Saba Soomekh, Assistant Director of the Jewish Studies Program at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, offers a fascinating ethnographic study about the life of three generations of Iranian Jewish women who lived in Iran and now reside at Los Angeles, California. A 2013 Gold Medalist for the Independent Publisher Book Awards in the Religion category, this study explores the political and social changes that have affected these women’s rituals, religious observance, and self-concept as Iranian Jewish immigrants. Comparing three generations, the author explores their religiosity, their concepts of womanhood, their intergenerational relationships, and their identities. In particular, the book focuses on the concept of sacrality throughout these three generations and how it has changed over time.

According to the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the earliest report of a Jewish population in Iran goes back to the 12th century. According to unofficial statistics released by the Jewish Agency in Teheran, there were between 100,000 to 120,000 Jews living in Iran in 1948. With the change of the regime and Ayatollah Khomeini’s rise to power in 1979, about three quarters of Iran's 80,000 Jews left the country. Most immigrated to Israel and the United States.

Soomekh, being a part of Iranian Jewish community, fled with her family from Teheran to Los Angeles in 1978 at the age of two. Growing up in America, she became aware of the lack of opportunities for women of this community to discuss their life experiences. Between cups of tea and Persian pastries, Soomkeh elicited the stories and experiences of these women. Their memories about life in Iran, their frustration about life in America, and their aspirations were recorded in this narrative.

The first generation of women in this study includes those who lived through the Constitutional Revolution, the Pahlavi dynasty, and the Iranian Revolution and then went on to re-establish their lives in the United States. Soomekh’s goal was to explore Iranian Jewish ritual life as understood by elderly women in order to examine how this group of women express their piety and participate in the Jewish community. The woman’s role in this generation, as in most
traditional societies in the Middle East, was centered in the home and family. “The matriarchal role in Iran enabled women to develop a relationship with God and become ritual experts in their community”. Their ritual activities were a way of enacting their role as spiritual guardians and protectors of their families.

This group of women was married at a very young age, either when they reached puberty or by the age of fifteen or sixteen, mostly though arranged marriages. Through their husbands, these women learned about Torah and Judaism, but it was through their mothers and grandmothers that they learned about rituals. For this age group, life in America changed their domestic rituals once performed in Iran. Synagogue attendance replaced some domestic tasks. This generation performed rituals that have been reinterpreted by their matriarchs and then passed on to them through example and oral tradition. However, under the secularization policies of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), many of the ritual tradition were not passed on to the next generation.

The first generation of Iranian Jewish women living in the States has not become more secular; instead, they are taking advantage of the different movements found within American Jewry, choosing to attend Conservative synagogues. From their childhood to their role now as grandmothers or great-grandmothers, their lives have been dedicated to their family and to God. They learned that sacrality does not come only from the synagogue and the sacred text, but instead, can radiate from the domestic sphere.

The second generation of women in this study were born between 1948 and 1963 in Iran, during the secularization period of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) and then immigrated to Los Angeles. This group, comprising of forty women from the towns of Hamadan and Tehran, became wives and mothers under the Shah’s regime. Unlike the first generation, this group did not prioritize religion. They were raised in a country that strove for modernity and these women wanted to embrace that modernization. They cherished their Jewish heritage and identity, but keep it separate from their public lives. During this period in Iran history, the Iranian Jewish community went from oppression and poverty to affluence and integration. The Pahlavi regime’s attempt to modernize and secularize Iran, allowed Jews to participate more widely in the Iranian society, although intermarriage was still a taboo subject in the community. For the second and third generation of women, the domestic sphere has been replaced with the social sphere.
Religious rituals have been replaced with the social obligations in which women must participate within the Persian Jewish community.

For many women who escaped the 1979 Iranian Revolution and settled in Los Angeles, life in a new country forced them to join the working force. However, even as their access to education and employment increased, they still needed to meet social and domestic expectations. Many of the women embraced a greater participation within the synagogue. This group believes that it is their duty to transmit traditional values and to preserve the Jewish Iranian heritage, while still appropriating certain aspects of the dominant Ashkenazi Jewish culture in Los Angeles. They got to experience a notably different Judaic environment than that which was practiced in Iran.

The women in the third generation are still in the process of choosing aspects of American culture to integrate into their lives, while still maintaining their Iranian Jewish distinctiveness. They delicately balance many identities, that of a woman, a Jew, an Iranian and an American. This generation has only known life in America, yet the Iranian Jewish culture is a major aspect of their lives. The belief that a woman’s behavior is a measure of the status of the household is still ingrained in this group, leading to awareness about their reputation and proper behavior in the eyes of the community. This group is afflicted with culture disorientation, as America and its culture of independence are foreign to the Iranian Jewish community.

*From the Shahs to Los Angeles* is a unique book, in that it is the only existing narrative that delves particularly into the lives of three generations of Iranian women and the changes that the forced immigration to America brought into their lives. Other books, like the wonderful *Esther’s Children: a Portrait of Iranian Jews*, edited by Houman Sarshar, covers in detail the role of women in the family, and the history and culture of the Jews of Iran. In Farideh Goldin’s book, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*, she tells the story of her childhood, her emigration to the United States in 1975 and her relationship with the stories told by mother and grandmother. But Saba Soomekh gives a voice to the women who share with her their personal stories, their emotions and some of their intimate secrets; and this gives us, the readers, a front seat to the transformation and evolution of an important Jewish community in the Diaspora.
From the Shahs to Los Angeles