The Question of Identity: The Architecture of Synagogues in Isfahan, Iran

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Introduction
Synagogues in Iran have a history as old as the life of Jews. About hundred synagogues in Iranian cities like Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd still survive. The construction of synagogues followed different patterns that were usually under the influence of local or stylistic movements in Persian architecture. The humble exteriors and simple facades of synagogues did not differ in design from other buildings in Iranian cities, but their introverted interiors were based on a design language that was rooted in foundations of the Judaism.

The city of Isfahan was one of the earliest Jewish settlements, likely established at the time of Jews’ deportations by the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian kingdoms in the first millennium BCE. Isfahan, located in the center of Iran, gained its world renown as the capital of the Seljuk (11th century) and Safavid (16th century) empires. The Jewish quarter in Isfahan, which was in proximity to Friday Mosque, housed the majority of Jews as well as their synagogues (Figure 1). The Jewish community, their history, traditions, art and other aspects of social life have been the subject of contemporary research, yet their houses and places of worship have not been seriously studied as part of the history of the city.

While there are references to synagogues in historical, social, and anthropological studies, the architectural qualities of Jewish religion and domesticity have not been thoroughly explored in contemporary scholarship. This article, which is part of an ongoing fieldwork, aims to explore the design of synagogues in the Jewish neighborhood of Isfahan, Jubareh, through examining the physical and non-physical links between the city and synagogues (Figure 2). Studying spatial qualities of synagogue architecture, I will discuss how synagogues reflect complex layers of Jewish and Persian cultures at macro and micro scales, from the city to the interior.
Synagogues in Urban Context

As mentioned before, the Jews were among the founders of the city of Isfahan. Jewish buildings, such as houses, synagogues, and schools were integrated into the urban fabric of the city in such a way that no structural or stylistic distinctions are recognizable. The houses of the Jews are identical to those of other people, the only difference being the scale: Jewish houses are not magnificent but are ordinary residential units. While Jews’ houses and urban quarters blended with the rest of the city, their synagogues were completely distinct in character.

At the first glance, no striking distinction is visible between synagogues and the other buildings in the district. Nevertheless, there are clear distinctions when it comes to the spatial organization and elements. The interior space of the synagogues is usually below street level. Because the Jews were prohibited by the Pact of ‘Umar from building synagogues exceeding a certain height, they compensated by digging below the earth in order to gain height. Of the two permanent natural elements light and water, which are always present in Persian architecture, the former is widely used in defining interior spaces and emphasizing the sanctuary of synagogues. The filtered light coming through an octagonal skylight makes the sanctuary a mysterious and spiritual space within the synagogue (Figure 3). In contrast, water is not much employed in Iranian synagogues. The construction methods of synagogues are not different from the other buildings in Isfahan. The vaults and dome-shaped roofs are supported by load-bearing walls and columns. The main elements of the interior include stucco walls, painted plaster, and ornamental work such as muqarnas and haft-rang glazed-tiles. Thus, as far as construction and its quality are concerned, these synagogues completely pertain to the Iranian architecture style (Figure 4).
Apart from two synagogues, all the synagogues in Isfahan are located in the Jubareh district. The oldest synagogue in Isfahan, Mushi Haja, dates back to around 1700 whereas the most recent, Keter David Synagogue, was finished in 1940. Jubareh is one of three old Jewish neighborhoods with the largest Jewish populations. Jubareh is in the proximity of the Old Friday Mosque of Isfahan. This illustrates symbiosis between Jewish and Muslim communities. Dispersion and positioning of the synagogues in the Jubareh district follows an ‘organic’ and ‘asymmetric’ pattern. No regular or symmetrical distance can be identified among these synagogues. The dispersion map shows that half of the twelve synagogues in Jubareh are located near the main street. The other six, except Sangbast Synagogue, are also built adjacent to a primary street. Therefore, all of them are situated in the semi-public areas of the district not disturbing the hierarchical procession between private and public.

Like other historical buildings in Isfahan, these synagogues are attached to adjacent buildings. What is visible to the eye from the main street is a small entrance or two simple walls as well as a skylight on a dome-shaped roof. The exteriors of these synagogues are covered with thatch. This gives them the same quality as that of other buildings in the neighborhood, integrating them into the context. Because of this, they cannot be identified by strangers in the first glance. Another factor emphasizing this integrity is scale. These buildings are not built on a large or even medium urban-scale. Most of them are small, which may be one of the reasons behind the construction of several synagogues in one district. Instead of building a large central place of worship (such as the Friday Mosque), a small synagogue was built in each part of the quarter.

In a unique case, Bozorg, Jima'ati and Mulla Rabi synagogues are attached to each other. They can be considered as one edifice, with a common entrance and corridor, and a separate door leading to each synagogue. There might be different reasons behind the creation of such a structure. The property lines show that one of them was built earlier than the others, and gradually Jews bought adjacent properties and added them to the whole complex. But were all three synagogues used simultaneously? What justified the construction of three synagogues in one single complex? In the absence of any historic documents to answer these questions, it can only be said that perhaps these three synagogues were used by different groups of the Jewish community in Jubareh.

With only one exception built in the Safavid Era, all fourteen synagogues in Jubareh were built after the nineteenth century. One may ask why the surviving synagogues in this neighborhood are so recent when the urban quarter itself has at least 1,500 years of history? Without doubt, synagogues have been part of this neighborhood since its early years, but it is possible that some were destroyed or converted to other use, such as residences, during periods of increased religious oppression.

An overview of the chronology of synagogues in the Jubareh district shows that the majority of them were built in the late Qajar period between 1880 and 1920. This is quite surprising since in the late Qajar era, Aqa Najafi Esfahani (1846–1914), a prominent Shi‘i religious leader, ruled in Isfahan. He had a reputation as a fanatic cleric who had not only religious but also political
authority in the lack of a powerful central government. One may ask why the Jews built six modest synagogues in about forty years instead of a one larger synagogue. There are probably four reasons behind this phenomenon. First, the people of Jubareh belonged to the lower classes of society. They were not rich enough to fund the construction of a major building. Instead, they gradually collected the charity money and used it for the construction of small neighborhood synagogues. Second, urban regulations did not permit Jews to construct monumental buildings. As mentioned, their houses and synagogues had to be lower than the local mosques and below street level. Third, different sub-communities of Isfahani Jews might have preferred to pray with their own kind. Finally, it is likely that some of these synagogues were originally residential buildings that were modified to synagogues after they were donated as a waqf property or after the owner’s death. This is the case in the Khorsheid synagouge, which was originally an early Qajar house. Half of it was converted to a synagogue, while the other half was kept for a residential function. Even in plan, the courtyard of this house is divided between the synagogue and the house.

Conclusions
The minority borrows from the culture of the majority in many ways. The long-time Jewish integration within the Iranian society, as well as their cultural, financial, and linguistic symbiosis with the Muslim majority, has made them indistinguishable from the non-Jewish population in many ways. Synagogues were supposed to blend with the city, and did so effectively. The fact that in local dialect Jews referred to synagogues as ‘masjid’ (mosques) reflects just that kind of syncretism. At the same time, the interior of the synagogues integrated features of Persian so-called Islamic architecture as well as Jewish motifs and elements. This unique hybrid of elements and concepts converted architecture to a tool that manifested a dual identity, which did reflect complexities of life of a minority.

References


2 The case study research for this paper is part of a NEH research project to be conducted until 2015.
3 This may be due to the different philosophical views on water in Judaic and Islamic religions.
4 The Haft Rang tile was a square or rectangular panel of glazed tile. In the beginning of the Safavid Era, this method was invented to make tile production and architectural construction more efficient.
5 Fourteen synagogues are located in Jubareh. Out of these fourteen, one is destroyed (Molla Rabi).
6 There are two smaller Jewish districts in Isfahan: Golbahar District, near the Haroon Velayat route in which one of the synagogues still stands, and in the Dardashti District in what is nowadays Abd-al-Razzagh Street. Apart from these, there are three old synagogues in the Jewish Cemetery located in Pirbakran on the outskirts of Isfahan.
7 This quality can also be seen in Yazd in the form of the proximity of the ‘Jews Passage’ to the Friday Mosque.
8 None of these buildings are detached from other units that are primarily residential.