

JAPS: Jewish American Persian Women and Their Hybrid Identity in America

Saba Tova Soomekh

A large house in Beverly Hills has turned into a nightclub, celebrating a graduation, an anniversary, a birthday, or no specific event at all. There is a large bar serving alcoholic drinks. There is a sushi chef at one corner making all the popular rolls and sashimi while on the other side beef and chicken kabobs are being grilled and served with numerous rice dishes. The DJ is spinning hip-hop and Persian, Arabic, and Latin music, while young Iranians are dancing and flirting on the dance floor. The majority of guests in attendance are Iranian Jews, with a couple of token “white” people. All the guests have grown up with each other in the same community, and if they have not, then they know each other from the numerous parties similar to this. The girls are all dressed in the latest fashions. They size each other up; they are looking at each other’s clothes and accessories and watching who is dancing seductively, who is drunk, and who is secretly dating. Married women come to these parties with their husbands in order to dress up, have fun, and get away from the kids. For single women this is the place to flirt, dance, and socialize in hopes of finding a husband.

A large community of Iranian Jews has been living in Los Angeles for more than twenty-five years and while the community has maintained its insularity, the children of Iranian-Jewish immigrants were born or have grown up in Los Angeles. Thus, unlike their parents, a majority of the children only know life in America. Most only know Iran through the romanticized stories of their parents and elder family members. They do not live in the same physical space or the same sociocultural landscape of their parents’ youth, and few of them are able to read and write Persian. Yet, Iranian-Jewish culture is a major aspect of their lives. Given these sometimes competing cultural forces, first-generation Iranian Jews have learned how to balance multiple identities—those of an American, a Jew, and an Iranian.

Ethnic Incorporation

Ethnic incorporation into American social life has been historically defined by two modes of thinking. One mode believes that

assimilation is inevitable and cultures will eventually be absorbed into mainstream white society, with ethnic identities eventually fading into a “twilight of ethnicity.” The other mode believes that regardless of the level of acculturation or socioeconomic attainment, ethnic groups will resist blending into the majority and instead experience persistently high social distances in intergroup relations and discrimination. Young Iranian-Jewish women have not completely assimilated into American society nor have they socially distanced themselves from it; instead, they have formed a hybrid identity that has allowed them to pick and choose aspects of American society while still maintaining their Iranian-Jewish identity. In many instances, they have reclaimed Iranian-Jewish cultural beliefs and added their own Western interpretations.

In this article, I will look at how American culture shapes young Iranian-Jewish women as they negotiate their identity and construct their own cultural world. From 2004 to 2006 I interviewed forty Iranian-Jewish women between the ages of 18 and 35. These women were born in either Iran or America and were raised and currently live in Los Angeles. As a member of the Iranian-Jewish community in Los Angeles, I asked women I knew from the community and also depended on other women to introduce me to my interviewees. I would meet these ladies either in my home, their home, or at coffee shops and cafés. The interviews would last anywhere from one to two hours, in which time I would casually ask them a series of questions. These women are in the process of a cultural syncretism and mixing that produces a hybrid identity which allows them to live in plural worlds revolving around their Iranian-Jewish culture, their American landscape, and their gender. Whether or not they realize it, they are appropriating a more egalitarian lifestyle while still respecting and paying homage to their parents and culture.

Najeeb

The common academic perception of female sexuality in America seems to emphasize personal and social independence, sexual experimentation, and sexual maturity. However, this is not the case for first-generation

Iranian-Jewish women who are raised by immigrant parents and a community that does not encourage social independence and sexual experimentation. Iranian-Jewish women are raised to be *najeeb*. The Persian word *najeeb* is translated as pure, sweet, and virginal. This word is used specifically for women when discussing virginity, or lack of sexual experience. A woman in the Iranian-Jewish community is supposed to be a virgin when she gets married. In addition, she is not supposed to have boyfriends and is only allowed to date with the intent of marriage. This word also connotes virginal qualities—those of a woman who is docile, domestic, sweet, and unknowing of the world. The young women I interviewed all said their parents raised them to be *najeeb*.

Many of the young women said sexuality was never discussed in their homes, it was simply assumed that Iranian-Jewish girls must be *najeeb*. While many of my interviewees’ mothers never openly discussed the values and beliefs about sexuality with their daughters, all the young women knew what was considered proper behavior through comments their mothers had made. Most of my interviewees are not virgins, even the ones whose mothers specifically discussed sexual matters with them. Many of my interviewees felt that maintaining their virginity was an outdated belief and, because many young women are getting married at a later age, that remaining a virgin was not only unnecessary but nearly impossible.

The main reason why mothers told their daughters they must be *najeeb* is fear of their daughters getting a bad reputation in the Iranian-Jewish community. Rebecca, a 19-year-old student, said that her mother discussed the proper way for her to act. “She told me that I have to be modest because people are watching you in the Persian community and other people’s opinions matter a lot. It matters what they think; you are always in the public eye.” In an insular community where everyone knows the details of one another’s business and personal lives, it becomes important for parents to make sure their daughters act appropriately and follow the rules and standards of the community. Parents want to ensure that their daughters do not get a bad

reputation, because it can ruin their chances of marriage and tarnish the family name.

Iranian-Jewish Values

The concept of an unmarried woman being *najeeb* is so important for Iranian Jews that traits that are valued in American culture such as independence are seen as a threat to her *najeebness*. Typically, American parents teach their children to be self-reliant, and the children grow up and move out, establishing households of their own. In contrast, the traditional Iranian-Jewish family is characterized by role prescriptions, family obligations, hierarchal relations, intense emotional expressiveness, and collectivist values. These values contrast sharply with the emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, and self-development in mainstream American culture. Immigrant children tend to quickly adopt American values and standards, which can create great schisms and challenges to parental control and authority.

One trait many of the interviewees appropriated from American culture is the desire for more independence. However, the prevailing belief in the Iranian-Jewish community holds that if a woman shows any sign of independence from her family, such as wanting to move away to college or live on her own before marriage, it is assumed that she is not *najeeb*, and she is immediately stigmatized.

While the idea of a young woman living on her own is new for many immigrant communities, in America after World War II, it became increasingly common for adult children to move out of their parents' home before marriage. The trend continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, this new life course pattern had become normative for young adults. This new pattern changed the relationships between parents and children, since premarital residential independence reduces parental influence over the daily lives of their children. Whether it is the fear of waning influence on their daughter's life, a fear of community gossip about their daughter's *najeebness*, or a fear that the community will assume there is something wrong with the family that has caused their daughter to move away from them, parents do not encourage or allow their daughters to live on their own before marriage. This has made many of my interviewees feel that the rules placed on them are too confining, only further fueling their desire to move away and live on their own.

Generational Conflicts

There is a clear disagreement between the two generations about the significance of the community, one's reputation, and the influence of parents. Iranian-Jewish mothers were heavily dependent on their reputation and family name in order to marry a husband from a reputable family. Their parents had more of a say in their children's lives than the younger generation. Thus, if a man's mother did not approve of a potential wife, he most likely did not marry her. Many first-generation girls refused to allow others to dictate their lives; they believed that if a man is so heavily influenced by his mother and "does not have a mind of his own or a backbone to fight back," then he is not worth being with.

The larger issue is how much influence first-generation Iranian-Jewish women want their parents, specifically their mothers, to have in their lives. This is one of the most difficult and sensitive issues within the community. The traditional Iranian-Jewish

family, like most Middle Eastern families, is extremely tight knit and parents have ultimate control over the lives of their children, especially their daughters. This is a community where one does not move out of their parents' home until married and whom a woman marries is heavily dependent on her parents' approval. However, these parents are raising their children in America, a country that encourages independence. This has caused strife within the family unit.

Many first-generation women challenge the amount of influence their parents have on their lives. As one of my interviewees, a 22-year-old college student, explained: "I just want to tell my mother to butt out of my life and to live her own life and not fixate on mine so much." Within the Iranian culture it is strictly taboo and considered extremely disrespectful for children to tell parents to mind their own business and to not interfere in their lives. In an insular community where everyone's life is everyone's business,

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it is assumed that the opinion, rules, and regulations of one's parents should not only be appropriated, but also appreciated.

The mothers of these young women told me that one of the hardest aspects of raising children in America is the lack of respect and reverence for parents; they fear their children have been influenced by that mentality. Their own parents had complete control over their lives, and they never disrespected, refuted, or questioned any of their rules and opinions. As parents themselves, they now feel they have less control and influence over their own children, who have been influenced by American culture, and they find this new relationship to be not only threatening but also sad.

Reclaiming the Meaning of *Najeeb*

While most of my interviewees have an issue with the traditional meaning of behind the word *najeeb*, there is a group of women who has reclaimed this word and assigned a new and more culturally appropriate meaning to

it. Neda, a 34-year-old realtor, explained what it means to be *najeeb*. She believes this word “does not have to connote a woman who is a virgin and timid, but instead, a woman who is *najeeb* has self-respect. It doesn't necessarily mean that she denies herself life experiences and doesn't date or have intimate relationships with men, but instead, it means that she respects herself as a woman; she knows where to draw the line and how to demand that men respect her. In our mothers' generation, an unmarried woman was either *najeeb* or a slut. They didn't understand that you could be intimate with someone and still maintain your self-respect. That is what a *najeeb* woman is to me. It is a new definition that fits into the culture that we are living in. I want to take all the negative association out of this word and use it to empower women as opposed to demoting them.”

Some of the more religiously observant interviewees define *najeeb* within a religious context and believe it should not only be used for women, but the new definition

should also describe a man's character. One interviewee said that “both men and women should be humble and respectful to themselves, their bodies, and to each other. It shouldn't just be the woman who is humble, selfless, and respectful of her body, but he should be too. I think there should be more equality between men and women in our community and a guy should be *najeeb* along with his wife.” There is no Persian translation for the word *feminist*, but what these young women are doing is reinterpreting the concept of *najeeb* in order to fit into a more modern and American concept of womanhood, while maintaining the Iranian-Jewish standard of self-respect and moral integrity.

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