jewish community: a Talmudic legend ascribes the foundation of Isfahan to Jews exiled by Nebuchadnezzar during the first phase of the Achaemenid Empire.

This settlement, which was initially called Yahudiya (lit. the quarter of the Jews), later merged with the Zoroastrian settlement of Jay and formed the center of Isfahan. The tenth-century Persian historian and geographer, Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani, writes:

“When the Jews emigrated from Jerusalem, fleeing from Nebuchadnezzar, they carried with them a sample of the water and soil of Jerusalem. They did not settle down anywhere or in any city without examining the water and the soil of each place. This they did all along until they reached the city of Isfahan. There they rested, examined the water and soil and found that both resembled Jerusalem. Upon that they settled there, cultivated the soil, raised children and grandchildren, and today the name of this settlement is Yahudiya."

The Yahudiya settlement, probably located in the present-day Jubareh district, formed the core of the city of Isfahan, which was largely developed under the Seljuks and Safavids. During the Sassanid Era (224–651 CE), despite the overall tolerance towards Jews, some occasions fanatic Zoroastrian clergy, influential in political affairs, caused persecution and harassment of Jews, Christians, and Mazdakits. Fragments from chronicles say that many Jews were transferred from Armenia and settled in Isfahan during the fourth century CE. The Middle Persian text, Shahristanha-ye Iran, gives the credit to the Persian-Jewish queen, Shoshandokht, who requested her husband, the Sassanid king Yazdegerd I (r. 399–421) to settle Jews in...