

## Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews



### Fowler Museum presents a major exhibit on the history of Iranian Jews

Since ancient times, Iran has been a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures, and languages. *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*—on display at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from October 21, 2012–March 10, 2013—tells the rich and complex history of one of the world's oldest Jewish communities, which dates back nearly 3,000 years since the first Jews exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia settled in the Persian sphere.

More than one hundred objects including archaeological artifacts, impressive illuminated manuscripts, beautiful Judaica and amulets, paintings, photographs, videos, and documentary ephemera are presented in the Fowler's Lucas Gallery to highlight the key features of the long, complicated, and vibrant history of Jews living in Iran.

This exhibition was created and organized by [Beit Hatfutsot](#)—The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, Israel where it was on display from December 2010–May 2011. The curators are Orit Engelberg-Baram and Hagai Segev.

The exhibition begins with the biblical story of Esther, who heroically foiled a plot to exterminate the Jews of the ancient Persian city of Shushan. Iranian Jews identify strongly with Esther and she is remembered through beautiful renditions of the book telling her story, amulets seeking her protection, and her tomb, which is still a pilgrimage site today.

Muslims conquered Persia in the seventh century CE and the lives of Jews there became progressively difficult. In the early sixteenth century the Safavid kingdom rose to power establishing strict Shiite Islamic doctrine, which discriminated against Iran's religious minorities. Conditions worsened for the Jews, and the exhibition uses objects to illustrate life in the Jewish quarter (*mahale*) of various cities and some of the constraints caused by Shiite edicts. A section is dedicated to the professions forbidden to Muslims and practiced by Jews, such as working as peddlers, used-clothing vendors, jewelry makers, producers and sellers of wine, and musicians and entertainers, in addition to those Jews who still worked as doctors, healers, and merchants.

Ironically, these circumstances lead the Jews of Iran to play a key role in preserving the legacy of classical Persian music and poetry (both forbidden to Muslims under Shiite law), and *Light and Shadows* features traditional instruments such as the *tār*, *setār*, and *santūr* and offers several examples of recorded musical compositions. Because the Jews were considered to be "People of the Book," they valued literacy in both religious and secular texts. Persian literature was integral to Jewish community life, and the exhibition includes rare illuminated manuscripts and books.

In the mid-1800s the Jews living in the city of Mashhad were forced to convert to Islam. As a result, many of them lived double lives, practicing Islam in public but privately maintaining Jewish customs. A special section focuses on the distinctive experiences of the "crypto-Jews" of Mashhad and includes miniature phylacteries worn covertly under a headdress; lavish garments for child-brides, who were betrothed at an early age to avoid marriages to Muslims later in life; and pairs of elaborately decorated marriage contracts, a Jewish version in Hebrew and a Muslim version in Persian.

A final section in the Lucas Gallery highlights a range of objects associated with religious practices, ceremonies, and rituals, which have a distinctive Iranian Jewish style. The consecrated space of the synagogue holds a prescribed set of religious objects and *Light and Shadows* includes an ornamented cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept as well as a number of their silver finials, decorated with recognizably Persian motifs. Wedding ceremonies were a hybrid of Jewish and Persian traditions and were designed to ensure the health and well-being of the young couple. Each marriage was sealed with a formal contract (*ketubah*), among the most beautiful of Persian Jewish illuminated documents. Lastly, the Jews of Iran wore amulets to confer protection against harm and promote healing, and the exhibition includes a wide range of delicately engraved examples in silver and bronze.

Continuing in the Goldenberg Galleria, the exhibition examines the opening of Iran to the West starting in the late-19th century, the reign of the Pahlavi Monarchy, and the exodus of much of the Jewish population following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Photographs by Hasan Sarbakhshian document the Jews remaining in Iran today, a community that numbers approximately 25,000. Installations by local artists Shelley Gazin and Jessica Shokrian reflect the large and dynamic diaspora community of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles.

"The Fowler is known for presenting exhibitions that effectively connect local communities with their distinctive heritages and then for sharing these rich and sometimes little-known cultures and histories with our visitors," says Marla Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum. "In the case of *Light and Shadows*, it is significant that the Museum is situated in Westwood, in the heart of Los Angeles's Westside, with its strong Iranian-American presence."

The lead sponsor for the exhibition is the [Y & S Nazarian Family Foundation](#).

The exhibition partner at the Fowler Museum is the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

Additional generous support comes from the Farhang Foundation and Sinai Temple.

The English-language edition of the book *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* (8.75 x 10.75 inches, 198 pages, 100 color and 19 b/w ill., hardcover, ISBN 978-0-9847550-2-8), will be published this fall and distributed by the University of Washington Press. The multi-authored volume is edited by David Yerushalmi, professor, Center of Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

### **Related Exhibitions in Los Angeles**

A number of companion exhibitions and events at other local institutions have been planned in conjunction with *Light and Shadows*. A complete list is [online](#). The exhibitions are:

#### ***My heart is in the East, and I am at the ends of the West***

Shulamit Gallery

**October 15, 2012–January 5, 2013**

Works by contemporary artists Ben Mayeri, Laura Merage, Soraya Nazarian, Farid Safai, and Jessica Shokrian

#### ***What Remains: The Iranian Jewish Experience***

Hillel at UCLA

**October 25–December 14, 2012**

Photographs of the Iranian Jewish experience in Los Angeles by Shelley Gazin, Jessica Shokrian, and others

#### ***Iranian Art Reimagined***

The Jewish Federation Bell Family Gallery

**November 1, 2012–March 31, 2013**

Works by contemporary artists Jessica Shokrian, Mitra Forouzan, David Abir, Shamram Farshadfar, Tal Schochat and architect, Yassi Gabbay

#### ***"We are a reality": Iranian Jewish History in L.A.***

UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library, East Exhibit Case

**November 2–December 14, 2012**

Books, journals, and historical materials from UCLA Library collections that reflect the presence of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles as well as in Iran

#### ***Leaving the Land of Roses***

Shulamit Gallery

**January 14–March 9, 2013**

Works by contemporary artists David Abir, Krista Nassi, Soraya Nazarian, Tal Schochat, and Marjan Vayhgan

**The Fowler Museum at UCLA** is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA

## Related Events at the Fowler:

**Sunday, Oct. 21, 12–5 pm**  
**Opening Day Community Celebration**  
1–4 pm  
Hello! Shalom! Salam!  
Family Art Activities

Create a *tzedakah* box to collect spare change for causes you want to support

Make a wish for your family as you emboss a silver *hamsa* charm, a sign for protection and good luck

### **2 pm *The Tapestry of Iranian Jewish Heritage: Reflections on Historical, Sociocultural and Political Relations***

#### **Fowler OutSpoken Lecture by Nahid Pirnazar**

In this opening day program, Nahid Pirnazar, a lecturer in Iranian Studies at UCLA who teaches the history of Iranian Jews and Judeo-Persian literature, reflects on how Iranian Jews have influenced and been influenced by Iranian culture and identity. Additionally, Pirnazar discusses how, in more recent years, Iranian Jews have continued to balance their attachment to both their religious homeland, Israel, and cultural homeland, Iran, while adjusting to their new environments in the United States and elsewhere.

**Sunday, Oct. 28, 2–4 pm**

#### **Tugging at Heart Strings: Experience the Classical Iranian *Tār*!**

##### **Family Jam**

Discover the melodic beauty of Iranian classical music through Parviz Panah's virtuosic performance on the *tār*, the stringed Persian instrument that has been said to cure headaches, insomnia, and melancholy. Enjoy the exciting conversation between strings and percussion and then make your own instrument.

**Thursday, November 15, 12 pm**  
**Saba Soomekh on Mashadi Jews**  
Culture Fix

The Jews of Mashad, Iran, were forced to convert to Islam, yet they secretly maintained their Jewish faith. Join professor Saba Soomekh, assistant director, Jewish Studies Program, Loyola Marymount University, at this thirty-minute talk inside *Light and Shadows: the Story of Iranian Jews* as she discusses this "crypto-Jewish" community and their diaspora in America.

**Thursday, November 29, 7:30 pm**  
**Jewish Women's Theatre presents *Saffron and Rosewater***

Enjoy an evening of stories, song, and lovely surprises, transporting you to Iran and back to America and illuminating the struggles of Persian Jewish women. *Saffron and Rosewater* features dramatic readings from the insightful writings of Gina Nahai, Angella Nazarian, Farideh Goldin, Dora Levy Mossanen, and Esther Amini, many of whom will be in attendance for a talkback session. The program concludes with a hosted reception. This special presentation is free but reservations are required. Unclaimed reservations will be released fifteen minutes before the program start time. [Reservations:](http://www.ucla.hillel.org/saffronandrosewater)  
<http://www.ucla.hillel.org/saffronandrosewater>

*Saffron and Rosewater* is directed by Eve Brandstein; produced and adapted by Ronda Spinak; co-produced by Jessica Youseffi and presented in collaboration with The Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts at UCLA Hillel.

**Sunday, December 2, 1–4 pm**

**From Market to Table: A Persian Jewish Tasting Experience**

Fowler on the Town

Mother and daughter Manijeh and Saba Soomekh take participants through the bustling Elat Market to learn about special ingredients and recipes used to make Persian Jewish fare. Following the tour, guests will have a brief cooking demonstration followed by a kosher Persian food tasting. For adults and teens ages 13+. Transportation provided and attendance limited to forty guests.

\$20 Fowler members; \$25 general. Registration: [fowlerprograms@arts.ucla.edu](mailto:fowlerprograms@arts.ucla.edu)

Presented in partnership with The Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts at UCLA Hillel.

**December 16, 1–4 pm**

**Gifts to Delight the Senses**

Kids in the Courtyard

Cultures throughout the world give gifts that are infused with scented oils or contain spices and herbs. Create a gift of your own that charms the senses, inspired by artist Jessica Shokrian's installation in *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*.

**Wednesday, January 9, 2013 12 pm (noon)**

*Light and Shadows* gallery

**Thomas Kren on the Illuminated Manuscripts in *Light and Shadows***

Among the objects featured in *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*, impressive illuminated manuscripts showcase the visual beauty and rich history of Judeo-Persian traditions. Thomas Kren, Associate Director for Collections at the J. Paul Getty Museum and a manuscripts specialist, sheds light on this visual tradition in a thirty-minute gallery talk.

**Saturday, January 13, 2013 7–9 pm**

***Leaving the Land of Roses***

Shulamit Gallery

[Opening reception](#) for *Leaving the Land of Roses*

**Tuesday, January 22, 2013 7:30 pm**

Hammer Museum

**[Ectasy and the Persian Spirit](#)**

Poets Majid Naficy, Bernard Radfar, and Niloufar Talebi will read from contemporary and classical poems in both Persian and in the ancient language of Aramaic, with English translations. The readings will be accompanied by traditional Persian music.

**Saturday, January 26, 2013 7:30 pm**

**Monajat: Galeet Dardashti in Concert**

Galeet Dardashti, inheritor of a Persian musical legacy from her grandfather, famed classical singer Yona Dardashti, presents this multi-sensory performance to kick off the [Light and Shadows conference](#) weekend. *Monajat* features live music layered with an electronic soundscape and dynamic live video art in a performance that re-imagines the poetic, repentant Jewish prayers of Selichot. A talkback with Dardashti follows the performance.

Priority seating from 7–7:15 pm for Fowler members.

**Sunday, January 27, 2013 10 am-5:30 pm**

**Conference: From Ancient Persia to Contemporary LA: 2,700 Years of Iranian Jewish History**

Organized in conjunction with the exhibition *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*, this day-long conference brings together distinguished scholars to examine topics including religions and cultures in ancient Persia, religious minorities under Shiite Islamic rule, and contemporary issues of identity and culture, including women in Iran and the Jewish-Persian diaspora.

**Morning Session 10:00 am–12:30 pm**

Welcome and opening remarks by Marla C. Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director, Fowler Museum and Todd Presner, Sady and Ludwig Kahn Director, UCLA Center for Jewish Studies

***Light and Shadows: 2,700 Years of Iranian Jewish History***

Introduction and Moderation by David Myers, Chair, Department of History, UCLA

Panelists:

David Yerushalmi, Professor, Center of Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University

*Introduction to Iranian Jewish Culture and History*

Jason Mokhtarian (pictured, left), Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University

*Jewish Culture in Ancient Iran: From Ezra the Scribe to the Babylonian Talmud*

Daniel Tsadik, Assistant Professor of Sephardic and Iranian Studies, Yeshiva University

*Jews Under Shiite Islamic Rule*

**Afternoon Session 2:00–5:30 pm**

***Contemporary Issues of Identity and Culture***

**Panel One 2:00–3:30 pm**

***Special Topics on Women in Iran***

Moderator: Morgan Hakimi, Co-Chair, Department of Psychology, Touro College Los Angeles

Panelists:

Janet Afary, Professor, Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity, UC Santa Barbara

Eliz Sanasarian, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Southern California

Jaleh Pirnazar, senior lecturer, Iranian Studies, UC Berkeley

Saba Soomekh, scholar, author and project coordinator for *Light and Shadows*

**Panel Two 3:45–5:30 pm**

***Contemporary Explorations of Heritage and Memory***

Moderator: Houman Sarshar, Director of Publications, Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History

*Introduction to the Jewish Iranian Community of Los Angeles since the Revolution*

Panelists:

Yassi Gabbay, architect

*Controversies over the Tomb of Esther and Mordechai in Iran*

Hasan Sarbakshian (pictured, right), photojournalist

*Religious Liberty and Freedom of the Press in Iran*

Free and open to the public.

Co-sponsored by the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies and UCLA's Y & S Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, and Department of History, and G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies.

EVENT DETAILS

**Sunday, January 27, 2013 1-4 pm**

***Kids in the Courtyard: Tu B'Shevat, Trees, and Me***

Celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish holiday that honors trees, and learn about *Tikkun Olam*— a Hebrew phrase that reminds us of our responsibility to work together to heal the world. Feast on fruit, make leaf rubbings, learn about trees, and plant a sapling with the Tree People.

**Saturday, February 9, 2013 8-11 pm**

***Pre-Purim Bash***

In conjunction with *Light and Shadows*, celebrate the Jewish festival of Purim with young professionals from across Los Angeles! Purim recounts the biblical story of Esther, which took place in Shushan, identified as present-day Hamadan in Iran. Esther, a beautiful Jewish woman, is chosen to marry the powerful King Ahasuerus, and eventually foils a plot by the king's advisor, Haman, to exterminate the Jewish community. This story of betrayal and redemption is dear to Persian Jews, but celebrated by Jews around the globe. Come in fancy dress or masquerade for open galleries, exhibition tours at 8:30 and 9:30 pm, *hamantaschen* treats, DJ, cash bar, and more.

This event is geared towards young professionals ages 21+.

\$10 general admission (includes first beverage).

Tickets on sale January 2, 2013

**Thursday, February 21, 2013 7:30 pm**

**Fowler OutSpoken Lecture:**

**Shalom Sabar: The Traditional Life Cycle of Iranian Jews in Art and Folklore**

Shalom Sabar, professor of art and Jewish folklore at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, illuminates select objects featured in *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* and provides a fascinating view of Persian Jewish art.

Co-sponsored by the UCLA Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies.

**Sunday, February 24, 2013 1- 4 pm**

***Kids in the Courtyard: Purim Party!***

Revel in Purim, a Jewish holiday that celebrates the story of courageous Queen Esther. Dress up like royalty, and eat *hamantaschen*—a delicious jam-filled cookie. Rattle your handmade noisemaker while you listen to this exciting story about bravery, deceit, and the triumph of good.

**Thursday, March 7, 2013 7:30 pm**

***Fowler OutSpoken Conversation: The Next Gen of Persian Jews in LA***

***Speakers: Sam Nazarian, Bahar Soomekh, Tabby Davoodi, Saba Soomekh***

In conjunction with *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*, entrepreneur Sam Nazarian (left), actress Bahar Soomekh, Tabby Davoodi (30 Years After), and professor Saba Soomekh (right) break taboos by discussing: *najeeb* (sexual purity) and the difference in expectations between men and women; homosexuality within the Iranian Jewish community; socio-economic disparity and the pressure to "fit in" financially; the *baal teshuvah* movement (those embracing Orthodox Judaism); career choices outside the societal norms; and other issues faced by young Persian Jews as they navigate between their Persian, American, and Jewish identities.

Sunday, March 10, 2013

8:30 am - 1:00 pm

## Persian-American Women's Conference

IAJF and IAWF hope to provide a platform to showcase the accomplishment of Iranian-American women, as well as to empower, educate, and encourage leadership among Iranian women of all ages. Two remarkable panel discussions are scheduled relating to the achievement of Iranian women as entrepreneurs and overcoming obstacles.

Morgan Hakimi, Ph.D., M.B.A.  
Conference Chair

### **Speakers include:**

Parisa Khosravi, Senior Vice President, CNN International News Gathering  
Angella Nazarian, author and speaker  
Mariam Khosravani, Founder, Iranian American Women Foundation  
Shahla Javadan, President, Iranian American Jewish Federation

### **Moderators and Panelists include:**

Azita Aghravi, Principal, Eastern Consolidated Properties  
Elahe Borokhim, E&B Advanced Healthcare Management  
Nazie Eftekhari, Founder and CEO, HealthEZ  
Sima Ghadamian, entrepreneur  
Nina Kani, Principal and Founder, Kani Law Group  
Elizabeth Mossanen, Co-Founder, Looking Beyond  
Soheila Motamed, aerospace engineer  
Mojgan Rahbar M.C.  
Shadi Toomari, PsyD.

[Download the event flyer](#)

RSVP: [persianamericanwomen@gmail.com](mailto:persianamericanwomen@gmail.com)