

It's the Moslems Stupid?!

(Part 2)

Dr. Mitra Makbuleh

I have received and responded to several anti-Islamic emails in the past few weeks. It seems that unfortunately we are forever ready and happy to point out the atrocities committed against us by the followers of other religions (today it happens to be Muslims), but we never wish to know anything about the atrocities committed by our own co-religionist against others.

Things are not as simple and as one-sided as we have been made to believe. Jews have not been always despised by the Moslems. In fact, if we were to have a pageant for electing the most violently Anti-Semitic countries in history, Christian Europe would win first place hands down, followed by the Shiite Moslem Iran and Yemen, with the Sunni Moslem Arabs as third runner up, and China and India disqualified from the pageant for a lack of any evidence of animosity toward their Jewish inhabitants. You will do well to read the article at the site below by Uri Avnery which might help you gain greater insight into the topic of Islamic vs. Christian anti-Semitism.

<http://ampal.blogspot.com/2006/09/pope-and-emperor-uri-avnerys-lucid.html>

As for the Jewish experience in Persia, here is an excerpt from the new book I am working on.

The Persian Jews, this oldest of Jewish exiles, has survived from the time of Cyrus the Great King of Persia whom the Biblical Jews called "The Anointed Messiah of God" to our modern times with its Ahmadi-nejad the Petty Despot of Iran who needs no introduction. During these 2600 years, the Jews of Iran have had some great times and some terrible times. But even on their worst days, the Persian Jews never had it as bad as the European Jews.

The Jews were exiled by the Assyrian and Babylonian Kings to the lands which later became known as Persia around 2700 years ago. In 537 BCE, Cyrus the Great King of Persia freed the Jews from the Babylonian captivity and allowed 40,000 of them to return to their native land and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. For nearly nine centuries, from 600 BCE to 250 CE, the Jews had it very good in Persia. There were Persian

queens in the latter Sassanid period (240-302 CE) who were either Jewish or had great sympathies toward the Jews—possibly providing the real background to the Queen Esther legend. There were also some famous Talmudists like Rav Samuel and Rabba who, like Mordecai in the story of Purim, had very close ties to the Persian court and managed to save the Jews from imminent persecution and annihilation at the hands of a Haman-like character named Kartir (240-272 CE). Kartir was a tyrannical Zoroastrian High Priest who was intolerant of all other faiths and massacred the followers of Mani and Mazdak, but despite his strong hatred for the Jews, he was not allowed to touch them.^[i]

Unlike what many people are being led to believe in these days of anti-Islamic fervor, the advent of Islam was not a calamity for the Jews of Iran or anywhere else. Toward the end of the Sassanid period (633 CE), state sponsored Zoroastrian persecution of all minorities especially Jews and Christians had intensified dramatically. The Islamic conquest of Persia (633-656 CE) brought some relief to these two minorities who were free to practice their religion provided that they paid a special tax called Jazyeh.^[ii] During the first centuries of Islamic rule and especially during the conquest of Iran by the Mongols, whenever granted the opportunity, the Persian Jewish community flourished and produced men and women of renown, including prime ministers, royal physicians, poets, and mystics.^[iii]

But there was more trouble ahead for the Jews of Iran. With the ascendancy of the more fundamentalist Shia Islam in Iran (1502 CE), things got really ugly for the Jews and they were periodically subjected to bloody pogroms, forced conversions, and discriminatory laws for the next few centuries until the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 CE. Under the modernizing and secularizing efforts of the Pahlavi dynasty, the Iranian Jewish community was fast recovering from several hundred years of severe anti-Semitic abuse. Throughout the past few centuries, the Shiite Moslem majority had been quite intolerant toward all minorities, but their hatred for the Jews was much more pronounced. The Jews remained number one on the hate list even after the advent of the much despised new sect, the Bahá'ís in mid 19th Century. Some of the most violent pogroms and forced conversions of the Jews of Persia took place during the Safavid and Quajar dynasties (1502-1925 CE).

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^[i] In a four part series called “Queen Esther and Xerxes: Real History or A Kabbalistic Mystery?” published in *Rahavard Persian Journal* (2007-2008), I suggested that the story of Purim reflects the

political circumstances during the Sassanid rule and not during the time of Xerxes, and this highly symbolic story is a mystical inner tale.

^[ii] Things got even better for the Jews when the Mongols took over Iran (1236-1318 CE) and chose a few of their prime ministers from amongst the Jews. This angered the Moslem clergy and they murdered the prime ministers and plundered Jewish communities.

^[iii] Persian Jewish ministers, Mystics and poets