

Illuminated Judeo-Persian Manuscripts

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Over the years the term “Judeo-Persian” (hereafter JP) assumed a wide range of usages and meanings in reference to various literary and cultural aspects of Jewish life across Iran. Written in Hebrew characters, JP manuscripts and texts are essentially works composed in a Persian dialect that closely resembles ‘classical’ or ‘literary’ Persian combined with Hebrew and Aramaic words. This body of literature contains a wide range of themes - both religious and secular - in prose and verse, with varying styles and levels of sophistication. The practice of writing the Persian language in Hebrew letters has been in use by Jews in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia as early as the 8th century. JP manuscripts have been copied by scribes up to the end of the 19th century. Their subject matter is broad, including Hebrew grammar and lexicography; translations of the Bible; rabbinical works; Midrashim and religious narratives; texts about philosophy, science, medicine and magic; and

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historical chronicles. Additionally, JP transcriptions of Persian classical poetry and original JP epics based on biblical and Jewish themes are the most important and significant genre in JP literature.¹

In this ample and varied literary corpus only thirteen illustrated manuscripts have been discovered to date. These manuscripts and their cycles of illustrations can be divided into two main categories: Hebrew transliterations of Persian poetry such as *Jāmī's Yusof va Zoleykā* and Neẓāmi's *Kosrow va Shirin* and original works by Jewish Persian poets. These rare and unique manuscripts which scattered throughout various collections worldwide have received limited notice in the research of Jewish art and are hardly mentioned in studies of Persian painting.² Without colophons stating the date or place of production and without comparative Jewish material it is very difficult to evaluate these cycles of illustrations. Yet, stylistically, the miniatures in these JP manuscripts appear to be provincial products of the late *Ṣafavid* and *Qājār* eras. The beginnings of this art among Persian Jews however, remain vague. Many of the scenes depicted in these manuscripts are of battle, hunting and court scenes which were undoubtedly copied from the vast Persian painting repertoire. Other scenes, on the other hand, which deal with Jewish iconography adapted Persian models to suit the Jewish content. While the scribes of these texts were undoubtedly Jewish there is no evidence regarding the identity of the painters who executed these miniature cycles.

From the beginning of the 14th century, JP poets composed original versified epics paraphrasing and elaborating on the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible. The earliest known and the most influential poet among Iranian Jews is *Mowlānā Shāhīn-i Shīrāzī*.

¹For more about JP language and literature see: Tamar E. Gindin, "Judeo-Persian language," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* (Brill Online, 2014). Retrieved from http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/judeo-persian-language-COM_0012360; Tamar E. Gindin & Vera B. Moreen, "Judeo-Persian Literature," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* (Brill Online, 2014). Retrieved from http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/judeo-persian-literature-SIM_000412; David Yerousalmi, "Judeo-Persian literature," in *Eshter's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed.,

Houman Sarshar (Philadelphia, 2002), 77-93; Amnon Netzer, "Literature of the Jews of Iran: a short survey," *Padyavand*, 1 (1996), 5-17.

²Orit Carmeli, "The material culture and ritual objects of the Jews of Iran," in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed., Houman Sarshar (London, 2014), 144-172; Alice Taylor, *Book Arts of Isfahan: Diversity and Identity in 17th Century Persia* (Malibu, 1995); Vera B. Moreen, *Miniature Paintings to Judeo Persian Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1985); Joseph Gutmann, "Judeo Persian miniature," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, 8 (1968), 54-76.

In 1327 he completed his versified commentary on four of the books of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) titled *Musa-nāma* [‘The Book of Moses’] as it recounts the stories of Moses’s life. In 1333 Shāhīn completed his most complex epic *Ardashīr-nāma* [‘The Book of Ardashir’] and ‘*Ezra-nāma* [‘The Book of Ezra’] consisting of a versification of the book of Esther and a very free treatment of the prophetic books of Ezra and Nehemiah. *Bereshit-nāma* [‘The Book of Genesis’] was completed in 1359 and tell the stories and accounts of the book of Genesis.³

Thus far, only 2 illustrated *Ardashīr-nāma* (hereafter AN) manuscripts have been discovered in research.⁴ The first manuscript is part of the JP manuscript collection of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York⁵ (hereafter JTS 40919 [8270]). The manuscript is complete copy of Shāhīn’s text containing one hundred and sixty four folios and lavishly painted thirty-three miniatures. The second manuscript is kept at Die Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin (hereafter SPK Or.Qu.1680) and is also a complete copy of the text, comprising two hundreds and three folios and twenty-four miniatures. Both manuscripts date to the second half of the 17th century based on stylistic evaluation of the paintings.

Many of the scenes in these two cycles of illustrations depict hunts, banquets and court life however particularly interesting are those miniatures dealing with the story of Esther. Illustrations of Queen Esther are familiar in medieval Jewish art and Christian art and have become popular in the cycles of the Esther scrolls.⁶ Whereas

²Orit Carmeli, “The material culture and ritual objects of the Jews of Iran,” in *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, ed., Houman Sarshar (London, 2014), 144-172; Alice Taylor, *Book Arts of Isfahan: Diversity and Identity in 17th Century Persia* (Malibu, 1995); Vera B. Moreen, *Miniature Paintings to Judeo Persian Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1985); Joseph Gutmann, “Judeo Persian miniature,” *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, 8 (1968), 54-76.

³For more about the poet and his literary works see: Vera B. Moreen, “Shāhīn-i Shīrāzī, Mowlānā,” *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, (Brill Online, 2014). Retrieved from http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/shahin-i-shirazi-mowlana-SIM_0019880 ; Vera B. Moreen, *In Queen Esther’s Garden – An Anthology of Judeo*

Persian Literature (New Haven & London, 2000).
⁴Hans Striedl, “Die Miniaturen in Einer Handschrift des Judisch-Persischen Ardasir-Buches von Sahin”, *Forschungsberichte*, 10 (1966), 119-133; Ariella Amar, “Ardashir nama: Megilah be-tahposet”, in *Megilah ke-Ktavah–Kamesh h-megilot: hagut, umnot, Itsuv*, ed., Yizhak S. Rekanati (Jerusalem, 2007), 70-89.

⁵For more about this collection see Vera B. Moreen, *Catalogue of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts in The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary* (Leiden, 2015).

⁶Rachel Wischnitzer, “The Esther Story in Art,” in *The Purim Anthology*, ed., Philip Goodman (Philadelphia, 1973), 222–249; Mendel Metzger, “A Study of Some Unknown Hand-Painted Megilloth of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1963), 84–126.

the biblical book of Esther ends with the triumph of the Jews over the wicked Haman, Shāhīn's epos continues the story of Esther by relating her union with king Ardashīr and the birth of their son Cyrus. Shāhīn enhances her importance in both Persian and Jewish history by making her the mother of Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who set the Jews free in Babylonia and allowed them to return to their homeland. A unique and rare miniature which appears only in JTS 40919 [8270] depicts unparalleled scene - *Esther Giving Birth to Cyrus*.⁷

In the miniature Esther is realistically portrayed squatting in a birth position. She is held from behind by a winged figure while two other midwives support her from each side and assisting her in the delivery. A fourth midwife is kneeling down to the right of her and ready to hold the head of the baby who seems to emerge from the womb at the very moment. A fifth midwife is waiting on the left side of Esther with water bowl to wash the newborn child. All attendants in the scene are gazing at and gesturing toward Esther who is the largest figure situated at the center of the composition. Examining this most striking and dramatic scene one is justified asking what was the visual culture the AN artists relied on in designing this miniature?

Visual expressions of childbirth do exist in the vast Persian painting repertoire. *The Birth of Rutsam*⁸ depicted in many *Shāh-nāma* manuscripts or the *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad* appears in *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* (Compendium of Chronicles) composed by *Rashīd al-Dīn*,⁹ are but just a few examples. However in these cases the birth itself is not shown but rather the moment after. An earlier similar visual convention of true-to-life childbirth is that taken from the *Maqāmat* by the Arab poet *al-Hariri*. Painted by *al-Wasiti* in 1237 Baghdad, the miniature portrays a woman squatting in a birth position similar to Esther in the JP miniature. She is being held and supported by two midwives, one from each side of her.¹⁰ Interestingly, realistic childbirth scenes also appear in Christian art depicting the birth of Christ which follows Byzantine convention and in Classical art.¹¹

⁷For image see: Sarshar 2001, fig 1195.

⁸For examples see: *The Birth of Rustam, Ferdowsī, Shāh-nāma*, Iran, 1659 (Dublin, Trinity College Library, Dublin, ms.1549, fol. 47v); *The Birth and Childhood of Rustam*, Ferdowsī, Shāh-nāma, Iran, n.d. (London, The British Library, IO.Islamic.1256, fol. 52v). It should be noted that Rustam was delivered by caesarian section.

⁹*Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*, Tabriz, 1314 (Edin-

burgh, Edinburgh University Library, MS. Or. 20, fol. 42r).

¹⁰For image see: Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Cleveland, 1962), 121.

¹¹For examples see: Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (London, 1971), figs. 157-159, 165, 171; Sydney C. Cockerell & John Plummer, *Old Testament Miniatures – A Medieval Picture Book* (London, 1975), pls. 256, 125, 52, 124.

The details of the birth are not described in the Midrash nor in Shāhīn's text. Why was it so important to the AN artists to draw such a naturalistic picture of Esther delivering her child? In the AN text Esther is married to Shah Ardashīr, one of the pre-Islamic greatest heroes which Shāhīn fictionally identifies with Ardashīr, son of *Esfandiyār* and grandson of *Goshtasp*.¹² She is also the queen mother of a hero herself; she is the mother of Cyrus the Great. By doing that the poet ties together and intertwines the fates and histories of the two nations, Jews and Iranians.¹³ Seemingly this miniature of *Esther Giving Birth to Cyrus* taken from JTS 40919 [8270] represents the world of women's culture. Neither the king nor *Mordechai* participates in the childbirth episode and only females are attendants. However, this picture is not completely realistic as there is a winged figure participating in the scene. The angel holds Esther from behind, as if providing her with physical and spiritual support. The portrayal of the winged figure implies on the involvement of God and perhaps even on a larger meaning. Esther here is put in full focus; not only she is the queen wife who saves her people but she is also the queen mother who is responsible for securing the Jewish nation in the future. In this case, Esther is transformed into metaphoric mother of all Jews.

Another intriguing illuminated JP manuscript is Shāhīn's *Musa-nāma* (hereafter MN) kept at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (hereafter IMJ 180.54). The manuscript is complete copy of the text containing two hundred and sixty two folios and nineteen miniatures. Interestingly, this is the only illuminated JP manuscript which has a colophon indicating it was copied in 1686 by *Nehemiah ben Amshal* of Tabriz.¹⁴ In this epos which narrates episodes from Moses's life, Shāhīn draws upon the Bible and rabbinic literature, the Quran and Islamic tradition, Persian classical poetry as well as his own imagination. He desires to turn Moses into an epic hero and glorifies him almost more than the Jewish sources do.¹⁵ Throughout this cycle of illustrations the figure of Moses is depicted with a halo of golden flames rising from his shoulders; in some cases his face is also veiled.

In Islamic miniature painting the golden-flamed halo usually accompanies a holy figure or prophet. Moreover, Moses's face is veiled in most of the manuscript in

¹²Vera B. Moreen, "The Iranization" of biblical heroes in Judeo-Persian epics: Shahin's "Ardashir-namah" and "Ezra-namah", *Iranian Studies*, 29:3-4 (1996), 321-338.

¹³Amnon Netzer, "Some notes on the characterization of Cyrus the Great in Jewish and Judeo-Persian writings," *Acta Iranica*, 2 (1974), 35-52.

¹⁴Ariella Amar, "Moshe ve-Musa: Sippure Moshe bi-Musameh", in *Ben Yahadut le-Islam bi-re'i ha-omanot: divre ha-kenes ha-esrim ve-shiv'ah shel ha-Agudah le-Omanot Yehudit*, ed., Shalom Sabar (Jerusalem, 1995), 6-17.

¹⁵Moreen 2000, 26-31.

the fashion characteristic of depicting Muhammad and other Muslim holy men. In Islamic tradition Moses is both messenger and prophet and the “light of prophecy” was shining from him.¹⁶ The miniature depicting *Moses’ Mother Casts the Baby Moses into a Flaming Oven* is a case in point (Fig. 1). Islamic tradition states that when Pharaoh was informed that one of the male children would grow up to overthrow him, he ordered the killing of all newborn Israelite males in order to prevent the prediction from occurring. Afraid of Pharaoh’s men, Moses’ mother hid the baby in the stove. When they opened the stove the light that was shining from baby Moses convinced them to think this was a fire burning in the oven. This story which portrayed in the miniature is not of Jewish provenance but is of Muslim origin and taken from the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (Stories of the Prophets) written by *Al-Tha’ālibī* in 11th century. In this case, the MN artists relied on familiar iconography taken from the Islamic painting repertoire.¹⁷

Moses is also very important in Islam for having been given the revelation of the Torah and was one of the many prophets Muhammad met in the event of the *Me’rāj* (ascension). Another interesting miniature taken from IMJ 180.54 is that depicting *Moses Receives the Torah* (Fig. 2). In the miniature Moses is depicted in the center upper part of the composition, holding the tablets of law. A golden flamed halo rises from his shoulders and also emanates from the Tablets. Ten winged angels are surrounding him, gazing and gesturing towards his image. This visual convention is very similar or almost identical to depictions of the Prophet Muhammad’s night journey (*esrā’*) and heavenly ascent (*me’rāj*) which started to appear in Persian painting from the turn of the 14th century onward.¹⁸ In this case, although a white scarf covers his head, Moses’ face is not veiled which becomes a standard feature of prophetic-religious iconography. It seems therefore that the MN artists depicted Moses in “pre-figuring” to Muhammad, relying on familiar models and ideas taken from their close surroundings.

Adopting an important Islamic iconographic feature characteristic of prophecy and holiness to depict Jewish religious heroes appears also in the miniature cycles of two illustrated *Fath-nāma* [‘The Book of Conquest’] manuscripts (hereafter FN). The

¹⁶Rachel Milstein, “The Iconography of Moses in Islamic Art”, *Jewish Art*, 12-13 (1986-7), 199-212; Rachel Milstein, “Light, Fire and Sun in Islamic Painting”, in *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honor of Prof. David Ayalon*, ed., Moshe Sharon (Jerusalem, 1986), 533-552.

¹⁷Rachel Milstein et al., *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*

(Costa Mesa, 1999). For example see Na’ama Brosh, *Sippure ha-Tanakh ba-ṣīyyur ha-muslimi* (Jerusalem, 1991), fig. 24.

¹⁸Christiane Gruber, “Between Logos (Kalima) and Light (Nur): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting,” *Muqarnas*, 26 (2009), 229-262.



Fig. 1. *Moses' Mother Casts the Baby Moses into a Flaming Oven*, Shāhīn-i Shīrāzī, *Musa-nāma*, 1686, Tabriz. The Israel Museum Jerusalem, 180.54, fol. 12r.



Fig. 2. *Moses Receives the Torah*, Shāhīn-i Shīrāzī, Musa-nāma, 1686, Tabriz. The Israel Museum Jerusalem, 180.54, fol.102v.

epic FN composed ca. 1474 by the second most known and important poet among Iranian Jews - 'Imrānī.¹⁹ This composition in verse recounts the main events from the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and Samuel. The first manuscript is part of the JP manuscript collection of the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem (hereafter BZI 4602).²⁰ It is an incomplete copy of the text, containing two hundred and ninety-one folios. Twenty-three miniatures embellish the text. The second manuscript is kept in the British Library in London (hereafter BL Or. 13704). This too is an incomplete copy of the text, comprising three hundred and thirty-five folios, seven miniatures and several ornamental page designs. Although both manuscripts lack a colophon, a stylistic analysis of the miniatures suggests that BZI 4602 was illustrated in the second half of the 17th century and BL Or.13704 in the first half of the 18th century.²¹

In both cycles of illustrations the prophets Joshua and Samuel, as well as King David, always appear with golden flame halos rising from their shoulders. Therefore, there can be no doubt that the artists of the two FN miniature cycles were influenced by or relied on the Persian artistic traditions of their close surroundings. Examination of further iconographic characteristics of the two cycles points to diverse iconographic influences. The first miniature in each FN manuscript depicts *Joshua and the Israelites Carry the Ark of the Covenant and Cross the River Jordan* (Fig. 3). In both illustrations, Joshua who is identified by the golden flame halo rising from his shoulders is situated at the center or upper part of the composition. His hands point toward the Ark of the Covenant which is being carried by two Israelites. The Ark looks like a polygonal box with a rectangular object rising from its center and is adorned with decorations in the shape of flames or drops at its four corners. According to the biblical story and 'Imrānī's text, Joshua and the Israelites escaped from *Shittim*, their last stop in the desert, and reached the bank of the River Jordan whereupon the river miraculously ceased to flow and they crossed on dry land. To commemorate this event, twelve men, one from each tribe, were told to assemble a pile of rocks.

¹⁹More about the poet and his literary works see: David Yeroushalmi, *The Judeo Persian Poet Emrani and his Book of Treasure* (Leiden, 1995); Amnon Netzer, "A Judeo Persian Footnote: Shahin and Emrani", *Israel Oriental Studies*, 4 (1974) 258-264; Nahid Pirnazar, *The Place of the Fifteenth Century Judeo-Persian Religious Epic: 'Emrānī's Fath-nāme in Iranian Literary Traditions*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, (Los Angeles, 2004).

²⁰For a survey of this collection see Amnon

Netzer, *Otzar kitve ha-yad shel yehude Paras be-makhon Ben-Zvi* (Jerusalem, 1986).

²¹For detailed analysis of these two FN miniature cycles see Orit Carmeli, "Omanut parsit be 'idan shel redifot datiyot," *Iran, Bukhara ve Afghanistan*, 2 (2008), 156-168; Orit Carmeli, "Two Illuminated Manuscripts of 'Imrānī's Fath-nāma: A Comparative Perspective" in Vera B. Moreen, *The Bible as s Judeo-Persian Epic – An Illuminated Manuscript of 'Imrānī's Fath-nāma*, (forthcoming).



Fig. 3. *Joshua and the Israelites Carry the Ark of the Covenant and Cross the River Jordan*, 'Imrānī, Fath-nāma, second half of the 17th century, Isfahan(?). Ben Zvi Institute Jerusalem, 4602, fol. 5v.



Fig. 4. *The Israelites Carry the Ark of the Covenant into Battle against the Philistines*, 'Imrānī, Fath-nāma, second half of the 17th century, Isfahan(?). Ben Zvi Institute Jerusalem, 4602, fol.132r.

These two miniatures depict a highly significant object in the Jewish tradition - the Ark of the Covenant. This sacred item appears in yet another miniature in BZI 4602 - that of *The Israelites Carry the Ark of the Covenant into Battle against the Philistines* (Fig. 4). To the best of my knowledge there is no pictorial tradition in Iran or in any other Islamic land of this sacred Jewish object.²² One is justified in asking how the artists knew how to depict such a significant object and what may have served as their artistic or visual model. As expected, the immediate source of inspiration would be Persian miniature painting, and indeed, the Ark of the Covenant appearing in the FN miniatures resembles royal thrones (*takht*).²³ However, several miniatures in BZI 4602 depict royal thrones which are identical to that of royal thrones portrayed in various Persian miniatures. Therefore, the FN painters knew how to distinguish between the two objects, the Ark and the throne, and their source of inspiration may not necessarily have been Persian painting.

It appears that in this case the artists drew their inspiration from another source or model - JP material culture. A possible object of inspiration may have come from the Jewish circumcision ceremony, *brit milah*. In this ritual two chairs are commonly used, one for the prophet Elijah called *takht-i milla* (circumcision seat) or *şandali elyāhu hanāvi* (prophet Elijah's chair), and another for the godfather.²⁴ Interestingly, this piece of furniture which is most common in the Afghan Jewish community²⁵ strongly recalls Persian synagogue's *tevah* or *bimah* - a table from which the Torah is read and a desk for the prayer leader. As feature of all synagogues, the *tevah* is situated across the *heychal* or *Aron ha-kodesh* in which the Torah is kept. In synagogues across Iran the *heychal* consists of an arched niche or hollow in the wall with wooden doors or a curtain before it, or both. The *heychal* is reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant which held the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. This is the holiest spot in a synagogue, equivalent to the Holy of Holies.

²²Pictorial representations of the Ark can be found in Christian art and Jewish art in the West. For examples see *Angels with the Ark of the Covenant*, Miscellany, North France, 1280 (London, The British Library, Add. 11639, fol. 522r); *Two men carrying the Ark of the Covenant crossing the River Jordan*, Spiegel van der Menschen Behoudenisse, Netherlands, 15th century (London, The British Library, Add. 11575, fol. 29v.).

²³For examples see *Bahrām Gūr with the Russian Princess in the Red Pavilion*, Nizāmī, Khamsa, Isfahan, 1665-7 (London, The Brit-

ish Library, Add.6613, fol. 171v); *Bahrām Gūr with the Princess in the Red Pavilion*, Nizāmī, Khamsa, 1650 (Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Suppl.pers.1111, fol. 184v).

²⁴Ruth Jacoby, "Ma ben kisse Eliyahu le-ben kisse sandaqq," *Rimonim* 5 (1997), 43-53; Lea Baer, "Life's Events - Birth, Bar Mitzvah, Wedding and Burial Customs" in *Sarshar* 2002, 311-336.

²⁵Zohar Hanegbi & Bracha Yaniv, *Afghanistan: The Synagogue and the Jewish Home* (Jerusalem, 1991).

Traditionally, the Torah scroll is housed in a wooden or metal case known as *tiq*, which contributes both to the beautification and adornment of the ritual and to the protection of the penned parchment. Customarily, Torah finials are placed upon the Torah staves in order to beautify and glorify the Torah scroll. Among the Jewish communities across Iran two main types of Torah finials have evolved: globular finials called *rimonim* (pomegranates) and flat finials called *ketarim* (crowns).²⁶ It appears that the design of the Ark of the Covenant carried by the Israelites in the FN miniatures bears close resemblance either to a Torah case or Elijah's chair (which resembles synagogue's *tevah*) decorated with golden "drops," or flames, at its four corners, similar to four Torah finials.

Thus far, no visual or textual evidence has surfaced to establish that miniature painting was indeed practiced by Jews in Iran. The evidence we do possess at this stage of research testify that they served as gents and middlemen, goldsmiths, tailors, millers, weavers, dyers and grocers. They traded in spices, antiques, precious stones and jewelry, fabrics, and other luxury goods. They were also involved in manufacturing and selling wine, medicine, and music.²⁷ We do not have sufficient information concerning Jewish painters or to the art of illustrating JP manuscripts. The closest artistic medium to miniature painting known to be utilized by Jews in Iran was the custom of decorating *Ketubbot*.²⁸ The Jewish marriage contract, *ketubbah*, spells out the obligations of the husband to his wife as a precondition to their marriage. Decorated *Ketubbot* were very common among Jews living in Muslim lands, as they were among European Jews; however, it is unknown when this custom started among the Jews of Iran.²⁹ Due to the scarcity of findings it is challenging to prove or establish any association between the illustrated JP manuscripts and the decorated *ketubbot*.

²⁶For more about these ritual objects see: Bracha Yaniv, "The Mystery of the Flat Torah Finials from East Persia", *Padyavand*, I (1996), pp. 5-17. Bracha Yaniv, *Ma'aseh khoshev: Ha-tiq lesefer Torah ve-toldotav* (Jerusalem & Ramat-Gan, 1998).

²⁷Walter J. Fischel, "Ha-yehudim bi-Iran bame'ot 17-18: hebetim politim, kalkalim ve-kehilateim." *Pe'amim* 6 (1980), 4-31; Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is - Nineteenth-Century Iran and its Jewish Minority* (Stanford, 2007); David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century - Aspects of*

History, Community, and Culture (Leiden, 2009).

²⁸Shalom Sabar, "Ha-Hatkhilot shel ha-ktubah ha-me'uteret be-kehilot Paras ve-Afghanistan," *Pe'amim*, 79 (1999), 129-158;

²⁹Shalom Sabar, *Ketubbah: Jewish Marriage Contracts of the Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum and Klau Library* (Philadelphia, 1990). The earliest known example of Persian decorated ketubba is from 1647 Isfahan. For image see Vivian B. Mann & Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Masterworks of The Jewish Museum* (New Haven & London, 2004), 106-107.

These rare and unique illuminated JP manuscripts provide a glimpse of the material culture of the Jews across Iran. They wrote and produced in a linguistic medium - the Persian language transcribed into Hebrew letters - which represented the duality of their cultural life. These people identified themselves as Jews but in equal measure as Persians. It is crucial to note that JP illustrated manuscripts were not central to Jewish religious life but a secular pursuit. This reveals the assimilation of Muslim and Persian cultural and esthetic norms into the material culture and life of the Jews of Iran, representing duality of cultural and spiritual sources of identity.