

PRESTIGE AND PIETY IN THE IRANIAN SYNAGOGUE¹

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Among Iranian Jews, long deprived of meaningful political power and afraid to conspicuously display material wealth, relative prestige became more valued than authority of opulence. The synagogue provides the traditional public forum where meaningful interaction among its members reinforces rank differences. Through a network of concerns centering upon the apportioning of ritual honors, the synagogue provides mechanisms for limited social mobility. This paper examines the processes of selecting the recipients of these honors, the strategies of participation and their manipulation by the potential social climber.

Despite the frequent assertion by sociologists and social historians that the synagogue is the central institution in traditional Jewish society, there is a remarkable dearth of competent description or analysis of synagogue behavior. Most of the available material is limited to a discussion of the synagogue's physical structure and the ideal mechanics of its organization and operation, but little has been said about processual matters, although there is considerable insightful fiction dealing with the American synagogue (Deshen 1969, 1970, 1972, 1974; Heilman 1975, 1976).

This article focuses on certain procedures of the synagogues of Shiraz, a provincial city in southern Iran, observed during 1967 and 1968.² Much of the accompanying analysis is somewhat applicable to behavioral patterns observed in other oriental as well as some occidental synagogues. The procedures described also supplement the literature currently available on the formal mechanisms of Middle Eastern face-to-face interaction and presents a perspective on their function which differs somewhat from those proposed by Bourdieu (1966) and Abou-Zeid (1966), among others.

The Setting

Jews first settled in Iran during the 6th century B. C. E., and have probably been in the southwestern province of Fars ever since. They constituted part of the found-

ing population of Islamic Shiraz in the 7th century C. E., where they have been an important component of the urban population (15+%) until recently (now less than 3%).

The Jews of Shiraz have been more harassed and intimidated than most Iranian Jews and their lives less secure than in many other places Jews have lived. One result of frequent persecution has been the inhibition of free social development, marked, for example, by a lack of visible political structures (Loeb 1977). Jews treated political power with ambivalence, fearing involvement with the authorities.

The only social institution in which the entire Jewish community participates is the *knisa*, 'synagogue,'³ of which there are a considerable number in the city. Here, largely concealed from the outside world, men can vie for a measure of influence in procedural decision making. The decision-making process culminates in a consensus only after the issues have been disputed and factions formed to support the contending personalities. The weight of communal opinion depends primarily on the relative religious and secular prestige of the protagonists. The main 'bone of contention' in Shirazi Jewish social life is *prestige*; the elite (top ranked) have it and wish to deny it to others. Everyone else wants a greater share.

Although Shirazi Jewish society is clearly *not* egalitarian, neither can it be sharply demarcated into bounded classes

nor strata. Rather a ranking system is operative, whose composite scale is the product of several prestige scales. Prestige (influence) is measured by indices of kin, affluence, occupation, religious knowledge, piety and education. Like Stirling (1965: 233), I am unable to derive the precise rank of all Shirazis since a) it is difficult to evaluate the relative weight given the various indices in each particular case, and b) prestige fluctuates through accrual or loss of honor.

In the past, social mobility among Shirazi Jews was very limited. Kinship, perhaps the most important single factor in rank, is not subject to major alteration. Great wealth always guaranteed acceptance into the elite, but wealth was unavailable to most potential social climbers. Bettering one's occupation might enhance one's prestige, but this alone did not guarantee acceptance into the elite. Today, some can circumvent the tedious struggle to achieve higher rank by use of a shortcut, i.e., by becoming college-trained professionals (doctors or engineers) or by becoming high-level government employees. But for most potential social climbers, only traditional means are available.

Two traditional mechanisms which simultaneously serve to a) reinforce rank differences and b) allow social mobility are: *ta'arof* (the Persian code of formal behavior) and the auctioning of *kvodot* (ritual honors). Each of these is a procedure dealing with transactions involving honor, and will be considered shortly.

Honor

Honor is understood to be a value associated with relative prestige which may be exchanged in face-to-face situations. It is also a valuation, composed of two factors:

1. an individual's self-estimation (pride), i.e. his claim to rank;
2. society's acknowledgement of this claim (deference, respect) confirming his right to rank.

In Iran, as throughout the Middle East and circum-Mediterranean, honor is the

critical factor in social relations (cf. Peristany 1966). The Jew considered devoid of honor was publicly insulted and forced to suffer various indignities by the population at large. Nevertheless, within Jewish community life, honor with its traditional Persian ramifications, became an essential complex in the Jewish value system. Despite the Shirazi Jew's preoccupation with physical survival—perhaps because real wealth and security were unattainable goals—honor became as much sought after as wealth.

Honor can be acquired, added to, saved, exchange and even spent (e.g. in exchange for loans, political power, etc.). It is suggested that the whole system of honor exchange could be fruitfully analyzed in economic terms, but that is not the subject of this paper.

The loss of honor (shame), no matter how slight, is a very serious matter. The offended withdraws, becomes sullen and often sulks by himself. He avoids the offender at all costs. If amends are not made, the offended individual may attempt to enlist support and has been known to spread rumors about the offender. Defense of one's honor is almost always verbal. When, infrequently, outright anger ensues, it is always contained before it reaches the point of violence.

In this presentation, the concern is with personal honor, which in most situations among Shirazi Jews, outweighs other kinds (e.g. family honor).

Ta'arof

Ta'arof refers to the Persian system of polite formal behavior, verbal and non-verbal, by which means honor exchanges are transacted in face-to-face situations. Descriptions of *ta'arof* are found in Charidin (1923:188), Waring (1807:101-3), Bishop (1891, I:196-7) and Wills (1883:28-32) among others. It used to be most strictly observed by the elite to reinforce rank differentiation, and it was considered the model of proper behavior, much imitated by the rest of the population.

Among the Jews of Shiraz, the elite is now affecting Western manners and less frequently initiates ta'arof exchanges. In its pristine form, ta'arof is best preserved among society's more conservative elements: the aged, religious and poor. Shirazis have maintained ta'arof to a degree rarely observed elsewhere in Iran.

The fundamental meaning of ta'arof, 'offer,' gives a clue to its most important process. The offer may, for example, be in the street, when acquaintances meet: "befarmayid!" . . . 'please' (come along, be my guest, etc.), by which the speaker implies that the other should accompany him to his house. Such offers are never accepted; nor are they meant to be.

A variety of offers are made in guest situations.⁴ The guest is offered a seat of honor, *bala*, 'up front,' away from the entrance. He may then be offered (the order varies) the water pipe, tea, nuts, raisins, fruit and perhaps a meal. At the meal the guest is offered the choice portions of food to the point of satiation and beyond, for the host may finally resort to placing the food in the protesting guest's mouth. The guest, on the other hand, no matter how hungry he is and no matter how little food he is given, must leave food on the plate to demonstrate that the host has been overly generous. Should a chance remark slip from the guest's mouth that some item belonging to the host pleases him, the latter will press the guest to accept it as a gift, for the host will declare: "manzel-e-man, khod-e-tun"—'my house is your own.'

The target of the offer is expected to politely refuse it. Repeated offers are declined and great power of persuasion may be necessary to force their acceptance. If more than one guest is present, the initial target of the offers must attempt to defer the honor of acceptance to the others. Eventually, each person present will accept the offer in rank order, from highest to lowest. Should someone accept out of turn, everyone else who considers himself to have been slighted, with adamantly refuse to accept at all.

Ta'arof in Knisa

Ta'arof is the foundation of the traditional code of synagogue behavior. Thus, with regard to seating: the most prestigious sit nearest the western wall (in which the Tora scrolls are kept), away from the entrance. Synagogue 'guests' are asked to sit *bālā* and they accept a place befitting their rank.

The ta'arof mechanism is of central importance in one of the synagogue's critical procedures: the selection of the *shaliaḥ zibbur*. The *shaliaḥ zibbur* leads the congregation in worship. Each *knisa* has one chief *shaliaḥ zibbur*, and several regular substitutes. At some time or other, nearly every male, literate in Hebrew, acts in this role. The chief *shaliaḥ zibbur*, who ranks high on indices of piety and learning, is considered among the *knisa*'s elite, although usually not being wealthy, he ranks considerably lower in the community's overall ranking. The opportunity to perform as *shaliaḥ zibbur* is eagerly sought after (as it is among Jews all over the world), since it identifies one as pious and learned, qualities highly respected in Shiraz.

If the chief *shaliaḥ zibbur* is present, he usually begins by offering the honor of leading worship to someone else, with the words: "agbaye so-and-so, *bakhavod*"—"Mr. so-and-so, with the honor" (using the Hebrew terms for honor). Mr. so-and-so declines the offer and offers it back, or, less often, defers to someone else. The chief *shaliaḥ zibbur* may now offer the honor to someone else, to several others, perhaps returning to his original choice, or he may persist immediately with his first choice. On Sabbaths and holidays, the chief *shaliaḥ zibbur* is expected to lead the worship and the offers are then made pro forma, since no one would accept the honor on these occasions.

This *kavod* (honor) is first offered to the substitute *shliḥey zibbur*. Next it is offered to others in order of general rank, with somewhat more weight given to knowledge of Judaica and piety than in secular ta'arof situations. One need not wait to be offered

a kavod, but may take the initiative in offering it to others at any time, providing one is literate.

Such ta'arof is a game, albeit a serious one. Its object is for the individual to accrue as much honor as possible. One 'scores' by: (1) accepting the offer after much protestation, (2) deferring the honor upward to the individual who accepts it, (3) magnanimously bestowing it on someone lower in rank, (4) pressing it on a near equal. All participants in these exchanges gain honor, though in different measure depending on their rank, posture during the exchange, and other variables. Non-participants suffer relative loss however slight. Because illiterate congregants cannot participate in these exchanges, the prestige gap between them and literate congregants would be everwidening were there no countering mechanisms in operation here, in knisa.

Things being equal, it is best to accept the honor offered (after appropriate refusal). One should not, however, accept an honor offered by someone very much higher in rank, should he make the mistake of offering it. He would appear to be mocking the recipient and this is frowned upon, both parties sharing a consequent loss of honor. The proper strategy is to defer the honor elsewhere, preferably upward, to avoid embarrassment. One may accept an honor offered from below, since such is one's due.

The ta'arof exchange for selecting a shaliaḥ zibbur usually lasts 2 or 3 minutes. Only 8 to 10 men, out of a much larger congregation, participate in the selection. Men can inject themselves into the transaction at any point, and do so. After the first exchanges, the participants usually sense who is eventually going to accept the kavod. The signs are subtle. The recipient's attempts at deferring are quieter and less convincing than those of the others. Instead of gesturing with the offer and looking toward the potential recipient, he will studiously look at the floor. Even if initial offers are not directed at him, he

will initiate his own offers. In terms of total number, the eventual recipient tends to make more frequent offers than anyone else. In this way, he covertly proclaims that he wants the kavod, while he overtly demonstrates his modesty, apparently only accepting the honor because everyone is deferring to him.

One who has *yerze'it*, 'memorial day,' or is in mourning, may feel that he has a priority claim to this honor on a given day, without regard to rank. He may seize the honor without even perfunctory deferral, usually without loss of honor. Honor-gaining strategies also depend on mood. One may simply not want to act as shaliaḥ zibbur and will instead accept a lesser honor by deferring. One of high rank may defer to one of lower rank who is more pious or learned or has a better voice. The elite need not participate at all, without penalty, since as Julian Pitt-Rivers (1966: 37) puts it: "Just as capital assures credit, so the possession of honor guarantees against dishonour."

Sometimes, one of low rank may cut through the ta'arof and seize the honor of leading the worship. Such mavericks lose more honor than they gain, since this is in violation of the rules. The ultimate loss of honor faces those who frequently resort to such tactics. They may be stopped by the *ḥazzan*, 'overseer,' of the knisa and asked to desist.

The Purchase of Kvodot

This is the second mechanism being considered. Kvodot (sing. kavod—lit. 'honor') are certain ritual acts and objects which are auctioned off in the knisa. These include: the opening of the ark and removal of the Tora, the various *aliyot* (being called to 'go up' to the reading of the Tora), 'ownership' of various parts of the knisa for specified periods (e.g. the eternal light), the right to lead certain prayers and (rarely) to act as shaliaḥ zibbur.

The various kvodot are of unequal merit. Thus among aliyot the last, *haftara*, is the

most important, followed by *masblim* (next to last), *sblisbi* (3rd), *samukh* (3rd from end), the 4th, 5th, etc. Some are restricted, e. g. the first one belongs to the *kobanim*, 'priests,' and rarely will a non-priest purchase it since he cannot make use of it himself. The absolute value of the *kvodot* varies with the occasion. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, they are worth most, on Sabbaths and holidays less, and during the week, least. In order to purchase and use a *kavod*, one need not be literate in Hebrew. Since during the weekday worship the bidding is well within reach of the poor, this mechanism tends to be less exclusive than *ta'arof*.

The purchaser of a *kavod* demonstrates his wealth. This is the only traditional example of conspicuous consumption among Shirazi Jews. In the past, Jews were not permitted to own real property; household items, carpets, etc. were kept to a minimum, for fear that these would be seized by the Muslim population. Only within the confines of the *knisa*, through auctioning of *kvodot*, could one demonstrate relative wealth. The elite, who need not support their claim to honor, but fear to express lack of piety (as would be assumed if they totally abstained), try to purchase *kvodot* at low prices. The rest of the congregation competes to keep the bidding up, thus justifying claims to position on this most important 'wealth' prestige scale.

The purchaser of *kvodot* demonstrates reverence for the *knisa* and Tora—important markers of piety—since the high bidder's money goes for synagogue maintenance and improvement. During mourning especially, when the merit of these purchases accrues also to the deceased (at the same time protecting the purchaser from *neshamot*, 'spirits'), one buys many *kvodot*, thus testifying to one's respect for the dead.

The Social Climber in Knisa

Since the *knisa* is Shiraz' only public Jewish forum, the social climber exhibits a marked interest in synagogue problems. He becomes the vigorous defender of synagogue improvement. His attendance becomes more regular, if it has been erratic in the past. He tries to be friendly with those who sit *bala*. At weekday services he gradually moves *balatar* (further from the entrance), often at the insistence of his new friends, who *ta'arof* him to do so. He may eventually establish himself up front. He may also leave the *Maballeh* (ghetto) *knisa* of his family and join a more prestigious one out on the main streets.

The social climber endeavors to call attention to himself for the "right" reasons. He enters *knisa* a few minutes late, puts on his *zizit*, 'prayer shawl,' and *tfillin*, 'phalacteries,' while loudly reciting the appropriate blessings. Worship is momentarily suspended as everyone replies, "amen"! After receiving an '*aliya* to the Tora, he like everyone else, waves the fringe of his *zizit* over the congregation and wishes them: "*kulkhem tibyu brukhim*"—'may you all be blessed.' Afterwards, he goes to the elders of the congregation, touches the fringe of their heads and kisses it, personally giving them this blessing.

The social climber must verify his claim to higher rank by demonstrating increased wealth. To solidify this ranking, he must prove his piety and be participating in synagogue *ta'arof*, constantly bettering his image and increasing his prestige.

The social climber participates frequently in the auction of *kvodot*. His bids are conspicuous and mostly directed to the more meritorious honors. He must have the audacity to challenge the very wealthy in the bidding. By outbidding the elite or forcing them to bid much higher than they

would normally, he gains great honor. Another honor-gaining strategy is to outbid someone and then, after some ta'arof, bestow the honor on the opponent. The social climber gives evidence of benevolence, by purchasing the honor for someone who cannot afford to bid for it. These last two strategies pay the added dividend of obligating the target of such generosity to reciprocate in some way.

The social climber clinches his claim to higher rank by showing that he is considered a near-equal by the elite, through participation in ta'arof exchanges with them in public.⁵ A common vehicle for this exchange is the selection of the shaliaḥ zibbur, previously described.

At first, no offers are made to him. The social climber must himself take the initiative by offering the honor to others. His moves must be subtle, to avoid appearing brazen. If he can establish himself as a respected shaliaḥ zibbur, so much the better; but he should at least act the role on occasion. His aim is not so much being shaliaḥ zibbur, as it is to regularly participate in the selection process, thereby benefiting from the continual (though lesser) honor of deferral. On occasion, by acting as shaliaḥ zibbur, he can convince the congregation of his learning and piety, as he demonstrates his acceptance by the elite through direct ta'arof exchanges.

The underlying assumption of the social climber is: by constantly adding small increments of honor, he can enhance his prestige and subsequently his rank:
Accumulated honor → Increased prestige (influence) → Higher rank.

Conclusion

The manipulation of the appearance of piety by the social climber serves to both validate the primacy of piety within the hierarchy of Shirazi values, while maintaining the importance of rank distinctions within Jewish society. Since some indices of prestige are not with the province of personal control (e.g. family, wealth, etc.), individuals seeking to maintain or better their position within the community are often compelled to resort of the manipulation of prestige through pious behavior. This should not be cynically misconstrued to suggest that all public manifestation of piety is insincere, nor that piety alone could suffice to raise one to high rank. Rather, for most Shirazis, because status (and all that accrues to it) is subject to upward and downward fluctuation and the most important public forum, the synagogue, is the nexus of community consent or dissent over its members' relative self-estimation, synagogue practice itself sets the parameters by which Shirazi Jewish men may be judged.

NOTES

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, 1969.

² The fieldwork, upon which this article is based was conducted in Iran from August 1967 to November 1968. Financial support was provided by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Cantors Assembly of America and the State of New York.

During a brief return visit to Shiraz in October 1977, I observed that the formal behavior described here has diminished somewhat as the older generation dies out and younger generations assume responsibility for the synagogues. The relative ranking of my main informants seems to have changed little.

The data herein derives from participant observation and interviews of informants during the research period. At the time, Fredrik Barth's Models

of Social Organization (1966) was not available to me, consequently, the application of "transactional-analysis" was not attempted in the field. I have nevertheless been highly stimulated by Barth and his critics, especially Paine (1974), in analyzing the procedures presented here.

³ All of the foreign terms used in the article are utilized by the Shirazi Jews themselves. With the exception of Hebrew terms centering on ritual and the synagogue, the words are of Persian origin, (see Loeb 1977:301-306).

⁴ Among Shirazi Jews, the guest-house or guest-room is not institutionalized. Guests are invited or come for particular purposes or at specific occasions.

⁵ The parallels between this behavior and potlatching are duly noted. Even the purported social ends attainable by both procedures are similar.

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