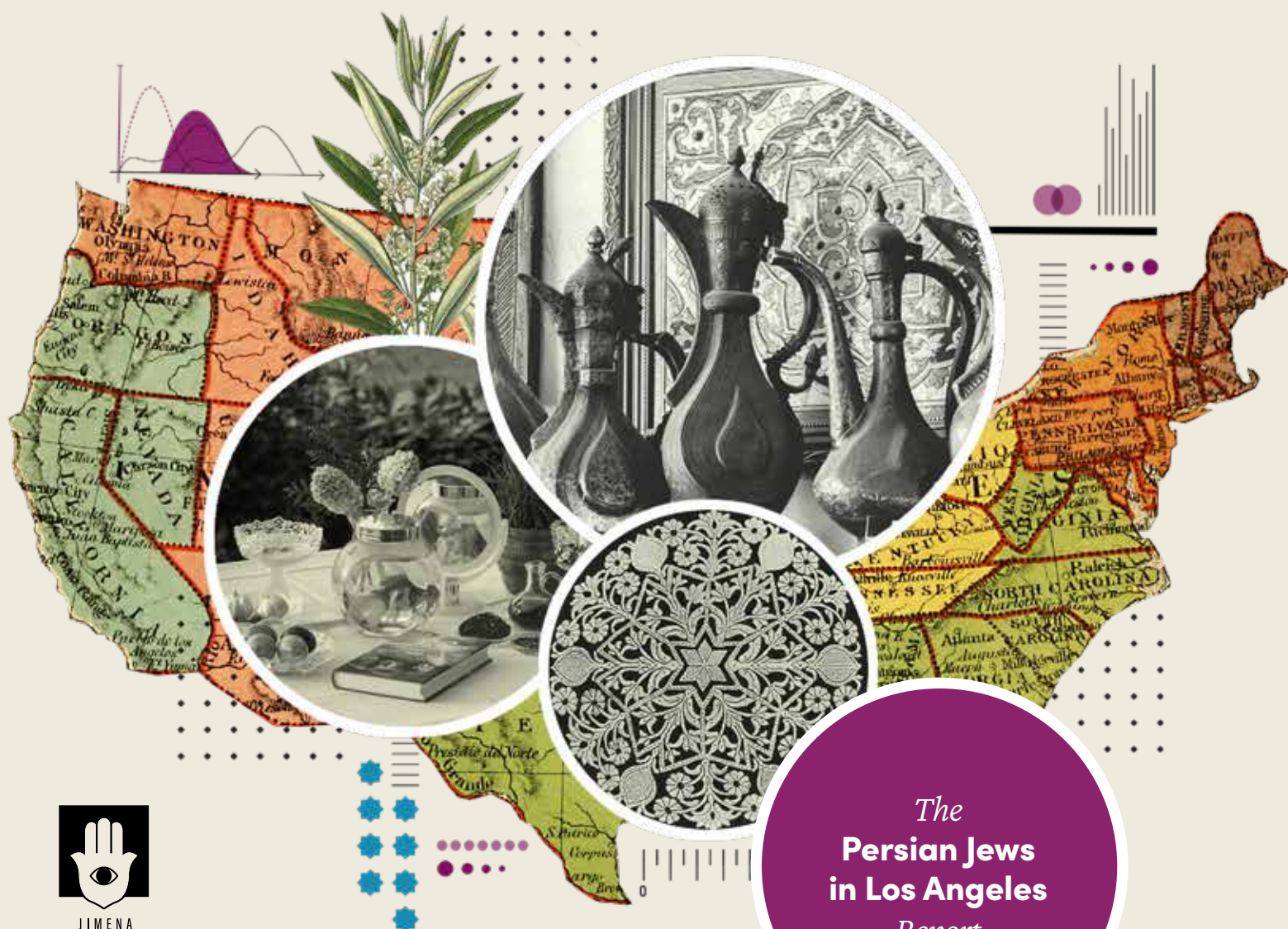


# Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

**IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES**



JIMENA

Commissioned by  
**JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS  
TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND  
NORTH AFRICA**

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**BRONFMAN**

*The*  
**Persian Jews**  
**in Los Angeles**  
*Report*

**AUGUST 2025**

# خوش آمدید



THE  
**Persian Jews in  
Los Angeles**  
REPORT

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# About This Study

**THIS REPORT IS ONE OF SEVERAL** produced from a multi-year research project focused on understanding the identities, experiences, and communal life of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States. The study was conducted by an academic research team based at New York University, under the direction of Dr. Mijal Bitton, and was commissioned by JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. It was made possible with the generous support of a range of philanthropic and institutional partners committed to advancing Sephardic and Mizrahi inclusion in Jewish communal life.

The project was carried out by a strong team of interdisciplinary researchers and benefitted from the guidance of an international academic advisory committee. In addition to academic input, we actively engaged practitioners and community leaders—both as interview participants and as advisors—to ensure the research reflected lived realities and communal perspectives.

The study aims to support a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that reflects the richness, diversity, and complexity of Sephardic life. It is designed as a comprehensive resource: offering new data, field-based insights, historical context, and practical guidance to help scholars, educators, and communal professionals better understand and engage Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the American context.

This work brings together two complementary forms of research:

- **Secondary analysis** of existing literature reviews, historical material, and quantitative data—including national and local Jewish population surveys—organized through our guiding questions and reinterpreted through a Sephardic and Mizrahi lens.

- **Original fieldwork**, including interviews, site visits, and ethnographic observations across four key Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration.

Although the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi have distinct origins and meanings, this study reflects how they are used—and contested—by participants. In line with community usage, we primarily use “Sephardic” as a broad social identity while noting when “Mizrahi” is relevant. Across the study, we prioritized self-identification and recognized the limitations of existing categories—religious, racial, and ethnic—in capturing these communities’ realities.

The study was conducted during a time of shifting communal and political context for Jews in America—including the brutal October 7th attacks by Hamas in Israel, the subsequent rise in antisemitism across the US, and intensifying public debate around race, identity, and inclusion in American Jewish life. These broader dynamics shaped both the narratives we heard and the urgency of this work.

This project is offered as a first step, not a final word. It is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, and we hope it serves as a foundation for future research. For further directions, see the “Recommendations” section of this report.

We invite you to explore the full report or delve into any of its focused sub-sections. Below is the full table of contents.

# List of Reports:



THE  
**Who We Are**  
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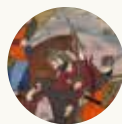
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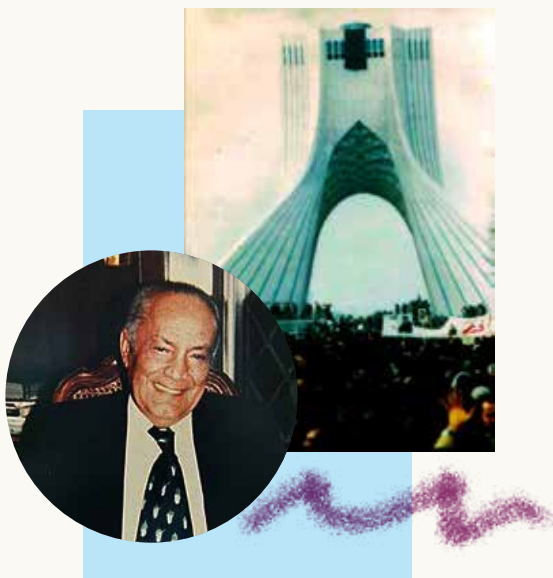
# Persian Jewish Community Portrait (LA)

## SECTION 1.

## Background

### IMMIGRATION

In the mid-1970s, the Jewish population in Iran was about 100,000, with many in the upper-middle class after several decades of upward economic mobility. Iranian Jews had a strong sense of loyalty to the Pahlavi dynasty, which they credited with advancing modernization and ending long-standing discrimination under which Jews were treated as “unclean” dhimmi (second-class citizens). This period marked significant improvements in Jewish life, fostering economic success and a sense of security.



#### A Note on Terminology:

In our interviews, participants primarily identified as Persian, though some also used Iranian. Several explained that Persian helps distinguish Iranian Jews from non-Jewish Iranians. Accordingly, we use Persian throughout most of this report, while still reflecting the variation in language used by community members.

We include Persian Jews as part of this study of Sephardic communities because many expressed comfort and alignment with the term Sephardic to describe their liturgy and religious customs. At the same time, Persian Jews often see themselves as having a distinct and ancient tradition that predates the broader Sephardic diaspora. Younger—and especially more progressive—Persian Jews are increasingly adopting the term Mizrahi.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic marked a turning point for Iranian Jews. Between 1978 and 1981, widespread social and political instability, the regime’s increasing anti-Western and anti-Zionist rhetoric, and the Iran-Iraq war fueled Jewish anxiety. The new regime’s fanaticism intensified fears, particularly following the prominent execution of Habib Elghanian, a well-known businessman, philanthropist, and leader of the Tehran Jewish community. Elghanian was arrested by the Islamic regime, accused of being a “Zionist spy” and of having ties to Israel and the Shah’s government. In May 1979, he was executed by firing squad, sending shockwaves through the Jewish community and serving as a grim warning of the dangers faced under the new regime. Many of our interviewees specifically cited Elghanian’s execution as a decisive factor in their families’ decisions to flee.

This fear was not limited to Elghanian’s case. One interviewee, an older woman, shared that her husband had been imprisoned and their properties confiscated because of their prior connections to the monarchy. Stories like hers contributed to an atmosphere of profound uncertainty and fear, prompting what many describe as an exodus from their homes. The combination of targeted persecution, arrests, and executions

created an untenable situation, driving a mass emigration of Jews from Iran.

For some, departure was orderly and on their own terms, with families quietly leaving Iran as the Shah's rule crumbled. However, for others, the journey was marked by fear and unpredictability. One interviewee recounted the uncertainty of simply going to the airport, unsure whether they would be blacklisted, detained, or stopped before boarding a plane. In the years following the revolution, many Iranian Jews escaped through perilous routes via Pakistan or Turkey, not knowing what awaited them.

By the end of the 1980s, the majority of Iranian Jews had left or fled the country, settling in destinations such as Los Angeles, New York, and Israel. However, a small Jewish community remains in Iran today, estimated at about 8,000-10,000 people. Those who remain are described as overwhelmingly lacking the financial resources or practical means to leave, particularly in smaller cities like Shiraz and Isfahan, where families are poorer and often rooted by local ties and children. Other barriers include challenges in obtaining professional licenses (such as in medicine), a lack of transferable professional skills or language proficiency, and ownership of small businesses that provide a livelihood in Iran but would be unsustainable at US costs.

The Iranian Revolution remains a relatively recent event, and some of our interviewees spoke of enduring family trauma. Shirin, a 74 year-old woman born in Iran who fled with her family reflected on the impact of her experience:

*"We went through a very difficult time. We had to come here and start all over again—it was not easy, especially with little children. We had everything, and then suddenly we had nothing. We were important, and then we were no one. We had to rebuild everything from the ground up."*

Her words capture the profound sense of loss and resilience felt by many Iranian Jewish families who fled their homes and were forced to begin anew.

## PLACES OF SETTLEMENT & COMMUNITY SIZE

More than half of post-Revolution Jewish immigrants moved to Los Angeles County, drawn to a smaller community of Persian Jews that had settled in the area. The new immigrants concentrated in neighborhoods like Beverly Hills, Fairfax, Pico-Robertson, and the San Fernando Valley. The city's growing Persian Jewish population soon became a pull factor in itself with established networks providing stability and a familiar culture.

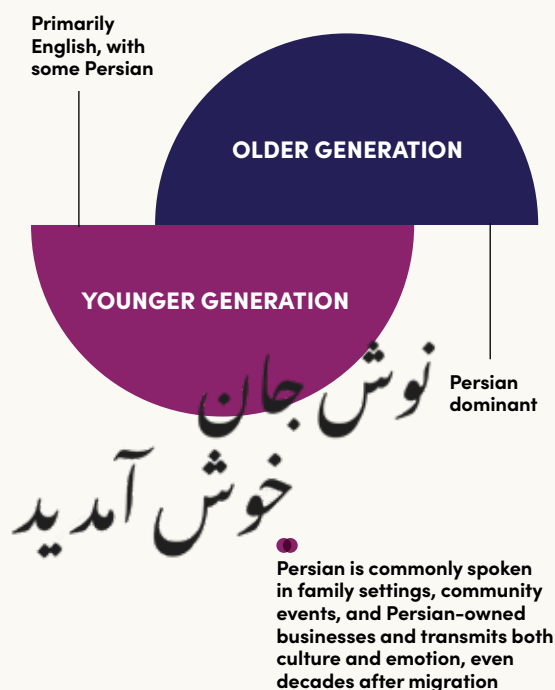


The 2021 Los Angeles Jewish Community Study estimated based on survey research that there are 22,500 Persian Jews in Los Angeles. Based on their own calculations, community leaders in LA estimate that the community size is between 50,000–70,000 people. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

## LANGUAGES

Persian remains a cornerstone of cultural continuity within the Persian Jewish community, particularly among older generations who immigrated from Iran. The language is commonly spoken in family settings, community events, and Persian-owned businesses. While younger members primarily speak English, most have a working knowledge of Persian, enabling them to communicate with grandparents and incorporate Persian slang, preserving both a practical and emotional connection to their roots.

### ENGLISH VS. PERSIAN USAGE ACROSS GENERATIONS:



“

**We had everything, and then suddenly we had nothing... We were important, and then we were no one.**

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Many immigrants initially faced significant economic challenges upon arriving in Los Angeles. Professionals such as doctors and lawyers struggled to continue their careers due to licensing and language barriers, often pivoting to new professions. Over time, however, the Persian Jewish community has largely become middle and upper class, with education and stable, prestigious careers deeply valued. Young people are strongly encouraged to pursue advanced degrees in fields like medicine, law, and business, reflecting the community's emphasis on economic stability, self-sufficiency, and upward mobility. Entrepreneurial ventures and real estate also play a prominent role, highlighting the community's drive for financial independence and reputation.

At the same time, many of our interviewees described the immense social and cultural pressure associated with this upward mobility. As Shirin noted, “Everyone knows each other. They need to have a profession, they have to have good means of living, and a lot of them are judged by how they look and dress—appearances, appearances.” She emphasized the status-driven nature of the community, where brand names and a polished public image hold significant weight. This pressure to excel—whether through professional achievements or social standing—can take a toll, as some individuals struggle to cope with the intense demands of communal judgment and competition.

## RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Persian Jews will often describe themselves as traditional, aligned with how many Middle Eastern Jews

self-identify. Religious observance in the Persian Jewish community spans a broad spectrum. Weekly Shabbat observance remains a key tradition, with family-centered gatherings that bring extended networks together. High holidays such as Yom Kippur and Passover are also widely celebrated, serving as focal points for religious continuity.

The community's traditionalism incorporates two distinct strands. First, many community members identify religiously as "traditional," blending Persian Jewish customs with more flexible religious practices. Second, traditionalism refers to the centrality of family life, including among the many who describe themselves as secular. This emphasis reflects cultural patterns of Jews in Tehran, where the Jewish community was also highly secular.

At the same time, the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles is notable for its religious diversity. Significant numbers have integrated comfortably into Conservative, Reform and Orthodox institutions including a visible Haredi presence.

This unique phenomenon highlights the evolving religious landscape of Persian Jewry in Los Angeles, where Persian Jews span denominational institutional affiliations. However, these affiliations do not necessarily determine whether individuals consider themselves "traditional"; rather, they reflect the community's comfort engaging with diverse religious spaces while maintaining their own traditions.

## FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Children often live with their parents into their twenties or early thirties, fostering strong familial bonds during emerging adulthood. Extended family members, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, frequently reside nearby, creating tight-knit, multi-generational networks. Young adults, especially women, typically remain in the family home until marriage, reflecting cultural values of family support and a gradual path to independence. Even after marriage, many families stay geographically close, preserving daily interactions and deepening connections, while those who move out often prioritize proximity, ensuring family traditions and a sense of community endure across generations. Many Persian Jews prioritize celebrating Shabbat and holidays with their families even as they do not observe the traditional practice of

not traveling on Shabbat or holidays. The ability to drive allows them to maintain these traditions, even in the sprawling landscape of Los Angeles.

## COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

The Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles is anchored by a network of synagogues, advocacy groups, and philanthropic organizations. While Persian Jews have actively integrated into established Jewish institutions across the city, they have also built their own communal infrastructure to preserve and nurture their traditions. This dual approach—both establishing independent institutions and engaging with broader Jewish organizations—reflects a commitment to maintaining Persian Jewish identity while adapting to the wider Los Angeles Jewish landscape.



# Identities

## SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Persian Jews in Los Angeles navigate the labels “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi” in diverse ways. For many, the label “Sephardic” feels familiar and accessible, especially in predominantly Ashkenazi American Jewish spaces, where distinctions between Middle Eastern and Iberian Jewish heritage are less commonly made.

For many Persian Jews, identifying as Sephardic reflects their alignment with Sephardic law and customs and underscores their shared heritage with the broader MENA Sephardic diaspora. For example, the prominent Nessah Synagogue—established in Los Angeles by and

for Iranian Jews—states on its website that it “upholds the traditions and customs of Iranian Jews according to Orthodox, Sephardic Halacha.” However, many Persian Jews prefer to emphasize their distinct Persian background without fully adopting a broader pan-ethnic identity. The Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center, for instance, highlights its “Persian Jewish culture” rather than explicitly referencing Sephardic traditions.

A smaller but growing number of young Jews within the community find that “Mizrahi” aligns more closely with their heritage as Jews from the Middle East. Molly, who used to identify as Sephardic but now identifies as Mizrahi, explains how, for her, “the differentiator” between the two labels lies in her family’s history and the understanding that they did not trace their ancestry back to Spain.

## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Persian Jews in Los Angeles navigate layered identities that deeply connect them to their Iranian roots while also distinctly marking their Jewish identity. For many older immigrants especially, Iran is a meaningful part of their identity, representing a homeland filled with family memories and cultural roots, and many of them speak of it with enduring affection for pre-revolutionary Iran under the Shah. Among younger generations, this connection often feels more symbolic, passed down through stories, language, and cultural practices shared by their parents and grandparents but not tied to their personal experiences. Some of our interviewees noted that while younger Persian Jews often distance themselves from their parents’ culture in adolescence, many later reverse course, developing a renewed appreciation for their heritage as they grow older.



Many Persian Jews in Los Angeles prefer to identify as “Persian” rather than “Iranian,” distancing their cultural pride from Iran’s current political regime. As Darya, a 27-year-old woman explains,

*“Most Persian Jews don’t call themselves Iranian Jews...Iran has like a bad taste in our mouth.”*

Evan elaborates:

*“I identify as Persian because it separates between the Iranian regime and government and kind of feels more to what that country was before the revolution... it’s about the culture, the values, the world that used to exist in Iran.”*

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

In this study, and in consultation with community leaders and scholars, we chose to prioritize the adjective “Persian” rather than “Iranian,” based on the preferences expressed by our interview subjects. While we occasionally use “Iranian” where appropriate—particularly when reflecting public or institutional language—our overall use of “Persian” aligns with how many community members describe themselves in internal and cultural contexts. Notably, leaders of outward-facing organizations, such as federations or advocacy groups, often prefer “Iranian” for external communications, whereas “Persian” is more commonly used within the community to distinguish Jewish Iranians from non-Jewish Iranians.

In the American racial landscape, Persian Jews in Los Angeles face complexities in defining their racial and

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**Most Persian Jews don’t call themselves Iranian Jews... Iran has like a bad taste in our mouth.**

### NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ “Sephardic” is often the default identity label in Ashkenazi-majority spaces.
- ➔ Many Persian Jews use “Sephardic” to reflect halakhic alignment and diaspora connection, especially in religious or communal contexts.
- ➔ At the same time, some also emphasize “Persian” to highlight communal, heritage, and cultural distinctiveness.
- ➔ “Mizrahi” is gaining ground among younger Jews, often framed as a more geographically accurate term.

ethnic identities. American racial labels like white, Asian, or other are limited in capturing the distinct identities and experiences of Persian Jews, leading to a sense of ambiguity and frustration in defining where they fit within the broader US racial and ethnic framework. When given the chance on forms that ask for this kind of information, some Persian Jews said they write in Middle Eastern, which is currently not an option in census questions.

Many Persian Jews feel that identifying as “white” in particular fails to reflect their Middle Eastern heritage and lived experiences as both a religious and cultural minority. Yet those with lighter skin often experience a form of “white-passing” privilege that allows them to blend into predominantly white spaces. David, a 26-year-old man captures this tension:

*"If my only option is white, I will begrudgingly choose that, but I don't identify as white, and I never did... I also acknowledge that I'm white-presenting because I'm lighter skinned. And so, I also am mindful that I benefit from certain privileges that people who are more explicitly of color don't."*

## JEW OF COLOR

For some Persian Jews, especially among younger and more progressive ones, the term JOC holds appeal because it acknowledges the unique challenges and experiences they face within predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish spaces.

*"I feel like, culturally, I am a Jew of color," Sahra, a 37-year-old woman said. "There's a lot of things about American culture, white culture that I had to learn."*

This shift reflects a broader re-evaluation of racial and ethnic identities, especially for those who feel that their darker features, cultural traditions, and Middle Eastern heritage set them apart from what's often perceived as the "standard" Jewish experience in America.

On the other hand, many Persian Jews describe it as a term applied to them by others rather than one they would naturally use to describe themselves. Others share objections to the term, feeling that the term may reduce a complex cultural identity to a single racial category that doesn't fully capture the nuances of their experiences. Additionally, some Persian Jews feel that the term JOC risks dividing Jewish identity along racial lines, which can feel out of step with their

understanding of Jewish unity and shared tradition. For them, Jewish identity is fundamentally about a shared history, spirituality, and commitment to family and community, elements they feel are obscured by a focus on racial categories.

## JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Persian Jews in Los Angeles reflect a wide spectrum of religious observance, blending elements of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and "traditional" practices. Many individuals have engaged with multiple denominations over time, allowing their religious identity to evolve as they adapt and explore. Batya, a 32-year-old woman, for example, shared,

*"I started in Reform, but over time I just felt more connected to traditions I grew up with, so now I'd call myself more traditional."*

For many, strict denominational labels feel limiting. Instead, "traditional" is the preferred term, capturing an inclusive approach that honors family customs and Sephardic rituals. As Sahra explained,

*"If somebody asks me how religious I am, I say, 'I'm traditional,' which means we use the holiday practice to come together as a community and as a family. We're not necessarily observant—we're not Shomer Shabbat or strictly kosher. It's more about being together."*

These preferences extend to institutional affiliations as well. While synagogues like Nessah, a prominent Iranian synagogue in Los Angeles, explicitly highlight their connection to Orthodox practice, others, such as Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel and Eretz Religious and Cultural Center, describe themselves as traditional on their websites. Despite this distinction, all these synagogues reflect elements associated with Orthodox settings, such as a partition and connections to Orthodox institutional networks, including the rabbinical training of their clergy. This blend of tradition and flexibility underscores Persian Jews' emphasis on maintaining their unique heritage while adapting to their diverse religious expressions.



# Community

## MAJOR COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

### Synagogues

**Nessah Synagogue:** Located in Beverly Hills, Nessah Synagogue is one of the most prominent Persian Jewish congregations in the United States. It was established in the early 1980s by Persian Jewish immigrants fleeing Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Nessah serves as a central religious and cultural institution for Persian Jews in Los Angeles, preserving their traditions and heritage. The synagogue is led by Chief Rabbi R' David Shofet, son of Hakham Yedidia Shofet, who served as the Chief Rabbi of Iran for many decades.

**Sinai Temple:** Established in 1906, Sinai Temple in Westwood is a flagship Conservative synagogue and a cornerstone of Jewish life in Los Angeles. Over the years, it has grown to become one of the largest and most influential synagogues in the city. Its diverse

congregation includes a significant number of Persian Jews, who have become an integral part of its community, reflecting the adaptability and inclusivity of both the synagogue and the Persian Jewish population. Recently, Sinai Temple even elected two Persian Jews as its presidents—an acknowledgment of the community's deep-rooted presence and leadership within the synagogue.

**Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel:** Founded by Sephardic Jews, particularly Turkish Jews, in the 1920s, Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel has evolved to reflect the changing demographics of Los Angeles' Sephardic community. Today, it boasts a large Persian Jewish population that has helped revitalize the synagogue, with both its current and past presidents being Persian Jews.



**Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center:** Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center is a vibrant focal point for the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles. It offers a range of religious and cultural programs, including Torah classes, lectures, concerts, and social events that celebrate Persian Jewish heritage. Founded to serve the growing Persian Jewish population, it fosters community ties and preserves its unique identity.

**Persian Presence in Other Synagogues:** While Persian Jews have established their own synagogues, they have also integrated into existing Jewish institutions across the city. Several historically non-Persian synagogues now have significant Persian congregations, reflecting the community's dual approach to institutional engagement. The Baghdadi-founded Kahal Joseph in Westwood has become largely Persian, while the Syrian congregation Magen David of Beverly Hills is now majority Persian as well. Valley Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue, offers a High Holiday service specifically geared toward

#### NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- While there are no Persian-led Jewish day schools, many families enroll in Ashkenazi-majority day schools or local public schools.
- Many families pair secular schools with after-school Jewish studies.
- In higher education, one common pathway is for Persian Jewish students to begin at Santa Monica College and later transfer to UCLA or USC.

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**One interviewee described growing antisemitism in his children's public school following the October 7th attacks.**

Persian Jews, and Stephen S. Wise Temple, a Reform synagogue, has a large Persian membership. Persian synagogues have also emerged in Downtown Los Angeles, catering to those who work in the area, and various Chabad houses throughout the city now serve overwhelmingly Persian congregations. Even the Iranian-American Jewish Federation building houses an egalitarian yet traditionally Persian synagogue.

#### **Smaller Synagogues in Pico-Robertson and Encino:**

Persian Jews in Los Angeles have also established numerous smaller synagogues in the Pico-Robertson and Encino areas, reflecting internal religious and social divisions within the community. These smaller synagogues cater to specific religious customs and communal preferences, providing spaces for tailored spiritual engagement while preserving Persian Jewish traditions.

#### **Educational institutions**

Los Angeles does not have day schools specifically established by or geared toward Persian Jewish children. However, there are some Persian Jewish nursery schools and Hebrew schools. Families typically enroll their children in established Ashkenazi-majority Jewish community day schools or public schools. Notable public schools like Beverly Hills High School remain particularly popular due to their central location within Persian Jewish neighborhoods and strong academic reputation.

While these options are widely used, some families express dissatisfaction with the current choices. One interviewee, for example, described growing antisemitism in his children's public school following the October 7th attacks. The same interviewee reported

discomfort with certain liberal Jewish day schools, where progressive views on gender and sexuality were presented as inherently Jewish, conflicting with their traditional and socially conservative understanding of Judaism. These challenges underscore the difficulty some Persian Jewish families face in finding educational environments that align with both their cultural values and religious identity.

For higher education, it is common for young Persian Jews to begin their studies at Santa Monica College, a local community college, and then transfer to UCLA or USC. At the same time, the community takes great pride in its many graduates and postgraduates who have attended Ivy League universities and excelled across diverse fields.

## Advocacy and community organizations

**The Iranian American Jewish Federation (IAJF):** The IAJF emerged in the early 1980s as the community's umbrella organization to assist Iranian Jews fleeing the Iranian Revolution, providing vital support such as financial assistance, medical care, legal aid, and immigration services. Today 18 main Iranian American Jewish community organizations maintain their membership at, and have seat on the board of, the IAJF.

While the IAJF initially sought to collaborate with the broader Federation system, some of its leaders expressed growing reservations over the years and ultimately decided against a deeper partnership. "We are more on the conservative side," one leader explained. When probed, he identified DEI initiatives as a key point of divergence, stating that the Persian Jewish community that IAJF represents did not see itself reflected in these frameworks.

Another leader emphasized the distinct perspectives of Persian Jews on antisemitism—including their focus on threats from Muslim communities—as a factor that sets them apart.

However, this distancing does not mean a complete lack of involvement. The IAJF continues to collaborate with the Jewish Federation Council of Los Angeles on broader community-wide initiatives. Today, the IAJF primarily functions as a central hub where individuals can seek guidance and referrals to available resources.

**30 Years After:** Founded in 2007 by a group of Iranian American Jewish young professionals, 30 Years After aims to encourage Iranian American Jews to take on leadership roles in American political, civic, and Jewish life, bridging generational gaps and fostering greater involvement in broader communal spaces.

Younger Persian Jews, particularly progressives, have engaged in various social justice causes. Organizations like **JIMENA** (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa)—which commissioned this study—are deeply active in advocacy, working to amplify the Iranian Jewish experience. This includes advancing the place of MENA Jews in ethnic studies curricula and ensuring Iranian Jewish voices are present in conversations about Israel.

Persian Jewish involvement in advocacy also extends to global and local causes. For example, the **Woman, Life, Freedom** movement highlights the community's enduring commitment to women's rights and freedom in Iran. Similarly, JQ International, a leading LGBTQ+ Jewish organization in Los Angeles, supports Persian LGBTQ+ Jews through its JQ Persian Pride programming, creating inclusive spaces for community members.

## Philanthropy

Persian Jews in Los Angeles support a wide range of causes, from local nonprofits to major institutions in the US and Israel. Unlike the other communities profiled,



## GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

Persian Jews showed support for Iran's *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement

prominent Persian Jewish families have made well-publicized contributions to non-Jewish institutions, particularly in higher education. The Nazarian family has donated extensively to local universities, including Cal State Northridge and USC, and played a key role in establishing the Israel Studies Department at UCLA. They also funded the exhibition, “Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews” at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. Similarly, the Merage family has supported Jewish organizations in Orange County and contributed millions to UC Irvine, where the business school now bears their name.

Support for Israel remains a central pillar of Persian Jewish identity. Organizations such as the Magbit Foundation, which funds scholarships for Israeli students, reflect this commitment. Persian Jews have taken leadership roles and support philanthropically organizations that such as AIPAC and Friends of IDF. As Khazra, a 45-year-old man explained, “Israel philanthropy...is near and dear to our hearts.”

## Other

**Iranian Jewish Calendar:** The widely circulated Iranian Jewish Calendar is a key resource for Persian Jews in Los Angeles. It advertises Persian-speaking and Jewish



## CULTURAL ANCHORS BEYOND SYNAGOGUES

Recognized universally among interviewees, **Elat Market** in Pico-Robertson, is a Persian kosher food hub where traditional dishes, fresh herbs, Israeli products can be found

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**Support for Israel remains a central pillar of Persian Jewish identity.**

services—both religious and communal—while outlining Jewish holidays, Persian cultural observances, and other relevant information. The calendar is often translated into Persian and sometimes Hebrew, ensuring accessibility for older generations and preserving linguistic ties to Persian heritage.

**Elat Market:** Many of our interviewees found it difficult to identify Persian-run institutions in Los Angeles beyond synagogues but consistently recognized Elat Market as a key community fixture. Located in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood, Elat Market serves as a cornerstone of the Persian Jewish community, offering kosher goods with an emphasis on Persian and Middle Eastern specialties. Known for its fresh herbs, spices, nuts, traditional Persian dishes, and Israeli products, the market is more than a grocery store—it is a cultural hub. Many other Iranian Jewish kosher markets, bakeries, restaurants and catering outfits have also sprung over the years.

## MORAL FRAMEWORKS

### Family

Family is the nucleus of Persian Jewish life, shaping social expectations around marriage, career, and social responsibility. Within this framework, marrying within the community is encouraged, as it reinforces cultural continuity and prevents perceived dilution of cultural identity. Eli, a 28-year-old man recalls meeting his fiancée on a Birthright trip, a match supported by their shared Persian background, which “just made everything easier” for their families. This sentiment is widespread, with many like Darya feeling that shared cultural experiences—food, language, holidays—create a natural bond that helps strengthen marriages and family ties. Avar, a 33-year-old man shared a similar

sentiment about always knowing that he would return to LA:

*"It was always [my plan] to come back to LA. Growing up here, it's where family is. Family growing up in my world is such a central core aspect of life. It's every single week Shabbat, mom's side, dad's side, mom's side, dad's side, flipping back and forth. That's just such a strong thing in my life. Even when I was living in New York, I had a girlfriend that lived there that was the impetus of why I went to New York. But even when I went, it was always like, okay, when are you going home to LA? It was just feeling it out. At some point, it ended up being the right time."*

Family serves as the primary anchor of communal life for Persian Jews in Los Angeles, not only as a cultural value but as a defining social framework that sustains Persian Jewish tradition. With a long-standing tradition of secularism dating back to their time in Iran, many Persian Jews do not engage deeply with formal religious institutions. At the same time, there are relatively few Persian-run Jewish community organizations, particularly ones that resonate with younger, less Orthodox-leaning individuals. As a result, family gatherings take on a communal role, filling the gaps left by institutional absence. Friday night dinners with extended family function as informal gathering spaces, fostering a sense of belonging. Hani, a 28-year-old woman explained that large Persian weddings, filled with dancing and socializing late into the night, similarly serve as crucial communal events.

*"There are weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs and everything is a party and a moment for everyone to*

*get together and that's how the community continues and evolves."*

Shirin described the comfort she feels knowing that 500 people will come to a funeral, underscoring the way family networks create a deeply embedded support system.

## Education

Education is a core community value, seen as both a source of familial pride and a strategy for communal survival. Many Persian Jews describe "algorithmic" educational paths where students start at Santa Monica College before transferring to prestigious universities like UCLA or USC. Part of these expectations include expectations to live at home, especially for young women. As Claire, a 27-year-old woman said:

*"We weren't socialized to have this sense of independence—like, 'i'm just gonna go out in the world, be my own person, and take care of myself.'"*

While more young Persian Jews are beginning to live independently and some choose educational paths outside Los Angeles, these are still exceptions rather than the norm.

## Social status

Social status and financial stability are central to the Persian Jewish community, with members expected to uphold a certain level of financial security and professionalism. Commonly pursued careers in medicine, law, and business reflect communal values around stability, reputation, and success. At the same time,

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## THE PERSIAN JEWISH SOCIAL FABRIC



### Family is central:

Weekly Shabbat dinners and life events like weddings and funerals serve as core communal spaces



### Education is strategic:

Many follow a set path—starting at Santa Monica College, then transferring to UCLA or USC—often while living at home



### Social status matters:

Careers in medicine, law, and business reflect expectations around professionalism, wealth, and reputation



### Zionism is foundational:

Deep communal support for Israel spans generations, alongside growing civic engagement in LA politics

## ZIONISM AS COMMON GROUND



Zionism functions as a unifying thread among Persian Jews, bridging differences in religious observance and political views

entrepreneurship plays a significant role in shaping the community's economic achievements. The exceptionally high rate of self-employment among Iranian Jews has contributed to their economic success and enabled them to build and sustain an "ethnic economy" that supports cultural preservation and integration in Los Angeles.

Social status and financial achievement confer both family pride and community respect, yet many feel the weight of these standards. One participant described it as a "socially political" environment, where "keeping up appearances" is crucial to maintaining standing within the community.

### Zionism and politics

For the Persian Jewish community, Zionism is central to identity and inseparable from Judaism. As Charlotte, a 23-year-old woman puts it,

*"[I work with an Israel advocacy organization], which is very much rooted in Persian Jewish values because our community is so Zionist."*

Although Zionism is widely shared across generations, other values are less uniform.

Some younger members, though just as fervent in their Zionism, embrace more progressive social positions, particularly on LGBTQ+ rights, reflecting the liberal influences of growing up in America, and in LA.

Historically, many Persian Jews avoided public political involvement due to the persecution they experienced in Iran, with families urging caution and advising that it's safest to "stay quiet." In recent decades, however, there has been a strong spirit of political engagement and activism in LA's Persian Jewish community, with many people visibly supportive of Israel and vocal in their Jewish identity.

"Most people are a lot more proud to be Jewish and want to do as much as they can to practice, celebrate, be active politically, [and] go to rallies," observed Eli, capturing the renewed sense of duty to affirm Jewish

identity and solidarity in these times.

In terms of local office, Persian Jews have made notable strides. Jimmy Delshad, highlighted as the first Iranian American to hold public office as mayor of Beverly Hills (2007), became a symbol of this growing civic and political integration. His election received significant national and international attention, reflecting the rising prominence of Iranian Jews in LA's political and civic landscape. The community also takes pride in Sharona Nazarian, the incoming mayor of Beverly Hills, who will be the first known Iranian Jewish woman to hold this position.

### Boundaries of belonging

The boundaries of belonging within the Los Angeles Persian Jewish community are shaped by a combination of traditional values and evolving norms. Zionism remains a defining pillar of the community's identity, with strong pro-Israel sentiment serving as the norm. Interviewees struggled to identify communal boundaries beyond being openly critical of Israel or rejecting Zionism, which appears to cross a clear line of acceptability. Our interviewees generally described how over time there has been greater openness to LGBTQ+ identity, though challenges persist in more Orthodox and

## PERSIAN JEWISH VOICES IN PUBLIC OFFICE

Once cautious about visibility, a new generation of Persian Jews steps confidently into public leadership



**Jimmy Delshad**

First Iranian-American (Persian Jewish) mayor of Beverly Hills, elected in 2007 and again in 2010. He paved the way for visible civic participation.

**Sharona Nazarian**

Mayor of Beverly Hills—sworn in in April 2025. She is the first Iranian Jewish woman to serve as mayor in U.S. history and represents a new generation of public leadership.

traditional spaces. Similarly, while mental health issues were historically stigmatized, the organization, Iranian Friends of Etta, have helped foster greater awareness and support within the community.

Economic status plays a subtler role: while financial hardship does not result in exclusion, individuals experiencing economic struggles can feel othered in a community where upward mobility is encouraged. Family is central to the community's culture, and those who are less oriented toward family life—such as individuals who remain unmarried later in life or are divorced—may struggle to feel fully included. Inter-marriage with non-Jews is another area of concern. Our interviewees gave mixed reports, some said it is “definitely not common” and others described it as a former taboo that is now being challenged.

## COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

### Mental health and well-being

Mental health struggles, though less stigmatized now than in the past, run against cultural norms that encourage resilience and discourage vulnerability. Many interviewees express a reluctance to discuss mental health openly, feeling that it could be seen as a weakness or failure to uphold familial perceptions.

### Economic and social pressures

As living costs rise, younger members struggle to achieve the same economic stability as their parents, a gap exacerbated by community expectations to maintain high standards of living. Social pressures around marriage, education, and career choices can also feel restrictive, particularly for younger generations who may desire more independence. For women, these pressures are intensified by traditional gender roles that prioritize family responsibilities, making it challenging to balance professional ambitions with cultural norms.

### Assimilation

Communal leaders described the community's intentional efforts to preserve its identity and maintain its cultural and religious traditions, particularly in the face of challenges posed by life in the United States. Community leaders highlighted tensions between the collective family-oriented values of the Persian Jewish

community and the individualism of American society. As Sol, a 55-year-old man said:

*“Family starts with marriage, and marriage is not an easy institution. It takes sacrifice. You have to want it. You have to want to keep it. American society is very self-centered... very individualistic, and that's in conflict with family.”*

These cultural shifts, along with intergenerational tensions, worried traditional leaders, who feared they might lose elements of their heritage. Some community leaders believe the community is assimilating at a very rapid pace and that there aren't enough institutional footholds supporting ethno-religious maintenance for the future.

## Continuity and change

The Persian Jewish community's resilience over the decades reflects a commitment to continuity, yet it is also an evolving entity, influenced by generational shifts and social adaptation. Weekly Shabbat dinners, which serve as a cornerstone of Persian Jewish life, exemplify this continuity, providing a space for families to connect, reinforce their Jewish identity, and share updates within the community. Institutional continuity is supported by the community's philanthropic and advocacy organizations, which engage younger members and keep them connected to Jewish and Persian values.

However, evolving gender roles, educational opportunities, and professional aspirations are slowly reshaping the community. Many young Persian Jewish women are pursuing advanced degrees and ambitious careers, challenging older gender norms that emphasize early marriage and homemaking. This shift is indicative of broader societal changes, yet it raises questions within the community about how to balance independence with family commitments.

Generational differences are particularly evident in how individuals navigate their cultural identity. While older generations tend to emphasize ties to Iran and a sense of nostalgia for their homeland, younger members are more likely to adopt a hyphenated identity, proudly identifying as Persian Jews but also as Americans.

# Interactions

## ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

For Persian Jews in Los Angeles, engaging with Ashkenazi Jewish institutions is an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Ashkenazi-dominated spaces, such as schools, synagogues, and Jewish community centers, often shape Jewish life in the United States, and Persian Jews have learned to navigate these institutions while maintaining their own traditions.

Despite these differences, Persian Jews are active participants in Ashkenazi institutions, though they often do so selectively. Many attend services at large synagogues like Sinai Temple but others rely on Persian synagogues like Nessah Synagogue, which offers a more culturally aligned experience. And while some Persian Jews have adopted Orthodox or Haredi practices, this trend is far less pronounced than in other Jewish communities in this report, with no significant community-wide trend toward religious conservatism.

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**It’s difficult for [Ashkenazim] to fathom this type of tightness of family or community.**

The relationship between Persian and Ashkenazi Jews is further complicated by social assumptions and stereotypes that Persian Jews often encounter in Ashkenazi spaces. Some Persian Jews, like Charlotte, report feeling that Ashkenazi Jews view them through a lens of stereotypes, often associated with materialism and conservatism. One interviewee described how Ashkenazi Jews struggle to comprehend certain family dynamics within Persian life—such as the expectation to invite all 60 members of an extended family for Rosh Hashanah or Passover. As Shirin explained, “It’s difficult for [Ashkenazim] to fathom this type of tightness of family or community.” Some interviewees noted that Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews seem to have an easier time appreciating and understanding the family-oriented traditions and general traditionalism that are central to Persian Jewish life.

## OTHER SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

While many Persian Jews recognize shared historical and culinary traditions with other Sephardic Jews, they tend to see themselves as culturally unique. This distinctiveness stems from the historical continuity of their community in Iran and the significant size of the Persian Jewish population in Los Angeles, which provides self-sufficiency in social matters. This allows Persian Jews to maintain their customs without fully assimilating into a broader Sephardic cultural groups.

However, Persian Jews interact and collaborate with other Sephardic Jews in specific spaces, such as synagogues and advocacy organizations, often finding com-

mon ground on identity and cultural representation. For example, many Persian Jews are heavily active in Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, an institution originally focused on Jews of Spanish descent but now home to a significant Iranian Jewish presence. These interactions have fostered shared activity, communal overlap, and even intermarriage between Iranian and Iraqi Jews in Los Angeles.

## Non-Jews from Iran

Persian Jews in Los Angeles share cultural roots, language, and certain traditions with non-Jewish Iranians, particularly around secular holidays like Nowruz (the Persian New Year). Los Angeles itself acts as a spatial strengthener of Persian culture, given the widespread presence of Iranian cultural landmarks and practices, both within and beyond the Jewish community. This visibility reinforces Persian Jewish identity while providing opportunities to preserve shared traditions. The City of Los Angeles officially designated “*Persian Square*” in Westwood in 2010, and Google Maps recognized “*Tehrangeles*” in 2012, underscoring the cultural prominence and social integration of Iranians in LA. Walking through neighborhoods like Westwood, with Persian signs, bookstores, music shops, restaurants, and cafés, reflects a vibrant cultural ecosystem that both preserves and amplifies Persian heritage.

This shared culture serves as both a bridge and a boundary. On one hand, the common Persian language and familiar customs foster a sense of kinship and connection between different Iranians—Jews, Muslims and other religious groups such as Baha’i. On the other hand, lingering memories of antisemitic policies and discrimination under the Iranian regime create caution in these interactions. Many Persian Jews engage in cultural exchanges while maintaining religious boundaries, such as observing Shabbat and other Jewish traditions that distinguish their identity.

Over the past four decades, Persian Jews have played a pivotal role in preserving and promoting Iranian culture in Los Angeles. They have actively supported Iranian music, dance, and traditions through private celebrations like weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other events, hiring non-Jewish Iranian musicians to perform and keep these traditions alive. Persian Jewish families might also send their children to music schools to learn

traditional Persian instruments and melodies.

Persian Jews have also contributed significantly to Persian media and publications that shape the larger Iranian diaspora’s cultural discourse. They established Persian newspapers, radio shows, and TV programs, and institutions like *Sherkat-e-Ketab* in Westwood Blvd became global hubs for Persian literature before its closure in 2017.

For younger Persian Jews, there is often a stronger willingness to bridge gaps, particularly around shared heritage and political solidarity. Many have actively supported movements like *Women, Life, Freedom*, which advocates for women’s rights in Iran. As 41-year-old man Rafael reflects, “*It’s part of our cultural and political identity to support these movements.*”

### NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ Unlike other groups in this report, Persian Jews have not experienced a large-scale shift toward Orthodox or Haredi practice
- ➔ LA sites such as “Tehrangeles” and “Persian Square” reflect how embedded Iranian culture is in LA’s urban landscape
- ➔ Persian Jews helped build Iranian cultural infrastructure in LA

# Distinctions

## What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

### Family-Centered Life With Integration Into Ashkenazi

**Institutions:** Persian Jews maintain strong family bonds while also integrating widely into Ashkenazi-led institutions, across multiple denominations.

### Some (Though Limited) Interaction With Non-Jewish

**Iranians:** While Persian Jews and non-Jewish Iranians share a cultural heritage, their communities remain largely separate. Interaction is often limited to celebrating secular Iranian holidays, with younger generations having even less social overlap than older generations.

### Comfort With Secularism and Multiple Denominations:

The Persian Jewish community has not experienced *en masse* the same broad shift toward religious conservatism or Haredi Orthodoxy seen in other groups in this study. Many continue to identify as secular.

## Customs

1. **Playful Rituals During Passover:** During the *Dayenu* portion of the Passover *Haggadah*, Persian Jews lightly hit one another with scallions—symbolizing the whips of slavery in Egypt in a spirited and communal reenactment.

2. **Loudly Joyful Wedding Celebrations:** Unlike the solemn processions seen elsewhere, Persian brides and grooms walk down the aisle amidst lively music, cheers, and clapping.

### POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

#### Aroos:

Bride or groom (depending on the context)

#### Yehoi:

An exclamation for surprise or “all of a sudden.”

#### Taarof:

A Persian cultural practice of politeness and hospitality—common among Persian Jews and others—often involving the host offering food and the guest declining, sometimes multiple times, as part of social etiquette.



### FOODS OF THE PERSIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY



#### Gondi:

A Persian Jewish meatball made of ground chicken, chickpea flour, and spices, traditionally served in soup

#### Choresh:

A general term for Persian stews, often served with rice

#### Rice with Tahdig:

Persian-style rice cooked with a crispy bottom layer (tahdig), which can be made with potatoes, or plain rice