Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran
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Introduction

The book you have in your hands, although having a geographical name in its title, is, in fact, the first chapter of the worldwide history of the Jews. Iran, according to the Bible and based on reliable historical facts, is the land from where the Israelites set out on the longest road ever known in the entire world: the road of the Diaspora. The borders of Iran during ancient times, when it was called the Persian Empire, extended far beyond its present-day frontiers. The first Jews were either exiled to or sought refuge in this large territory, which extended from Ethiopia to India and comprised 127 provinces, as the book of Ester indicates (1:1-9).

One hundred thirty-four years before the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., with the Assyrian onslaught to the north of the Holy Land, the ten lost tribes were forced to go to the east, toward Persia. Babylon, the former hub of Judaism, was an Iranian province for more than a thousand years, including the period during which the Talmud was written. Indeed, Iranian cultural influences are manifest in the Babylonian Talmud, which is, in essence, an “Iranian Talmud.”

Apart from Cyrus—the Iranian king referred to in the Torah as “God’s anointed”—there are many other biblical references to relations between Iran and Israel. Leaders and prophets, such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel, are testimony to the important role played by the Jews in Iran. The Jewish-Iranian queens, Esther and Shushandokht, and the Jewish grand viziers, Sa’d al-Dawlah and Rashid al-Din Fazlallah Hamadani, bespeak the influence of the Jewish community in Iran.

The Persian Empire at the outset of the Diaspora welcomed the Jews, who migrated from this vast land to other parts of the world, such as India, China, Russia, Armenia, Turkey, Greece and Afghanistan, and then, from these countries to other lands. Interestingly enough, despite all the events, good or bad, which transpired in Iran in the last 2,700 years, the Jewish community, large or small,
has continued living in this country, which must be reckoned second only to Israel in importance to the study of Jewish history.

Centuries ago, Iran was the birthplace of the Karaite movement in Judaism, which spread throughout the world and which, to this day, has adherents. During the Middle Ages, Iranian Jews translated Greek works into Arabic and were active contributors to the scholarship of the Islamic world—an important factor in the European Renaissance.

The history of the Jews of Iran is one of the most important chapters of Jewish history, yet it is also among the most obscure, as so little of it has been published. While numerous books have been written about the European Jews, Western Jews remain largely ignorant of the history of the Jews in Iran.

Habib Levy (1895-1984), the great Jewish-Iranian historian and scholar, realized while studying in Paris that there was little published information about the Jews of Iran, even in the works of Graetz and Dubnow. After completing his academic studies, Dr. Levy returned to Iran and spent over four decades extensively researching Jewish-Iranian history. His studies encompassed a 2,700-year period and included not only the territory of present-day Iran, but also neighboring lands which had, at various times, been provinces of the former Persian Empire. At the time of his writing, no reference had been published on the subject in Persian or in any other language.

The research methodology used by Dr. Levy in his unique endeavor was scientific and unbiased. He did not accept the validity of all accounts. With a critical eye, he sought to establish historical facts about the Jews of Iran. He traveled to many countries and searched libraries and archives. He traveled to Iranian cities and towns and collected data unavailable in libraries. He interviewed Jewish elders and worked night and day until he had gathered the necessary materials. He spent four more years reviewing, organizing, classifying, writing, and re-writing his documented information. Finally, he published his classic three-volume *Tarikh-e Yahud-e Iran* (History of the Jews of Iran) in 1960.
Dr. Habib Levy’s book is the only source cited by Encyclopedia Judaica for Jewish-Iranian history in the 19th and 20th centuries. This work was written in Persian, and no translation has been available to Western readers—until now. However, the original edition of Dr. Levy’s classic work, for all its positive features, was too voluminous and in some passages, provided too much detail. From the time of its first publication in the Persian language, there have been recommendations by distinguished personalities, such as Itzhak Ben-Zvi, the second President of the State of Israel and an eminent historian, that the Persian text be translated into English and published for a Western audience. Before this step could be taken, it was necessary that the original Persian work should be edited and abridged. Responsibility for accomplishing this task fell to me. Two principles I have chosen to follow in revising Levy’s work should be mentioned here:

1. For each historical period, I have added a brief political history of Iran to familiarize the reader with the atmosphere of the time.
2. I have attempted to write in a style suitable for both academic and general audiences.

It is my hope that the English edition of this book will fill a gap in Western literature on Iranian Jewry.

Hooshang Ebrami, Ph.D.
President
The Habib Levy Cultural Foundation

Los Angeles
August 1998
Translator’s Foreword

In translating Dr. Hooshang Ebrami’s edited and abridged edition of Dr. Habib Levy’s three-volume history of Iranian Jewry, I have attempted to provide as literal a translation as possible within the confines of English usage. In some cases, editorial changes were made after the publication of the Persian edition, and thus some passages in this English edition will differ slightly.

I made a conscious decision to avoid the use of a specialized transliteration font for Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew proper nouns, based on the rationale that it would not be particularly helpful for the reader who is not particularly fluent in these languages and that such transliteration will generally be unnecessary for the reader who is literate in those languages. However, I have used a turned comma (‘) to represent the Persian letter ‘ayn (ayn) and an apostrophe (’) to represent the Persian letter hamzeh (hamzeh) when the hamzeh appears in a medial or word-final position. Transliteration of Arabic and Persian names is based loosely on the Library of Congress method, with the notable exception that in Persian names, short vowels are represented by “a,” “e,” and “o” rather than “a,” “i,” and “u.”

In the original Persian, many quotations of English and French language sources are paraphrased. Whenever possible, I located the original source and provided a precise quotation, translating the French to English. These verbatim citations tend to be longer than the paraphrases in the Persian edition. In the case of Hebrew sources quoted in the Persian, I have directly translated the Persian.

All biblical citations are from the Jewish Publication Society of America’s edition of 1917. All translations of Persian verse are my own.

I have provided Gregorian equivalents to some Islamic and Hebrew dates mentioned in this book. For Islamic dates, I used the software program “Taqvim: A Multi-Calendar Display, version 1.0” for Macintosh, by John Woods, Mark Woodworth, and Paul Pomerleau.
For Hebrew dates I used "Jewish Calender 2.0" for Macintosh by Frank Yellin.

List of Abbreviations

EB    Encyclopaedia Brittanica
EJ    Encyclopaedia Judaica
JE    Jewish Encyclopedia
TN    Translator’s Note

The Hague
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George W. Maschke
PART ONE

INTRODUCTION
(1300–550 B.C.E.)
CHAPTER ONE
Who Are the Jews?

This question is prefatory not merely to this discourse, but to history itself—to a time when Man did not know the one God and was caught up in wizardry and black magic. He knelt before countless gods—some of them wrought by his own hand—and sacrificed his children to them. In times such as those, how would this question have been answered? Who were the Jews? What did they say? At the dark dawn of history, what role did they play in the precipitous course of mankind's history?

We who wish to study the history of the Jews in a corner of the world that has been one of the most important in the life of this nation, whether we are Jewish or not, will undoubtedly need to review the Jews and their beliefs and aspirations before their arrival in Iran. We must know of which Iranian people's history we are speaking. What people are these Jews, who have always been a minority in this cradle of civilization? What are their roots, and what is the source of their precepts and beliefs?

The Jewish faith appeared at a time when mankind—from a moral standpoint—was passing through dark and gloomy times. Idol worship had spread among humanity like an ill-omened contagion, and each nation and tribe endeavored to increase the number of its gods. Mothers, by sacrificing their children to various idols, debased the motherly instinct to such low levels as are unseen even among the basest of creatures. There was no law of any kind. Sexual intercourse was for the most part animalistic, and sometimes took place in the gods' temples. The temples of Marduk in Babylon and Astarte in Phoenicia were witness to shameful acts between men and women. The Assyrians believed that the more they delivered the people of outlying lands to their deaths and the more they expanded their borders by conquest, the greater would be the glory of their god, Ashur, and in their slaughter of others they knew no bounds. Tyranny and injustice reigned in Egypt, whose pharaohs had entered the
ranks of deity. Prisoners built great palaces and edifices under the scourge of the whip.

It was in such times that the Israelites—from amongst all the other lost nations and tribes—became the pioneers of monotheism. A wonderful revolution was brought about in the world. The children of Jacob, the sons of Israel—a small nation lacking military prowess but armed with law, justice, and equity, with the battle cry of humanity, with faith in monotheism and, as a result, faith in the oneness of Man—came to the fore. They became mankind’s guides, and without any expectation that human society would one day reward them for their moral message, they began treading the hard and treacherous road to understanding law, liberty, justice, equality, and true humanity.

The Jews said that God is one, and that his servants are equal in his eyes. They said that one should love others as one’s self. They believed that society’s helpless must be helped, that slavery and bondage should be abolished, and that innocent children should not be burned in sacrifice to false gods. They held peace to be sacred and extended a hand of friendship to the enemy.

It is apparent that in such a time when—from a moral standpoint—mankind was in a period of decline, such passionate beliefs were electrifying and left others bewildered. The proclamation of this humane message—though it ended up costing the Jews dearly, as vengeful enemies turned their brightest day into darkest night—bestowed upon them a place of honor for all eternity. As history bears witness, the moral and social revolution of the Israelites and their pioneering monotheism also carried a heavy price. They suffered mortal blows for centuries on end, yet they never succumbed: from the beginning they entrenched themselves in the impenetrable fortress of faith in the truth. The Jews do not yet consider their mission complete, for they see that those who believe in the one God still stain God’s earth with each others’ blood and do not refrain from committing fratricide.
WHO ARE THE JEWS?

Still, from a historical standpoint, an intriguing point is this: how was this nation—which was for centuries bound hand and foot in the chains of bondage—capable of speaking of freedom, liberty, concord, order, law, justice, love, solidarity, and friendship among men rather than becoming vengeful, cruel, and bloodthirsty?

The answer to this question must be sought in the fundamental nature of the Jewish faith.

The first historical Jewish figure is Abraham ben Terah, who lived in the second millennium B.C.E. He was born in the city of Ur, not far from present-day Basrah, near the Persian Gulf. He was a restless, well-travelled man. In his youth he went to Haran, and at the age of 75 he migrated to Canaan. Along the way lived in each city for a time. He arrived in Canaan in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. In those times, the bloody wars between the Elamites (the former inhabitants of Iranian Khuzestan and Luristan) and the Sumerians and Akkadians (the former inhabitants of Iraq) were at their hottest. There was no religion in the world save polytheism and idolatry. Although the peoples of the East had a more advanced civilization than those of the West, they were nonetheless at the same level as far as religion was concerned. Superstition, belief in ghosts, genies, and fairies, the worship of various animate and inanimate objects, and other unfounded beliefs played the role of religion throughout the world. Equality and brotherhood had no meaning. Slavery was universally practiced. Men preyed upon one another and took each other captive in hand-to-hand combat. The rule of the strong over the weak was common at all levels of society.

It was in these times that Abraham, the father of the Israelites, spoke of a single God for the first time in the history of the world. It was he who discountenanced the practice, then current, of sacrificing children to idols. It was he who recognized God and took the first step in making him known to others. Isaac, Abraham's second son, followed in his father's footsteps, and Jacob (also called Israel), son of Isaac, also followed this path. The twelve sons of Jacob, each of whom was the patriarch of a tribe, propagated the House of
Israel. Jacob's sons, the Children of Israel, were the ancestors of a nation which spread the light of knowledge and the worship of God, and which throughout the ages has produced incredible marvels.

In the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., the Israelites entered Egypt following a famine and drought, and for a short time found respite there and multiplied. It was not long before the Israelites, through perseverance and hard work in agriculture and herding, became materially prosperous. When the new pharaoh of Egypt saw this, he burned with jealousy and treated the Jews harshly. In short order, anti-Semitic violence in ancient Egypt reached the point where the pharaoh decreed that first-born Jewish sons should be killed and the Jews delivered into bondage. Moses' mother, fearing for his life, placed him in a basket and released it upon the waters of the Nile. By chance, the basket reached the pharaoh's daughter, and she adopted him as her own son. How remarkable that years later, Moses ben Amram—this imposing figure and great intellect—became the standard-bearer who led his nation to freedom from the oppressive pharaoh's yoke of slavery. In 1280 B.C.E., after years of struggle, he succeeded in delivering the House of Israel from Egypt. The book of Exodus recounts the story of this, the greatest of human uprisings in the struggle for freedom.

Some historians hold that the Israelites dwelled in Egypt for 210 years. In chapter 15, verse 16 of the book of Genesis, in the place where the voice of God is heard, it is written:

And in the fourth generation they shall come back hither:...

However, in chapter 12, verse 40 of the book of Exodus we read that:

...the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.
In any event, based on verses 16–20 of the sixth chapter of the book of Exodus, the life spans of four consecutive generations taken singly—without considering the years of overlap between father and son—when added, come to 430 years:

- Levi, son of Jacob, was 70 years old when he went to Egypt and he lived in Egypt for 80 years.
- Kohath, son of Levi, lived in Egypt for 133 years.
- Amram, son of Kohath, lived in Egypt for 137 years.
- Moses (the fourth generation) lived in Egypt for 80 years.

And the total for the four generations is 430 years.

Moses' uprising not only delivered the Jewish people from bondage, oppression, and tyranny: it also created a nation that led the world to knowledge of God and the Law. In Egypt, the Jews— Influenced by their environment—had taken to worshipping idols. They had no leader and were unfamiliar with the Law. Moses’ leadership and his fundamental, immutable laws made of the Jews an enduring people. For 40 years, Moses led the people toward the land of Canaan. Along the way, atop Mount Sinai, he spoke with God and bestowed upon the people the tablets of the Ten Commandments. These commandments strictly forbade the people from practicing idolatry and clearly commanded them to worship none other than the one, true God. When Moses departed from this world at the age of 120, on the threshold of the Promised Land, the Jews were a strong and organized people.

It is interesting to note that not all of those liberated from the pharaoh's chains of captivity were Jewish. There were gentiles among them. Moses resolved that his laws were to be applied to all persons uniformly, and that Jew and foreigner should be equal. Moses' law encompassed all aspects of human life. He promulgated instructions in areas such as welfare, punishment, financial transactions, matrimony, morality, agriculture, and judgement. Such was the attention to detail of the Jewish prophet's corpus of law—which became the
foundation of legislation for all mankind—that it even addressed relieving the suffering of animals. How great must his philanthropy and humanity have been for him to declare:

Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set, in thine inheritance which thou shalt inherit, in the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess. (Deuteronomy 19:14)

This command was given at a time when murder was quite common (and indeed it is still quite common several thousand years later amongst those who do not follow God). Rivers of blood muddied prairies, plains, towns, and deserts. Moses said, "Do not lie. Do not accept bribes. Do not molest strangers. Do not countenance the oppression of workers, and return the lost sheep or calf to its owner."

Moses' laws were the foundation of humanity—a call for peace and love between people. Because during his time there was no precedent of obedience to the law among any nation or people, he had no option but to impose harsh penalties in order to compel his followers to obey the Law. The first prophet of monotheism addressed the Jews as God's and mankind's firstborn. He placed a heavy burden upon their shoulders. Moses' world-wide revolution pitted his people, the pioneers of monotheism, against the great godless nations—who were slaves to various idols—and so the seeds of hatred were cultivated in their hearts so that even at a time when many of these countries had embraced monotheism, the hatred and enmity persisted against the followers of Moses.

Shortly after losing their great leader, the Jewish people set foot in the land of Canaan—the Promised Land—and began their hectic life there. This Holy Land, dubbed "the land of milk and honey," had distinctive characteristics even though it lay within an area no more than several hundred kilometers long by a hundred kilometers wide. In this small country, extending from the snow-capped Mount Harmon in the north to the desert sands south of Beersheba—where the heat of the sun burns all vegetation—all climates exist in close
proximity: from the lofty mountains to the lowest point below sea level in the world, the Dead Sea. It is as if the purpose of this people's living upon this expanse of land was to show the world that just as the scorching desert winds and the eternally spring-like coastal plains can be neighbors, and just as depths and heights can be near one another, and sweet water and salt water may be not that far removed from one another, in the same manner all people—all servants of God—whatever their circumstances and whatever their peculiarities, can live side-by-side in a beautiful world created by the hand of the one God.

We stated that Judaism shone in a time when the world was plunged in darkness from the standpoint of morality and social relations. In pursuing this discourse, it is appropriate to note the social environment in which neighboring countries were living at the time of the Jewish people's return to Canaan. Apart from the Philistines, Amalekites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Phoenicians who lived adjacent to the Promised Land, let us consider the larger and stronger countries, including Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Media, Elam, and Persia, first from the standpoint of religion:

The Egyptians had many gods, and each god had a legend. In these legends, gods killed each other. In their system of belief, Osiris, the great god, entered the body of the cow Apis, which was black with a white star in the middle of its forehead. They worshipped this cow for a period of 25 years. They then drowned it and sought a similar cow. Rams, jackals, lions, and crocodiles were also the objects of worship. Exalted above all of these was the pharaoh, who held the status of god, and whom the people actually worshipped.

The cities of Chaldea and Assyria each had separate gods, and these gods had mothers, fathers, and children. Land had a god; water had another god; and the sky had yet another. The creator of Man and the world was Marduk. He was held to be the greatest god, and it was believed that each year all the other gods knelt before him and worshipped him. When Assyria seized the upper hand over Babylon, another god by the name of Ashur took center
stage. Ashur was a warlike god, desirous of much veneration, which he demanded from the people by force. It was in the name of this god that the Assyrians so ferociously fought their battles. Spiritual and moral bankruptcy were commonplace in Chaldea and Babylon. Black magic, sorcery, and superstition had drawn a black veil across the beliefs of the people. Idolatry had reached an appalling level. The Babylonians held prostitutes to be sacred and engaged in debauchery.

The Hittite (present day Turkey) god, Rad, was a sky god. In Phoenicia, too, countless gods, foremost among which was Baal, were worshipped. The Hittites fashioned gods in the image of lions, eagles, calves, and even flies. The practice of sacrificing children as burnt offerings to the gods was common.

The religion of the Medes and Persians before the advent of Zoroaster (which coincides with the Achaemenid dynasty) is unknown, but it can be asserted that they did not worship idols. Zoroaster introduced Ahura Mazda, the god of Good, and Ahriman, the god of Evil, to the Iranians and gave them the Zend and Avesta.¹

Overall, the religious beliefs of all other nations were miles apart from the monotheistic beliefs of the Jews. This in itself caused a deep schism between the Jewish people and others and planted the seed of enmity toward the Jews in the hearts of those who did not worship God.

Let us now take a cursory glance at the military and financial capabilities of the Jewish nation’s neighboring countries. Egypt enjoyed an elaborate pharaonic system, limitless wealth, and military prowess the full extent of which remains unknown to historians and archaeologists even after several centuries of research. Because of Egypt’s uncommon military strength, the countries neighboring the Promised Land, such as Edom, Moab, Palestine, Phoenicia, Ammon, and Aramea, remained under its sway for many years.

¹The Zend and Avesta are Zoroastrian scriptures.
WHO ARE THE JEWS?

The Assyrians, though they were not possessed of a great civilization like that of the Egyptians, were nonetheless the peers of the Mongols and Tatars. Assyrian brutality and ruthlessness was a curse upon the peoples they conquered. In Tarikh-e Iran (History of Iran) it is related that:

In the spring of each year, the Assyrians attacked neighboring countries to force them to pay tribute and to plunder their prosperous cities. They killed as many as they saw fit, and took the survivors back to their country as prisoners and put them to hard labor whilst they themselves lived a life of luxury...One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Assyrians was their unusual wickedness and cruelty toward the peoples they conquered. (Pirniya, Tarikh-e Iran p. 35-6)

Regarding Assyrian military power, it is sufficient to note that in 768 B.C.E. Assyria occupied the powerful and prosperous Egypt, compelling it to pay tribute. The Assyrians admitted and even took pride in their atrocities. Ashurbanipal, one of the great kings of Assyria, declares in a stone inscription:

I swept the entire land of Elam in one month and one day. I denied this land the passage of cows and sheep and even the blessings of music and allowed predatory animals, snakes, desert animals, and gazelles to overrun it. (Pirniya, Tarikh-e Iran, p. 42)

The kings of Assyria, who appropriated the wealth of defeated nations through military force and acts of brutality while they themselves lived an opulent life of luxury, were finally brought low by the Medes, their former victims. During the reign of the Median king Cyaxares (633–575 B.C.E.), the Assyrian reign of oppression was brought to an end.

Although the Chaldeans (Babylonians) had a flourishing civilization like that of the Egyptians, from the standpoint of military aggression and the conquest of neighboring nations—especially during the reigns of some of the more oppressive kings—they were on a par with the Assyrians. After the death of Assyria as a political
entity, the defeated officers and soldiers fled to Babylon and put their warrior spirit and blood lust at that nation's disposal.

Media was among those powerful countries which—though not sharing a common border with Israel or Judea—because of their proximity to Assyria and Babylon and their conquests, had for a time a direct effect on the life of the Jews of the Promised Land. The Medes came to the fore in the 7th century B.C.E., that is, after the defeat of Israel by the Assyrians.

The Medes at first lived as tribal clans and had no army. They were attacked by the Assyrians on numerous occasions and paid tribute to them. But Cyaxares, who made peace with Babylon and gave his daughter in marriage to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, was able to exploit the expanded military power thus created to defeat Assyria and to divide it between himself and Babylon.

In general, thuggery and oppression were customary amongst the great nations of that time, none of which were far from the Promised Land. Aggression against and the plundering of other nations was an accepted practice; respect for the rights of others was not even dreamed of. In this regard, even countries such as Egypt, Babylon, and Persia—which played important roles in laying the foundation of Median civilization—were no exceptions. Such countries as were stronger and more aggressive invaded their neighbors that they might become their masters. The land of the Jews was surrounded by such countries, and the Jews, following the example of their great prophet and other prophets, addressed their coreligionists thus:

Thou shalt not murder. Neither shalt thou commit adultery. Neither shalt thou steals. Neither shalt thou bear false witness against thy neighbor. (Deuteronomy 5:17)

Cursed is he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. (Deuteronomy 27:17)

Meaning “ancient Israel,” whose capital was Samaria, and which was situated north of Judea, whose capital was Jerusalem.
...that innocent blood be not shed in the midst of thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, and so blood be upon thee. (Deuteronomy 19:10)

When thou drawest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. (Deuteronomy 20:10)

When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a parapet for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thy house, if any man fall from thence. (Deuteronomy 22:8)

Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates. In the same day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it;... (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

Cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:16–18)

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him... (Isaiah 58:7)

This sea of humane and lofty teachings is shoreless.

The Promised Land, Jerusalem, Judea, and Israel

The life of the people in the Promised Land continued under Moses' chosen successor, Joshua ben Nun, a capable man of the tribe of Ephraim who became the people's leader in 1240 B.C.E. Under his leadership, the people established roots in the land of Canaan and grew so strong that they became the most progressive nation of that age in terms of humanity. More than five centuries had passed between the birth of Abraham, the Friend of God, and their arrival in the Promised Land. The Jewish people had lost most of their power. But by the light of their prophet and the wisdom of his successor, they had become possessed of an independent land and their own religion and culture. Each of the twelve tribes had settled in a portion of the Promised Land. It was at this time that, finding
themselves masters of the land beneath their feet, they once again took up agriculture and converted the hills and valleys into cultivated fields and orchards of fruit and olives.

After the death of Joshua, it was the judges' turn to rule. They administered the country for a total of 180 years, from 1200 to 1020 B.C.E. Although no documentation other than the Book of Judges is available to historians for this long period, there are some other valuable details which may be of great value to the Jewish people. One of these points is that there is no mention of any oppressive king or leader seeking to establish his sovereignty by force of arms and create a legendary life for himself. The second point is that these were judges who were administering the newly founded country of the Israelites, and that the word "judge" immediately brings to mind the rule of law, the enforcement of truth and justice, and the containment of the demons of force, tyranny, selfishness, and vanity. The third point is that the judges did not emerge from a special class of society that was considered superior to other classes. A judge could be a religious leader, like the priest Eli, or a brave champion like Samson, or a strong woman with poetic talent like Deborah. The judgeship of Deborah—the first woman in the world to lead a country and under whose judgeship the people lived in tranquility for years—is indicative of the Jewish people's leadership and tirelessness in bringing about an intellectual and moral revolution in human society. It must not be forgotten that the period of the judges came hundreds of years before other peoples accepted monotheism.

All this notwithstanding, it is not to be concluded that the Israelites lived in peace and tranquility throughout this whole period. Two fundamental factors repeatedly disrupted the order of the land, brewing storm after storm. The first factor was the conflict between the religion of the Israelites and that of their idolatrous neighbors, which kept the flames of bloody conflict constantly burning between the two parties. The other factor was the conflicts between the tribes themselves, who in those days lived under a feudal system,
having strayed from the unity of the days of Moses and Joshua. There is a hypothesis which is hard to discount (whose supporters include Dubnow, author of History of the Jews) that each tribe had its own judge, many of whose names are unknown to us owing to the fog of history. The land of the Jews, surrounded on all sides by the enemies of monotheism and humanity, not only faced the heat of their bellicosity, but was also subjected to their misleading proselytization. Because many of the Jewish people were illiterate, they sometimes succumbed to the loathsome beliefs of their neighbors and were drawn into heresy.

After Samson was killed, Philistine transgressions against Israel grew more severe. During the rule of the priest Eli, the fourteenth judge, the Jewish people suffered a great defeat, and Eli was killed. The last judge, the prophet Samuel, was then invested. Samuel was a skilled orator and was able to guide those among the nation’s people who had been led astray by venomous beliefs back to the true path and to keep alive the true religious sentiments of the Jews by uniting the tribes.

When the prophet Samuel attained old age, the era of the prophets also came to a close. The people asked him to appoint a king, but he declined on the grounds that with God’s presence, he saw no need for a king. He addressed the nation, warning that the king who would reign over them:

...will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. And he will take your men-servants, and your maid-servants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks; and ye shall be his servants. (First Samuel 8:14–17)

But the leaders of the people continued to insist. Samuel finally acceded to the people’s wishes and appointed Shaul ben Kish of the tribe of Benjamin—a brave leader—as king of the House of Israel. Each of the twelve tribes accepted this appointment. Shaul reigned
for sixteen years, from 1020 to 1004 B.C.E., and finally lost his life on the battlefield along with his son Jonathan. Shaul was a brave king, and worked hard to unify the tribes. One of his commanders, David ben Jesse, was betrothed to his daughter Michal. David was a fearless champion, possessed of a keen intellect, and highly talented. His amazing victory over the ferocious Philistine giant Goliath made him one of the enduring legendary figures of the Jewish people.

After Shaul, the leaders of the people chose the 30-year-old David as king. David reigned for 39 years, from 1004 to 965 B.C.E. He was an unrivalled genius. He was at once a first class poet, writer, and musician and also a military leader and statesman whose mastership astounded all. During his reign, the borders of the land of Israel were greatly expanded to encompass the territory between Egypt and the Euphrates. It was David who brought Moses' tablets of the Ten Commandments to Mount Zion and placed them in a tent while he built the glorious Temple. It was he who established the capital of the whole nation at Jerusalem in order to stop the quarreling amongst the tribes and establish brotherhood. It was he who established within the borders of his kingdom a central government without intransigence, selfishness, and oppression. David's personal life was, however, tragic. His son Amnon was killed by his other son, Absalom, who rebelled against his father and lost his life. Because his hands were stained with the blood of his battles, God did not permit David to complete the construction of the Temple. This job was left to his son, Solomon.

Solomon—whose fame is so universal that people other than the Jews have legends about him—reigned for 37 years, from 965 to 928 B.C.E. This period has been considered the Golden Age of Jewish history because there was neither war and strife nor drought and famine. There was instead dignity, purity, peace, security, and military strength which no neighbor dared to confront. Kings of other nations bowed their heads before Solomon, but the Jewish nation, for all its military power, did not covet other lands. Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. Like his father, he, too, composed verse.
WHO ARE THE JEWS?

His Song of Songs and Proverbs were immortalized when they were incorporated into the Bible. Commerce flourished to such an extent during his reign that it is said that Jewish ships sailed to Ethiopia and Yemen and from the Red Sea to India.

Solomon's greatest honor was the construction of the Temple. Because of this accomplishment, many of his sins—such as his marriage to non-Jewish women, the erection of pagan temples in the Holy Land, and the imposition of high taxes that ultimately caused the division of the Jewish nation—have been overlooked. Construction of the First Temple, which was to house the tablets of the Ten Commandments, took place between the fourth and eleventh years of his reign. Solomon also built a sumptuous palace for himself.

The death of Solomon marked the end of the Jewish nation's glory. A vast country was at once transformed into two separate lands. The northern part of the country, in which ten of the tribes lived, was called "Israel," and the southern part was called "Judea." The Northerners refused to pay high taxes and made the city of Samaria their capital, while the Southerners retained Jerusalem as their capital. The North's conflict with the South reached the point where northern kings prohibited pilgrims from going to Jerusalem and from time to time flirted with idolatry. Society fell into a state of decline. The conflict of the ten northern tribes with the two southern tribes weakened the Jewish people, leaving them vulnerable. It seems that obedience to God's commandments and the laws of Moses retained a place of honor in the South, but that the Northerners had not only become estranged from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but some of them had also become estranged from their religion. The kings of the North sometimes became so weak in their monotheism that they flirted with the worship of other gods. Ahab ben Omri, who reigned as king of Israel from 871 to 852 B.C.E., married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. Jezebel undertook the construction of an idolatrous temple and openly urged the people to practice idolatry. The foundations of monotheism were shaken, and some were ensnared. But the religious leaders succeeded in
preserving the Jewish faith in the northern portion of the Promised Land. The land of Judea, which was smaller, was further removed from the danger posed by the enemies of monotheism and remained safe from the stubborn proselytization of the infidels.

From 928 to 698 B.C.E.—that is, for 230 years—19 men ruled Israel, the last of whom was Hoshea ben Elah—the history of whose reign is recounted in the 17th chapter of Second Kings. During his time, the powerful and warlike nation of Assyria found Israel a vulnerable morsel and attacked it with a vast and mighty army. The king of Assyria at that time was Shalmaneser, who had occupied Egypt before attacking Israel. The Egyptian pharaoh played a role in fanning the flames of war between Assyria and Israel. The war lasted three years and after much death and destruction, Israel finally surrendered, and the ten tribes were taken captive by Assyria.

From this point on, the trail of the ten Jewish tribes was lost. Researchers and historians have proposed many theories about their fate, some of which are mere speculation, and others of which are based on evidence.

Shalmaneser’s attack against Israel and the capture of the Jews by the Assyrians was much harsher and crueler than Nebuchadnezzar’s attack against Judea and the destruction of the First Temple by the Chaldeans, which occurred a century and some decades later. In the end, however, history has preserved the latter, while the memory of the former has been effaced by the whirlwinds of time.

The Assyrian attack against Israel marks the beginning of the Jewish diaspora outside the Promised Land, and recalls Moses’ “encouragement-and-punishment” appeal to the House of Israel:

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all His commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all the nations of the earth. And these blessings shall come upon thee...But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command
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This diaspora began in 720 B.C.E., 134 years before Nebuchadnezzar’s attack against Judea and the destruction of the Temple. The storm which carried off the ten tribes was so mighty and fearsome that the most brilliant historical researchers have not been able to precisely determine where the ten lost tribes went and what became of them. It is from this year forward that the Jews of the diaspora—from the Himalayas to the Hindu Kush, Mount Damavand to the Alps, and from the cold regions of Siberia to the burning deserts of Arabia and Africa—have held their eternal book like a beloved to their bosoms. Despite coercion, oppression, and massacre, they have not allowed the blazing torch of mankind’s guidance to be extinguished. Although the diaspora has been wearisome and harrowing for them, it has served mankind as an object lesson in steadfastness and belief in God, justice, and law.

Years after the fall of Israel, a similar fate befell the land of Judea. This time, a great and terrible blow was struck which horrified the people, that is, the burning of the First Temple, which in 586 B.C.E. fell to the Chaldean army under the command of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. The people of Judea were taken captive to Babylon.

The independence of both Israel and Judea came to an end within a period of 134 years, and once again the Promised Land was out of their grasp. But did this mean the end of Judaism? History replies, “No.” For from this time forward, Judaism became more firmly established, and the hand of God supported the Jewish people in a different way. Although captivity and dispersion after a long life in the land of milk and honey subjected the Jews to many corporeal hardships, they became spiritually stronger day by day, and their faith, aspirations, and ideas were effective in the intellectual enlightenment of others. The cruelties suffered by Israel and Judea during a long period perfected the Jews, strengthening them like tempered
steel as they pursued their lofty goal of spreading monotheism and respect for the Law to the rest of mankind. The period of the Jewish captivity in Babylon was a time of awakening during which a nation progressed from infancy to maturity, wisdom, and wholeness. The corruption that was commonplace in Babylon served to show the Jews the value of their moral principles. In the words of Greek historians:

The Babylonians refrained from nothing to satisfy their lust. Babylonian men, in lieu of fulfilling their given responsibilities, openly encouraged their wives and daughters to become prostitutes. In their celebrations, they drank to excess and in a state of drunkenness committed lewd acts...Even the wives and daughters of leading families considered lewd acts to be within the bounds of decorum. (Pirniya, Iran-e Bastan, 2:1397–98)

It was during these years that the Jews saw with their own eyes the ugliness of the lives of those who were estranged from God and truly understood the value of their religious teachings. Life in Babylon became a crucible in which unrefined gold was placed and from which pure gold was extracted. It was during this time that the people’s attraction to the land of their forefathers grew and their desire to see Jerusalem burned stronger. They sang:

*By the rivers of Babylon,*  
*There we sat down, yea, we wept,*  
*When we remembered Zion.*  
*Upon the willows in the midst thereof*  
*We hanged up our harps.*  
*For there they that led us captive asked of us words of song,*  
*And our tormenters asked of us mirth:*  
*‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’*  
*How shall we sing the Lord’s song*  
*In a foreign land?*  
*If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,*  
*Let my right hand forget her cunning.*
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Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
If I remember thee not;
If I set not Jerusalem
Above my chiefest joy. (Psalm 137)

In this manner, the Jewish nation passed from the crucible of trial and took form. The homeless Jewish nation—whose numbers, excluding Levites, once reached four million during the reign of Solomon—declined greatly as a result of many battles, drought, disease, and captivity. But rather than completely disappearing and being relegated to the ranks of oblivion—as did many other nations of those times—it found new strength and moved forward. This was no longer the grumbling people of Moses’ time, and although Moses was no longer at their side, they had his book of law in their hands. Possessing the Bible, they needed no other prophet or leader. Not only in those times, but throughout all successive diasporas, in city and in countryside, in time of peace and in time of war, on days of mourning and on nights of merriment, in brightness and in darkness, they never set the Bible aside. Through their commitment to it, they felt secure in the shelter of an Eternal Guardian. The people’s book of law, the Torah, is a light shining upon the dark heart of mankind, and the people—for all their strayings and sins both upon their own soil and throughout this vast world—have been able to find their way by this light and miraculously survive thousands of hardships in a gloomy, bigoted world. The prisoners of Babylon were freed by Cyrus the Liberator. A group of them returned to the Promised Land and erected the Second Temple. Judea was re-established, but it later fell to the Greeks, and years later, to the Romans. Then it was the turn of the Islamic caliphs. The wars between the Muslims and the Christians for control of the holy city of Jerusalem—known as the Crusades—made the exalted status of the land of the Jews even more manifest. Later, the Ottomans took possession of that land which the Romans called Palestine, and after that, Great Britain became its master. It is amazing that after
all these tumultuous upheavals, God's ancient covenant with the Jewish people has been renewed, and the people have returned to Israel.

Judaism's adversaries have delighted in commenting on the short period of Israel and Judea's independence in centuries past, and have usually regarded the diaspora as evidence of Israel's unworthiness or mortal sin. But a comparison of the lives of other ancient nations with these two Jewish countries shows that any such notion is fraught with error. Assyria, for all its power, conquests, and plundering, lasted but 296 years. Babylon was independent for only 87 years. Media, the great conqueror of Ninevah and Assyria, was independent for 151 years. The independence of the Achaemenid state lasted no more than 229 years. The Elamite state, which was so crushed by Assyria that it never again rose, lasted 100 years. But the states of Judea and Israel lasted for 1,270 years, from the beginning of the rule of the judges until the destruction of the Second Temple, and if the historical existence of the Jewish nation is reckoned from the time of Abraham in 1812 B.C.E. until the restoration of Israel's independence in 1948 C.E., we reach the amazing total of 3,760 years. It is clear that this is not the end, and that with the passage of time the age of this eternal nation will increase.

In short, the Jews were the first people to recognize the one, unique God and to worship him. In those times, when the world was in darkness concerning moral principles and social relationships, the Jews kindled the enlightening torch of Law, and throughout successive centuries they have obstinately struggled to keep alive this magical torch, despite all hardships and afflictions. The Jews are a people who so cherish freedom that they have never sought to convert others to their faith through killing, bloodshed, coercion and threat of force, or to violate the rights of others.

Moses is their teacher, and they are the long-suffering mentors of mankind.
CHAPTER TWO
The First Jewish Settlers in Iran

There is a general belief that the first Jewish settlers in Iran were those held captive at Babylon and liberated by Cyrus, and that instead of returning to their homeland, they accompanied Cyrus' army to Iran, where no Jew had set foot prior to that time. The general public and some amateur historians concur on this point based on indisputable Biblical documentation which recounts in detail the relationship between the Jews and Iran during the Achaemenid dynasty. The prisoners of Babylon were comprised of those who had lived in Judea, including the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. But did not the other ten tribes have some connection to Iran? Did not the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, and Joseph who lived in the northern part of the Land of David, called Israel, set foot in Iran after their defeat and capture?

In the previous chapter, reference was made to the historical fact that after the reign of Solomon, his realm was divided into two parts. The northern part was called "Israel" and the southern part was called "Judea." It was also mentioned that 134 years before Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, bringing Judea to its knees and exiling the Jews to Babylon, the Assyrians conquered Israel, massacred the population, and scattered the survivors of the ten tribes throughout their empire. As a result, ancient Israel vanished, and the ten tribes were veiled by a curtain of obscurity which grew darker with the passage of time.

The prophet Joel said of the Assyrians:

A fire devoureth before them, and behind them a flame blazeth; the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing escapeth them. (Joel 2:3)

The question is this: A little more than a century before the Babylonian siege, did not a group of the Jews who were taken prisoner by the
Assyrians and left their homeland enter, either voluntarily or involuntarily, what was then Iranian territory?

It is difficult to give a definitive, documented answer to this question. The history of the ten lost tribes is one of the most uncertain, and at the same time most interesting, chapters of Jewish history. So much has been said and written about this subject that some have deemed it a fable. Hundreds of books and articles about the "ten lost tribes" are to be found, each of which deals with a separate region and identifies a certain people as descendants of one or several of these tribes. In fact, there are fewer countries and peoples to which no relation with the ten tribes has been ascribed than vice versa. From the religious leaders of Japan, known as "shindai," to the inhabitants of Australia, from the American Indians to the blacks of Africa, historical writings have found some link to the ten tribes. From India, the Caucasus, and Yemen to Ireland, Denmark, and America, all nations of the world have made some effort to trace the path of the ten tribes.

The main cause of this confusion is the shocking omission in the holy texts of any mention of the Israelites after the Assyrian victory. Why do these texts not mention the fate of the Assyrian prisoners, at least in passing? Two reasons may be cited. The first is that all of the Jews' sorrow was over Jerusalem, and this city was in Judea, separate from Israel. The other reason is that in Israel there were fewer scholars, scribes, believers, and people concerned with the future than there were in Judea. It was Judea, and particularly its capital, Jerusalem, which had orators and prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, farsighted scribes like Ezra, and capable administrators like Nehemiah, who strove to maintain the spirituality of the people, to bring order to the confusion resulting from two major defeats, and to preserve their history for future generations. Indeed, in the Bible we find ample references to the sacrilege of both the kings and some of the people of Israel, the result of which was the calamitous Assyrian onslaught. The ten northern tribes were unlettered, and thus left no historical records. There were no
religious books among them or men of letters to write their history. Perhaps they are not to be faulted, for they were far from the center of learning, history, and faith, that is, Jerusalem. The loss of literate men who adhered to the faith and were concerned with history created historical impoverishment among the ten northern tribes and invited future historians' speculation about the fate of the ten tribes.

The Assyrian onslaught against Israel was much more savage and ruinous than the Babylonian campaign against Judea, but because the Temple was in Judea, the story of the Assyrian atrocities, unlike that of the destruction and reconstruction of the Temple, was not recorded in the Bible. This added to the historical uncertainty concerning the ten tribes after they fell to the Assyrians. In Second Kings we read that:

   In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abel-beth-maacah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria. (Second Kings, 15:29)

This was the first major Assyrian assault against Israel, which took place from 741 to 739 B.C.E.

It was the policy of the tyrannical king of Assyria to deport the surviving population of conquered lands to other parts of the empire and to settle other conquered peoples in their places so that they would not be able to rise up and seek vengeance. Tiglath-Pileser III's policy of resettling prisoners of war, which helped to maintain Assyrian victories, was implemented more forcefully by other kings. This policy uprooted peoples and relegated them to the annals of history. Many of the peoples of those times of whom no trace remains suffered the same fate. The disappearance of the ten tribes is also a result of this Assyrian policy. One incomplete document from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III bears the names of
thousands of exiles from Galilee, among which the names of figures who appear in the Bible are to be found.\(^3\)

Several years after this terrible assault, in 720 B.C.E., the king of Israel, Hoshea ben Elah, rose up against the Assyrians who had occupied a portion of Israel. The tyrannical king of Assyria, Shalmaneser V, became enraged against Israel, seized Samaria, the capital of Israel, and took control of the whole country. His successor, Sargon II:

...brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Avva, and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. (Second Kings 17:24)

This policy was also practiced by his son, Sennacherib.

If the practice of resettling conquered peoples as described in the above biblical verse was in fact implemented, then where were the Jewish survivors of Israel taken? Rather than resorting to concocting fables that are far removed from any historical reality, we should consider the following hypothesis: some of the survivors of the ten tribes of Israel went to Iran.

We will present some credible evidence in support of this hypothesis, although we will not be able to completely prove it (a difficult task which would require extensively detailed research).

The first and most solid piece of evidence supporting this theory is found in the Bible. It is true that because of Judea's learned men and the importance of Jerusalem, many details about the Judean prisoners of Babylon were recorded in the Bible. But the Bible is not completely silent about the Assyrian prisoners. It would suffice to find in the Bible one reference about the forced resettlement of Assyria's Israeli prisoners in Iran and to consider it testimony to the truth of the above-stated theory. This reference is to be found in Second Kings 17:6, which states:

\(^3\)EJ, 6:1034.
In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away unto Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and in Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

The city of Halah corresponds to the city of Calah, which was the capital of Assyria before Ninevah.

Where were the cities of the Medes? They were cities which at the time of the second Assyrian campaign against Israel were under Assyrian rule. The Assyrians had previously occupied Media, which included the western and northern regions of present-day Iran as far as Mount Damavand and the Kevir-e Lut desert—which they considered to be the end of the world—and resettled their Median prisoners in other occupied territories of the Assyrian Empire. The Gozan River is one of the tributaries of the Euphrates River, and the cities of Halah and Khabur were in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan. It can therefore be said that what was meant by “the cities of the Medes,” was a place further away, that is, in present-day Iranian Kurdistan. Documents later discovered in the vicinity of Nimrud and other Kurdish areas, and in particular Hebrew names mentioned in these documents, support the historical truth of the exile of Assyria’s Israeli prisoners to western Iran.

The second supporting factor is to be found by examining the path generally followed by prisoners at that time. A study of the civil and military practices of the times clearly shows that captive peoples, either by force or of their own volition, were drawn toward the capturing power. This phenomenon held true even during the reign of Cyrus, who by no means countenanced oppression of defeated nations. A group of freed Jewish prisoners in Babylon, rather than returning to the land of their birth, was drawn to Iran by the magnetism of the conquering power. Clearly, when force is also applied, this attraction becomes all the more intense, and thus it was with the Assyrians who conquered Israel. At that time, they

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4EJ, 10:1296.
held sway over the entire land of Media, and on this basis, it can be said that some, if not all of the captive Jews of Israel held by the Assyrians, were taken to western and northern Iran, and that gradually, with the passage of time, they dispersed from the northern region toward the east, and by the time Assyria collapsed—before the arrival of the Babylonian captives—Jews were established in a country called "Iran." In fact, the dispersal of the ten tribes within Iran was different from the dispersal of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who lived in Judea and were captured by the Babylonians. The Jews of Israel went from Samaria to Aleppo, Ninevah, Kurdistan, and Azerbaijan, and thence to Gilan, Mazandaran, Gorgan, and Khorasan, while the Judean Jews went from Jerusalem to Babylon, Elam, Shush, Stakhr, and Pasargadae, and later were drawn to other cities of Iran such as Yazd, Kerman, Kashan, and Isfahan. It might be possible to say that some of the Jews who lived in Bokhara, Samarqand, Kabul, and Khwarazm and also in the Caucasus and Georgia are descended from the ten lost tribes. The roads traveled by the ten tribes of Israel and the two tribes of Judea in Iran and neighboring countries were separate. It is probably for this reason that the Jews of Isfahan consider themselves to be of the tribe of Judah and that the Jews of Hamadan believe they are of the tribe of Simeon, most of them having chosen the name "Simeon" for their male children in generations past.

The third factor supporting the notion that the first exiled Jewish prisoners in Iran were of the ten tribes is the historical accounts of travelers and curious historians who, though not having produced complete proof through the touchstone of research, have produced important historical documentation.

Josephus, the renowned Jewish historian of the 1st century C.E., that is, 700 years after the Assyrian captivity of the Israelites, writes:

...the ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude and not to be estimated in numbers. (EJ, 15:1004)
The definition of the region “beyond the Euphrates” and whether it includes western Iran is not explicitly stated, but a glance at a historical atlas suggests the possibility that it includes a portion of Iran.

Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th century Jewish traveler who visited Iran about a century before Marco Polo, gives a detailed account of the ten lost tribes in his travelogue, Sefer ha-massa’ot. The writings of this traveler, who began his journeys in 1165 C.E. and entered Iran during the reign of Sultan Sanjar, are reliable, and the text of his travelogue has often been cited. However, nineteen centuries had passed between the Assyrian resettlement of the tribes of Israel in Iran and Benjamin of Tudela’s time, and, of course, his account of this subject may merely be the oral traditions of his own times. In any event, Benjamin of Tudela makes reference to the great number of Iranian Jews and provides numbers for the Jewish populations of Gorgan, Samarqand, and Bokhara. He also traveled to the cities of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. Regarding the Jews of Azerbaijan he writes:

Five days thence [from Baghdad] to ‘Amaria with five and twenty thousand Jews. This congregation forms part of those, which live in the mountains of Chaphton and which amount to more than one hundred, extending to the frontiers of Media.

These Jews are descendants of those, who were originally led into captivity by king Shalmanesser; they speak the syriac [sic] language and among them are many excellent thalmudic scholars; they are neighbours to those of the city of ‘Amaria, which is situated within one days [sic] journey of the empire of Persia, the king of which they obey and to whom they pay a tribute. This is collected by a deputy and amounts here as well as in all mahomedan countries to one Amiri of gold—equal to one and one third golden Maravedi—for each male inhabitant of the age of fifteen and upwards. (Benjamin of Tudela, pp. 121-22)

In this account, Benjamin of Tudela several times mentions the “River Gozan,” along which lay, according to Second Kings, the towns to which Assyria’s Israeli captives were exiled. It is interesting that he speaks of the Jews living along the Gozan River once while speaking of Tabaristan, a second time while speaking of Ghazna
[Ghaznin], and a third time while speaking of Nishapur. The cause for this ambiguity, which seems unlikely for a great traveler like him, might lie in this: that because the prisoners of Assyria were given a place next to the Gozan River, in the several places in northern Iran where he spoke of these prisoners and saw that their town was next to a river, he thought that river to be a continuation of the previous river and called it "the Gozan."

*The Jewish Encyclopedia* states:

In 1835 Asahel Grant, an American physician, was appointed by the American Board of Foreign Missions to pursue his calling among the Nestorians of Mesopotamia. He found among them a tradition that they were descendants of the Lost Ten Tribes, a tradition which had already been gathered by Smith and White [*sic*] during their earlier mission ("Researches in Armenia," vol. ii.). He found also among the Jews of the neighborhood of Urumiah recognition of this tradition, which he considered to be confirmed by the following facts: they dwelt in the neighborhood to which the Israelites were originally deported, while Josephus declared that the Ten Tribes lived beyond the Euphrates up to his time ("Ant." xi. 5, § 3), and his statement is confirmed by Jerome ("Opera," vi. 780); their language is a branch of the Aramaic; they still offer sacrifices and first-fruits like the ancient Israelites, and they prepare for the Sabbath on the preceding evening; they have Jewish names and Jewish features. (*JE*, 12:250)

According to documents which another Jewish traveler, Baruch Gad, presented to the rabbis of Jerusalem in 1647, he had seen the "Children of Moses" (Tribe of Levi) in Iran, and they gave him a letter to deliver to the rabbis.5

*Encyclopaedia Judaica* writes concerning the Jews of Kurdistan, which includes parts of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey:

An ancient tradition relates that the Jews of Kurdistan are the descendants of the Ten Tribes from the time of the Assyrian exile. The first to mention this was R. Benjamin of Tudela, the

5*EJ*, 10:1296.
12th century traveler who visited Kurdistan in about 1170 and found more than 100 Jewish communities. (EJ, 10:1296)

The Jews of Kurdistan spoke an Aramaic with insertions of Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Arabic, and Hebrew words. They called it the "language of the Targum" or *Lishna Yehudiyya* ("language of the Jews"), as well as *Lashon ha-Galut*. The Nestorian Christians who live in this region also speak Aramaic, which they refer to as "Syrian." (EJ, 10:1298)

Another traveler, who coincidentally is also named Benjamin and is known in Jewish history as "Benjamin II," went to Kurdistan in 1848. He also supports the view that the Jews of Kurdistan are descended from the ten tribes. He believes that the Nestorians, or Assyrians, of Kurdistan are descended from the tribes of Dan and Naphtali, and notes that although they have changed religion, they still maintain some Jewish customs. They do not mix with other Christians but marry within their community. Many stories relate that descendants of the ten tribes exiled by the kings of Assyria to Kurdistan frequently converted to other religions.

In the middle of the seventh century, after the Arab conquest, a surrender treaty was concluded between them and the Jews of Kurdistan, and thereafter the status of Jews in the region was transformed. Generally speaking, they led a hard life of poverty and want. There was no small number of erudite and distinguished persons amongst them, but most of them were employed in shopkeeping, vending, weaving, dying, carpentry, cobbling, and the like. If they were employed in agriculture, they chose to live in Jewish-populated villages. The Jews of Kurdistan, regardless of their social status, had a reputation for bravery, as did other people of this area. Little is known of them from the time of the Arab conquest until the 16th century, and from that point forward, the numbers provided by travelers indicate widespread changes amongst the Jews of Kurdistan. The number of Jews in the cities of the region fluctuated erratically. This must be attributed to the instability of their financial situation and to their insecurity, as they were constantly moving in search of
bread and security. Anti-Semitic movements eventually drove them completely out of this area. In the mid-twentieth century, after the independence of Israel, many of the Jews of Kurdistan returned to the land of their forebears.

**Khorasanzan of Yore: Present-Day Afghanistan**

Another place to which a link with the ten lost tribes has been ascribed in Jewish history is old Khorasanzan, which includes wide areas of present-day Afghanistan. Again, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* writes on this subject:

Early Karaite and Rabbanite biblical commentators regarded Khorasanzan as a location of the lost Ten Tribes. Afghanistan annals also trace the Hebrew origin of some of the Afghan tribes, in particular the Durrani, the Yussafzai, and the Afridi, to King Saul (Talut)…

Medieval sources mention several Jewish centers in Afghanistan, of which Balkh was the most important. A Jewish community in Ghazni is recorded in Muslim sources, indicating that Jews were living there in the 10th and 11th centuries. A Jew named Isaac, an agent of Sultan Mahmud (ruled 998–1030), was assigned to administer the sultan's lead mines and to melt ore for him. According to Hebrew sources, vast numbers of Jews lived in Ghazni but while their figures are not reliable, Moses ibn Ezra mentions (1080) over 40,000 Jews paying tribute in Ghazni and Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1170) describes “Ghazni the great city on the River Gozan, where there are about 80,000 [8,000 in a variant manuscript] Jews…”...

A Jewish community in Firoz Koh, capital of the medieval rulers of Ghur or Ghuristan, situated halfway between Herat and Kabul, is mentioned in *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, a chronicle written in Persian (completed around 1260) by al-Juzjani. This is the first literary reference to Jews in the capital of the Ghurids. About 20 recently-discovered stone tablets, with Persian and Hebrew inscriptions dating from 1115 to 1215, confirm the existence of a Jewish community there. The Mongol invasion in 1222 annihilated Firoz Koh and its Jewish community...

The Mongol invasion, epidemics, and constant warfare made inroads into Jewish communities in Afghanistan throughout the
centuries, and little is known about them until the 19th century when they are mentioned in connection with the flight of the *anusim* of Meshed after the forced conversions in 1839. Many of the refugees fled to Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Bokhara, settling in Herat, Maimana, Kabul, and other places with Jewish communities, where they helped to enrich the stagnating cultural life. Nineteenth-century travelers (Wolff, Vâmbéry, Neumark, and others) state that the Jewish communities of Afghanistan were largely composed of these Meshed Jews... The language spoken by Afghan Jews is not the Pushtu of their surroundings but a Judeo-Persian dialect in which they have produced fine liturgical and religious poetry. (EJ, 2:326–7)

Another city of Khorasan where individuals from the ten tribes are said to have lived is Nishapur. Sir John Malcolm, the English ambassador to Iran who published his *History of Iran* in 1815, writes about the Jews living between Khorasan and India that many of them believed that they were of the tribes of Israel, and that even some of the emirs of ancient Khorasan considered themselves to be descendants of Shaul and David. After the advent of Islam, a great number of these Jews, particularly those who live in present-day Afghanistan, converted to the new religion. Itzhak Ben-Zvi (Fig. 1 & 2), in his *The Exiled and the Redeemed* (נודר ואזר), opines that the Jews of northern Iran settled in Afghanistan during the Achaemenid dynasty, probably during the reign of Cambyses. He says these Jews were a mix of Assyrian and Babylonian prisoners, and, of course, the first group is descended from the ten tribes of Israel. Ben-Zvi writes that some of the Muslim tribes of Afghanistan do not deny that they are descended from the ten tribes of Israel. Jewish travelers have spoken since the Middle Ages of the Israelite origins of some of the Afghan tribes who migrated there from Iran. According to Ben-Zvi, the Afghans have a set of laws based on oral traditions called “Pukhtun-Wally,” most of which are former Jewish laws. He writes:

Emir Abdul Rahman, grandfather of the former Afghan Shah Amanallah, stated expressly in his *History of the Afghans* that the Afghans were of Jewish descent. (Ben-Zvi, p. 217)
He thereupon cites S. Menahem Lazar, stating that in the past, many Israelites lived in Afghanistan, all of whom were emigrants from Iran, with their own social administration and religious leaders. Relations between these emigrants and the Iranian Jews were not severed for a long time, and for the most part they communicated concerning religious teachings and regulations. But later, when Islam triumphed in Afghanistan, the status of the Afghan Jews also changed. A number of the Jewish tribes of Afghanistan who converted to Islam nonetheless preserved most of the customs and traditions of Judaism. One of these tribes, the Musa-zay, who live on the border between Russia and Afghanistan and who remained Jewish until the 19th century, are pastoralists with whom fragments of the Torah are to be found. Afghan claims of descent from the ten tribes of Israel have been noted and discussed by most Islamic writers, and some Western researchers have also referred to this relationship. One such researcher, George Moore, traces the identity of the Afghans back to the ten tribes in his The Lost Tribes.

Itzhak Ben-Zvi, whose research on the lost tribes of the House of Israel leads to credible conclusions regarding the Caucasus, cites evidence from this same region. He writes that the And, Nawar, and Tsiz tribes, who live in the foothills of the Caucasus and who are today Muslims, as well as the Dagestanis, are descended from the tribes of Israel and Iranian Jewish emigrants, know the Persian language, and have preserved some of the old customs. He also believes that the Jews of Bokhara and Samarqand are descended from the ten lost tribes.6

The last attestation that some individuals from the ten tribes were the first Jewish settlers in Iran is produced by the Jews of this land. Although this evidence is not strong from the standpoint of scholarly research, it may nonetheless be useful in a broad and serious study of the ten lost tribes and their residency in Iran. This evidence consists of the following:

6Ben-Zvi, pp. 50–51.
The Jews of Damavand, or Gil'ad, insist that they are descended from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Naphtali and claim that they are descended from the Assyrian prisoners who were exiled to Iran. This belief may be consistent with the actions of the king of Assyria regarding the Israeli prisoners whom he resettled in Damavand, which he thought to be the end of the earth. That is, if the settlement of the Jews in Damavand and its environs coincides with the removal by the Assyrians of the Medes from this region, then more consideration may be given to what the Jews of Damavand say about their origins. According to Pirniya's Tarikh-e Iran, the King of Assyria attacked Media in 744 B.C.E., defeated its tribes one after the other, annexed Media to his vast empire, seized over 60,000 Iranian prisoners, and took them to Calah (Halah), the capital of Assyria.7

Three years later, in 741 B.C.E., the Assyrians sent tens of thousands of Israeli prisoners to Damavand and the cities of the Medes. The oral traditions of the Jewish people of Damavand, who have not studied the history of Assyria and who are also unaware of their own history as a people, are in accord with the Assyrian policy of resettlement. In fact, in order to crush the spirit of the ten tribes—a brave and courageous people who withstood the onslaught of the bloodthirsty Assyrian army for three years—the Assyrians deported them to the very "end of the earth," the abode of the White Demon,8 so that they would have nothing to fear from them.

More interesting is the name "Gil'ad," which the Jews gave to this area. We know that Gilead is the name of a region in Erez Israel, a place where some of the ten tribes lived. If we do not allow that the inhabitants of Israeli Gilead were directly deported to this place, then we must suppose that the amazing similarity between the climates of Damavand and Israeli Gilead was so great that the new inhabitants of Damavand recognized in it their birthplace, Gilead.

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7Pirniya, Tarikh-e Iran az aghaz ta enqeraz-e Sasaniyan, p. 49.
8TN: In Iranian mythology, the formidable "White Demon" (div-e sefid) ruled over Damavand before being killed by the epic hero Rostam.
Both places have fertile plains and are well watered. Each plain is surrounded by fairly high mountains, there are many pastures for livestock, and the air is pleasant and pure. About a century and a half after the settlement of the prisoners of Israel in this area, Ezra the scribe, the great leader of the Jews who tried to return the scattered tribes to Israel, during the return trip from Iran to Judea took upon himself the arduous thousand-kilometer journey from Susa, the southernmost point of Iran, to Damavand. He gave a large group of his coreligionists the good tidings of the return to the homeland, and encouraged the former prisoners to return to Israel. But he was not completely successful.

The next point concerns some issues which we encounter in the present age, and again, however small and trivial they may appear, they may help unravel the mystery of the ten tribes, and, as the saying goes, "put the end of the thread in the hand." For example, if, as has been said, the course of the prisoners of Israel took them to the northern areas of what was then Iran, that is, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Gilan, Mazandaran, Damavand, Khorasan extending to Samarkand, Bokhara, Herat, and Kabul, then it is interesting to note that the Jews of northern and western Iran generally call themselves "Israelites" while the Jews of southern Iran call themselves "Jews." This brings to mind that the Promised Land was divided after the reign of Solomon, that the northern part was named "Israel" while the southern part was named "Judea," that the Assyrians, during the time of the Medes, forcefully resettled the people of the country of Israel to northern and western Iran, and that some of the people of Judea voluntarily settled in southern and eastern Iran during the reign of Cyrus.

Also, when Afghan tribesmen are encountered who, despite the fact that they are Muslims, observe some of the old customs of the Jews of Israel, we can consider it support for the view that in the past, the large group of Jews who comprised the ten tribes flowed

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9TN: Persian: سر نخ را به دست دادن.
into this region. From the reports of two witnesses who travelled to Afghanistan on business in the first half of the 20th century, we learn that the link between the Muslim Afghan tribes and the lost tribes has not been completely severed, and parallels, however faint and partial, may be found in this regard. According to the accounts of these two, one of whom is named “Mehdi-tash” and the other “Ilyas,” every man of the Afridi tribe, who make their living through livestock herding and agriculture, has pe’ot, locks of hair that faithful Jews grow next to their temples and which hang curled next to the ear lobes. They always keep a long, white cloth draped over their shoulders which they spread on the ground instead of a prayer rug. This cloth was probably the very same tallith which Jewish men drape over their shoulders while praying. On Friday nights, they light lamps and place them under baskets. Although they are Muslims, they consider themselves to be descended from the lost tribes of the House of Israel.

All in all, the belief that Assyrian oppression led to the complete eradication of the ten tribes of the House of Israel is untenable. What has strengthened this idea is the silence of historical researchers on the relation of historical Iran with the ten tribes. It is surprising that even historians such as Graetz and Dubnow, who have achieved worldwide renown for their general studies of Jewish history and whose works have been used in the preparation of this book, have neither themselves conducted an independent study of this subject, nor have they mentioned the opinions of others. It is this inattention, especially the failure to consider the formerly common principle of scattering prisoners throughout the territory of the conquering empire, that has led some Jewish historians astray, especially those in Europe, and caused them to utter incredible statements about the fate of the Jewish tribes held captive by the Assyrians.

The resettlement of the Jews of ancient Israel by the kings of Assyria is a certainty, and that some of them were moved to “the
cities of the Medes" is even more certain, as attested by the Bible. This is exactly what is recounted in this summary, so that it may become clear that the Jewish prisoners of Assyria came to Iran before the Jewish prisoners of Babylon, and that these were the first emigrants to this land.

It is a near certainty that many people from the ten tribes of Israel gradually mixed with those of the two tribes of Judea in the vast area of the latter diaspora. For example, during the time of Ardashir III, worship of the goddess Anahita took on a national aspect, and Ardashir commanded that she be worshipped throughout his vast empire. But the Jews in the land of Judea, which was at that time occupied by Iran, refused to comply with the order. As a result, Ardashir III exiled many of the inhabitants of Jericho, who were the primary instigators of the revolt, beyond Damavand, and these Jews took up residency in Gorgan. In this manner, Israelites and Judeans commingled in northern Iran. Many times this same kind of commingling occurred in other forms in other places.

The Bible also attests to this national commingling. The prophet Ezekiel, who merits the title "hope-giver of the captives," mentions the "elders of the house of Israel" by the River Khabur in the land of the Chaldeans (Ezekiel 8:12) and also "the elders of Judah" (Ezekiel 8:1). This indicates that the captives of Israel and the captives of Judah came face to face in Babylon and lived together within the space of a century and a half. The prophet Isaiah writes:

And he will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather together the scattered of Judah from the four corners of the earth. (Isaiah 11:12)

The prophet Zechariah, who lived at the time of the construction of the Second Temple during the reign of Darius I, in 516 B.C.E., that is, 225 years after the capture of the first of the ten tribes, says:

And it shall come to pass that, as ye were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you,
and ye shall be a blessing; fear not, but let your hands be strong.

(Zechariah 8:13)

This last verse indicates that the ten tribes of Israel remained alive and well in a fortress of divine law after surviving more than two centuries of the darkest period in their history—the time of blood-thirsty tyrants like Tiglath-Pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sennacherib. The conclusion that they were assimilated amongst the Assyrians or that they forever disappeared is far from the truth.

In short, the ten tribes did not disappear. Nor were they lost. They were dispersed, and some of made their way to Iran. Later, under the protection of the Achaemenid kings, a number of other Assyrian Israelite captives emigrated to “the cities of Media,” including Gil’ad of Damavand. In any event, each of the scattered twelve tribes established communities throughout the world and finally returned to the land of their forefathers, Israel. It is clear that during the long years of the diaspora many Jews, whether of the ten tribes or the two southern tribes, were either converted to other monotheistic religions by force or fell by the wayside under the influence of the blind demons of extremism, coldheartedness, and ignorance.

Perhaps those Westerners who speak of “the ten lost tribes” and lead themselves astray imagining that the American Indians, the blacks of Africa, and the aborigines of Australia are descended from these tribes should be told:

There was water in the jug, yet we wandered about in thirst
The beloved was at home, yet we searched the world over

The traces of the ten tribes are not to be found in lands far from the East. Either by compulsion or by choice, they went east and traversed the road from Mesopotamia to the land of the Medes, northern Iran, Khwarazm, ancient Khorasan, and India. They were the first Jews to emigrate to Iranian territory.

\[10\text{TN: Persian:}
آب در خانه، و ما تشنه لبنان می گردیم.
یار در خانه، و ما گرد جهن می گردیم.