



# A Modern-Day Purim Saga ...And Mordechai Will Not Bow

*Shimon Rosenberg*

*Iran. The land of intrigue where Haman once plotted to wipe out every single Jew. Now, over 2,500 years later, it seems that little has changed, as Haman's modern-day counterparts are still pursuing a similar goal. That is why it is so inspiring to hear the story of a modern-day Mordechai who performed a public act of Kiddush Hashem with startling similarities to the Mordechai of old.*

*It was 1980. Storm clouds gathered over America as 52 embassy officials were taken hostage by the radical new Islamist regime. Foreign aid organizations arranged for a delegation of spiritual leaders, composed of three Christian clergymen and (lehavdil) a rabbi, to visit the captives whose number included three Jews. Experiencing miracles, Rabbi Avrohom Mordechai Hershberg, zt"l, lit Chanukah lights with the three Jewish hostages and infused them with new hope.*

*The climax, however, occurred several days later when Rabbi Hershberg stood before a crowd of a million militant Muslims alongside Ayatollah Khomeini. In this exclusive Zman interview with Rabbi Yedidia Ezrahan, former Chief Rabbi of Iran, he recounts the dramatic story of how Rabbi Hershberg publicly sanctified the name of Hashem at the risk of his own life.*

It was a late wintry afternoon near the end of 1982. After a long day of looking after the community's spiritual needs, Rabbi Yedidia Ezrahan, Chief Rabbi of Tehran, sat in his office in the Community Council where he set aside time for private petitioners.

Suddenly, the telephone rang. One of the country's leading prosecutors, a man with whom the rabbi shared a warm personal friendship, was calling. The official who answered the call sounded nervous as he said into the phone, "Please come over to my office now!"

As the man charged with looking after the Jewish community in the stormy times that followed the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Rabbi Ezrahan was used to angry telephone conversations and heated conferences. In fact, it was through such occasions that he had developed a working relationship with many high-level figures in the Iranian government, including its judicial department. This time, he did not suspect that anything was particularly out of order.

However, the moment he arrived at the chief prosecutor's office and saw the serious expression on the official's face, the chief rabbi understood that this time was different. The prosecutor set down a letter on his desk. By law he was required to hand it over to the secret police, but he decided to let the rabbi read it first.

Even before Rabbi Ezrahan began perusing the letter the prosecutor told him curtly, "As a good friend I recommend that you flee—right now!"

Rabbi Ezrahan froze in his seat. His relations with the Islamic regime were so strong that he had achieved incredible concessions for the Iranian Jewish community. The very fact that the prosecutor had called the rabbi in to see the letter before he handed it over

to the authorities was an indication of the deep respect Rabbi Ezrahan had earned among the highest officials. Yet,

now these connections would not save him.

After thanking his friend, Rabbi Ezrahan took the only step that made sense. Quickly and quietly he left the land of his birth.

Thirty years have passed since that fateful day. Rabbi Ezrahan served for 25 years as rabbi of an Iranian-Jewish synagogue in Manhattan and unofficial Chief Rabbi of New York's Iranian-Jewish community. A few years ago he resettled in Great Neck, Long Island. We met the 80-year-old rabbi, who does not look his age. He remains vivacious and energetic. After greeting us warmly he engaged us in a long conversation. His concern for the welfare of the members of the Iranian Jewish community was a recurring motif.

During our interview, Rabbi Ezrahan recounted for the first time the events that led to the treacherous letter against him and how he was forced to embark on his overnight escape to freedom.

## Raid on the Jewish Community Center

Angry winds were blowing in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Its leader, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had always had strong leanings toward the West and had allowed Jews under his domain to practice their religion freely. Now, driven from power in a bloody coup, a radical Islamic regime took over and placed Ruhollah Khomeini, "the Ayatollah," as its Supreme Leader.

Already in 1979, during the first year of the revolution, the freedoms that the Jews had enjoyed under the Shah came to an abrupt end. Iranian Jews feared that the revolution could spawn forced conversions, as it had in the past. In 1656, the harsh decrees of Shah Abbas I led to a 30% conversion rate among Iran's Jews. The Jews of Iran were again massacred or forced to convert at several later junctures into the twentieth century.

This turmoil after the fall of the Shah's government led to a mass exodus of Jews from modern Iran. Within a relatively short time, 25% of Iran's Jews left. Their fears

unfortunately proved well founded. Immediately after Khomeini installed the religious government in Iran on December 3, 1979, the religious persecutions began. Within one year the number of Iranian Jewish émigrés rose to 75%.

The new Khomeini regime began confiscating Jewish businesses and factories, and virtually halted the extensive import-export industry. Jews had been heavily involved in manufacture and trade. Now they were crippled economically.

Not long after the Islamic regime was installed, one edict was passed that particularly distressed the age-old Iranian-Jewish community: Iranian citizens and institutions were required to destroy all documents, papers and books that bore the symbols of the now-outlawed royalty. This included not only the symbols of the ousted Shah, but also those of kings dating back to Koresh (Cyrus) in the times of Ezra!

The government gave everyone one month to remove all offending items. Anyone found with any document or volume bearing such symbols afterward would be severely punished, even facing a possible death sentence! Special inspectors were appointed to check all libraries, bookstores and archives to make sure that all illegal books were rooted out.

"The Jewish community faced a real dilemma," Rabbi Ezrahan explained to *Zman*. "After all, we had archives hundreds of years old, historical *seforim* and manuscripts—truly rare finds—going back to the destruction of the first *Bais Hamikdash*. Most of the documents and *seforim* had the symbol of the monarchy, as well as the name of the Shah. In addition, we had priceless items such as a candelabrum that dated to the period of Mordechai and Esther. We also had gold coins that the community minted when the Shah celebrated 2,500 years since the ascension of Koresh to the throne. On one side of the coin was a menorah and on the other side was the royal seal. Would we really have to destroy everything, and was it even possible to do so in such a short period of time?"



Interior of the tomb of Mordechai and Esther.



Jews in a synagogue in Iran.



Historic sifrei Torah in Iran.