



## YOM KIPPUR IN TEHRAN

It's rare for outsiders to penetrate Iran's Jewish community but last autumn writer **Amy Guttman** was given a unique insight into their distinctive world

It's not easy to gain access to Tehran's Jewish community. Theirs is a tight-knit circle of about 10,000 Jews, protective of the few places they control, including 10 synagogues and four kosher restaurants.

My impression of the country, which has been cut off from the West for decades, was filtered through reports of hostages, uranium production, and human rights abuses, and then recalibrated through the many chats I'd had with émigrés before my trip. So, I was

prepared for high-rise buildings, shopping malls, Western brands and a warm welcome.

One of the longest streets in the world, Vazr Ali, charts the personality of Tehran and its residents. It stretches from the conservative, religious south, where many of Tehran's Jews live, through the commercial centre, and north to the Alborz mountains, home of the city's elite. I never imagined that Iranian women could arrive for dinner at sophisticated restaurants wearing stilettos, painted nails and heavy makeup, but they can be seen doing just that in the trendy cafes and shops of north Tehran. Since a post-revolution edict forcing women to wear black was finally overturned in 1997, color, in all its forms, has been embraced.

There were once 200,000 Jews living in Iran. Less than 10 per cent remain, but Iran is still home to the largest and oldest Jewish community in the Middle East, outside Israel. It's a population whose identity is firmly rooted here. Farah, one of the women I meet on my trip, tells me, "We consider ourselves Iranian Jews, rather than Jewish Iranians."

### IRANIAN BREAKFAST

At 6.30am, two days before Yom Kippur, the 500-seat Abrishami synagogue, the heart of Tehran's Jewish community in the south of the city, is nearly full for Selichot. Outsiders are usually forbidden from entering synagogues, but I have special permission to visit the city's

synagogues with my Muslim guide, Noosheh.

Jews of all ages are inside, men and women separated only by a waist-high panel. Iranian Jews seem to be a relaxed version of Orthodox, with varying degrees of observance. They're neither Sephardi nor Ashkenazi but Mizrahi, or Eastern, Jews.

Throughout the service, women go back and forth to the kitchen, an extension of their seating area, carrying trays of a typical Iranian breakfast: tomatoes, peppers, watermelon and dates. Platters of hard-boiled eggs, creamy feta cheese and honey are laid out on two tables – one for men, another for women. A dish called *koukou* catches my eye. It looks and tastes like a thin potato kugel, but sweeter. When the thick, doughy, sesame-topped flat bread hits the tables, it's a sign the service is nearly over.

### OUTSIDERS

The Jews in Tehran are regarded as a group shrouded in mystery by their Muslim neighbours. "We don't know anything about them," says a shopkeeper in the city to whom I speak later. "I went to school with a Jewish boy, but our families didn't socialise."

"It wasn't always like that," Maryam, a woman at the synagogue, tells me. "We used to mix with Muslims, but after the revolution, when Iran became an Islamic state, we stopped. We turned inwards. Secular Jews became religious, and the observant more so. Our synagogues became our social life."



Celebrating at Tehran's Abrishami synagogue

# PASSPORT

A few Muslims I meet outside the synagogue share anecdotes of playground antisemitism – encouraged by some teachers – such as calling Jewish children ‘dirty’ Jews I talk to insist these are isolated incidents.

A recent émigré to the USA, who didn’t want to be named, tells me discrimination exists on a subtle level, rather than through specific hate crimes. “If you own your own business, or work in a private office, it’s okay, but if you work at the university or in the civil service, it can be difficult,” she says. Those ‘difficulties’ include being overlooked for promotions and higher pay. Non-Shiites are also less likely to get hired by the government.

Noosheh accompanies me to another synagogue, Yousef Abad, in central Tehran. There are no guards outside, as there would be at American or European synagogues. When Noosheh and I arrive for Kol Nidre, some 500 people are packed inside.

As we climb the stairs to the women’s section, Noosheh catches her breath, and exclaims, “Oh, wow!” She’s overwhelmed by the front wall of the ark, covered in blue and green tiles arranged in elaborate designs. This is the work of Noosheh’s grandfather. Because outsiders aren’t usually allowed in synagogues it’s the first time she has ever seen it.

Her grandfather, Aliakbar Massoodi, was an architect, and famous for designing mosaics. He created this one when the synagogue was built in 1967, the year she was born.

## KOL NIDRE

Once we’re in the women’s section, I’m fascinated by the elegant women, with their smoky eyes, straightened noses (an everyday procedure for Iranians), long black hair swept back – and they are fascinated by me. Their headscarves resemble a sea of ribbons in cobalt blue, hot pink, saffron and green. Many wear heels, which are swathed by their chiffon skirts.

Talking to the women, I learn that Iranian-style lamb stews are usually eaten on festivals. There are a few exceptions: chickpea and minced chicken dumplings, akin to the matzo balls that Ashkenazi Jews are more familiar with, are served with soup every Friday night.

Many in the West believe that life in Iran for women is similar to places like Saudi Arabia. It isn’t that black and white. They may not enjoy Western freedoms, and certainly don’t enjoy wearing the government-mandated headscarf and light jacket, the manteau, which covers everything from neck to knee, and which must be worn in public by all women. But change has brought a degree of independence.

Women drive, own businesses, socialise in public, and are highly educated, outnumbering men with

multiple post-graduate degrees. I met several who privately shared with me their strong views about feminism, careers and even dating: one 20-something woman in the Yousef Abad synagogue tells me the Jewish community is too small; it’s hard to find a husband, and many marriages end in divorce.

Yet, a 25-year old British woman, Ghoncheh Ghavami, was sentenced to a year in jail last November for attempting to watch a men’s volleyball game in Tehran.

Later at a kosher restaurant, I talk with other Iranians about optimism over the new political regime and how President Rohani has distanced himself from his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had a hostile attitude towards Jews: his 2006 Holocaust conference in Tehran was largely made up of Holocaust deniers.

Just before my visit, Rohani’s office wished Jews around the world a Happy

Rosh Hashanah via Twitter. But some I spoke to who voted for Rohani say they’re disappointed promises to relax strict religious laws remain unfulfilled. Others refuse to emigrate: it would be hard to abandon families, good jobs, large homes and

even their language. They say the environment is not perfect, but they have freedom to worship, and are left alone.

Back in the synagogue, a woman and her two teenage daughters listen to our conversations intently before inviting us, with that legendary Iranian hospitality, to break the fast in their home the next night.

## BREAKING THE FAST

Golshan, the woman with the warm smile from the synagogue, waves the minute she sees me. After a 20-minute ride to the edge of north Tehran, we arrive at an elegant apartment block. Inside Golshan’s apartment,

the lines between east and west blur: Golshan in her jeans and over-sized pink plaid shirt, her daughters in T-shirts and leggings. All of them are brandishing iPhones and wanting to swap Instagram IDs. We are barely able to communicate in a common language, but we can ‘like’ each other’s pictures.

The table is set with a simple dairy meal of hard-boiled eggs, plain omelette with sugar, tomatoes, tuna, dates, home-made wine, milk, pastries and typical Iranian flat bread.

There’s another guest at the table, a Muslim man and lifelong family friend. He carefully pours hot water through the tea strainer in each small glass teacup. The fact that he is here at all breaks many of the stereotypes about Muslims and Jews not mixing. Golshan’s girls talk about their school (a regular state school), where religion is not an issue. I admire a small menorah on top of the mantelpiece and Golshan proudly tells me it was a gift from another Muslim friend.

Golshan and her husband, Adel, had an arranged but happy marriage. He owns a clothing import business. But their wider families have all but moved to Los Angeles. Golshan and Adel stay to look after their elderly parents. “My business is better in Iran than any job I could get elsewhere,” he says. Their 13 and 15-year-old daughters will be free to choose their partners, so long as they’re Jewish and, hopefully, Iranian. They may even be Californian if 15-year old Lily pursues her dream of joining her extended family in LA.

We talk a lot, causing my guide to speak in a mixture of Farsi and English simultaneously, and there’s lots of laughter. We take group pictures, and I collapse in stitches when Lily says, “You want to take a selfie?” I smile and say ‘Yes’, and tell her it’s a good opening line for when she meets her future husband – especially if he’s Californian. ■

Amy Guttman was a guest of Travel the Unknown and Oman Airways. All names have been changed.

Carrying the Torah from the ark at Abrishami synagogue



**“It’s not perfect here but we have freedom to worship”**

Looking down into Yousef Abad synagogue from the women’s section

