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Mashhadis and Immigration: Redemptive Narratives and Practical Challenges

Hilda Nissimi

General History Department, Bar-Ilan University, Rmat Gan 5290002, Israel; hilda.nissimi@biu.ac.il

Abstract: This paper analyzes redemptive narratives constructed by Mashhadi Jewish immigrants through oral histories, memoirs, and life stories collected across generations. It examines how conceptions of religion, community, and family shaped their meaning-making around migration challenges. The first case study examines Malka Aharonoff's lamentation reconstructed from religious redemption across generations into a Zionist narrative. The second analyzes Esther Amini's published memoir, which reconciles her story with that of her immigrant parents through narrative, demonstrating its role across generations with gender as the focal point. The later cases of Aharon Namdar and Mehran Bassal present individual oral histories, capturing major migration waves from Iran, playing out the differing import and expression given to Zionism and to religion by different immigrants. The study explores how selective appropriation and cultural translation occurred between generations. It sheds light on ideological and cultural frameworks underlying immigrant perspective. By comparing narratives emphasizing collective redemption versus individual experiences, it offers insights into identity formation and the role of memory in immigrant communities dispersing over time. By demonstrating narrative's therapeutic role in processing dislocation across generations, the study sheds light on cultural transmission and identity formation within dispersed immigrant communities. It offers a fresh perspective on their migration experiences.

Keywords: Mashhadi; immigration; redemption; Zionism; United States; gender roles; identity; religion; family; community

1. Introduction

The Mashhadi Jewish community, originating in Mashhad, northern Iran, was deeply rooted in the importance of family. They were shaped by forced conversion to Islam in 1839, which generated a crypto-Jewish identity that they preserved until they left the city after 1946. They were a crypto-faith community that, due to the forced conversion in 1839, went through a social and cultural process that created new boundaries and new cohesion. Their forced conversion fostered a unique tradition, a blend of Judaism and Persian culture, where private Jewish practices coexisted with external dissembling as Muslims. Under these underground conditions, memory transmission (and memory failings) led to individualized religious practices, from which a sub-culture emerged; the collective memory of the communal past was sanctified. Their distinctive cultural and religious characteristics, as well as their antagonism toward Islam, led to endogamy, cementing relationships by ties of blood, faith, and danger. Immigration—temporary for commercial year-long trips and 'colonies', semi-permanent settlements inside or outside Iran—was a constant feature. This sub-culture strengthened their religious and communal identity. Family was not just a part of their lives, it was central to it all: religious faith, economic activity, and immigration decisions.[1]

This paper examines how Mashhadi Jewish immigrants perceived and processed immigration challenges through the intersecting lenses of religion, community, and family. Drawing on individual oral histories and life stories constructed across multiple generations, this study analyzes how conceptions of religious identity, communal ties, and family shaped

the narratives immigrants constructed. Through these redemptive narratives, they sought solace and purpose in addressing the challenges of their migration experiences.

This study extends beyond the existing research on the role of communal ties in immigrant absorption. It specifically compares narratives that emphasize religious redemption and peoplehood with those that focus on individual experiences of gender and cultural adaptation. Doing so sheds light on the ideological and cultural frameworks underpinning immigrant meaning-making, offering a fresh perspective on this complex issue.

By analyzing narratives across time periods and geographies, this study sheds new light on how conceptions of religion, family, and community converged for Mashhadi immigrants in processing the challenges of dispersal and resettlement. Thus, it aims to contribute new qualitative insights to debates around the role of identity formation in immigrant communities.

2. Materials and Methods

Taking a historical approach, this study examines the redemptive narratives of Mashhadi Jewish immigrants across time by analyzing oral histories and personal experiences. The study is based on 78 oral history interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024 with American and Israeli Mashhadi Jewish community members.[2] The goal of the interviews, which lasted an average of about 100 min each, was to gather life stories, emphasizing those that dealt with immigration.

The interviews employed an interventive approach, common in history fields, allowing room for "dialogic invention" between the interviewer and participants. Rather than only extracting information, the goal was to co-construct meaning by discussing and interpreting personal experiences. This framework recognizes the collaboration between the teller and listener in shaping one's story. As such, follow-up questions and discussions helped to elicit deeper layers of understanding surrounding challenges, decisions, and meaning-making processes.

Life stories are an efficient tool for understanding how groups build their common voices through the stories of individuals. Analyzing narratives is a tool for gleaning conceptions, and this is particularly true of the Mashhadis because of their history of underground existence and strong group cohesion. However, recollections vary—it is common wisdom. It has also been known that narratives affect the facts that protagonists choose to share (Ben Peretz 2001, pp. 469–98).

The participants were chosen through snowball sampling, where initial contacts often led to additional participants. This approach helped to access diverse narratives across gender and geographic locations, maximizing insight into the community's dispersal over time.

Four representative life stories were selected for in-depth case analyses in the findings section. These captured the major waves of Mashhadi migration:

Malka Aharonoff, who immigrated from Mashhad to Israel in 1902, represents the first generation to establish roots in the Holy Land. Her story demonstrates the challenges of being a widow and the difficulties faced during World War 1. It is based on a lament she wrote during World War I and an interview with a descendant family member, Avinoam Aharonoff (Aharonoff 2021).

Esther Amini'as life story was published as a memoir. It is the story of her coming to terms with her immigrant background, raised by parents who came to the United States in 1947.

Aharon Namdar's life story tells of his family's immigration to Israel in 1950, part of the mass immigration of Jews from Iran, and at the height of Israel's "melting pot" policy. It was a period with a strong tendency to disregard the cultures of immigrants and a passion for inculcating Western norms and culture (Namdar 2020).

Mehran Bassal left Iran for Israel after the 1979 Revolution. It was a period when about 75% of Iranian Jews left Iran for the West. Some came to Israel, and many re-immigrated to

the United States and other Western countries. So did Bassal, who followed his family and eventually settled in New York (Bassal 2022a, 2022b).

These case studies fall into two groups: analyses of the lamentation and the published memoir examine the construction of narrative across generations, and the oral histories, while taken individually, are part of a collective portrait with shared themes. Each part has one story that narrates redemption in the biblical sense of the ingathering of the Jewish people in the land of Israel and one that uses an alternative redemptive motif. These cases collectively capture the dispersal and resettlement processes over the community's many waves of migration during the 20th century.

3. Early Immigrations: Religion, Peoplehood, and Gender Redemption

This section explores the laments of Malka Aharonoff, an early 20th-century immigrant from Russia, as transferred by her descendants. The second focuses on Esther Amini's memoir recounting her upbringing as the daughter of Iranian immigrants. Despite differences in form—intergenerational recollection versus a singular autobiography—both sections illuminate how storytelling enables immigrants and their families to process dislocation and cultural transmission. Both demonstrate a narrative's therapeutic role for immigrants and their communities in coming to terms with the immigration experience across generations. Both sections demonstrate Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation to highlight how immigrants, through creative mixing and appropriation, both shape and display hybridity (Bhabha 1994, esp. pp. 283–303). In both cases, the discrepancies between the first layer and the complete narrative can be explained by the difference between the identity and values of the first generation and the translation process by their descendants: Malka's story evolved into a Zionist narrative, still holding the original prophetic layer, and Esther translated the story her mother told her into gender equality and agency.

The idea of the community is a major example of this translation: from a factual reality for the first generation into a symbolic concept in later narratives. The community was a network of family and assistance for newcomers, but this reality met with very different feelings. Both cases start with religion as being highly important for the migrants—which characterizes Mashhadis. But in Malka's family's narrative, it becomes the basis for political redemption. In comparison, religion in Esther's memoir becomes, at best, a frame of Jewish ties to other Jews and, at worst, a way of othering Jews from Muslim countries.

3.1. Malka Aharonov: Loneliness, Oppression, and the Ingathering of Israel

Malka was born around 1850 and immigrated to the Land of Israel among the first Mashhadi families in 1902, following a protracted route. Two versions of the family's journey exist. Malka's youngest son, Nuriel, told a reporter, "Father had become a citizen of Russia, so we went north to Marv, and from there to Odessa, where we boarded a ship going to Palestine" (Cowen 1981, p. 28). However, a later generation in the family insisted that the sojourn in Russia was for business purposes, and the family came to Palestine through Bombay (today Mumbai) (Mashiah 1992, p. 20). It was a family decision, as her husband, Haj Matatiya Hacohen, and his brothers followed Haj Adoniyah, the elder brother and the group's leader in the migration. There is no information about Malka's opinion on their immigration. Still, she stayed on, even though her husband, who, soon after reaching the Land of Israel, returned to Iran to liquidate his affairs and died there. According to the story told by descendants, the group's incentive was Zionism, coupled with a reaction to local animosity against the Jadidis—the New Muslims (E. Levy 1992, p. 34). Zionism as a political, institutional movement came to Iran only in the 1920s, and Zionism as motivation for immigration in earlier immigrations is not commonly accepted in current research. However, this might be a typical case of reading backward, where descendants read their ancestors' actions in the light of their own convictions. There is no sign that Malka was influenced by Zionism, neither before nor after her immigration or even post World War I. Common wisdom has it that Zionist activity started in Iran only after the Balfour Declaration. Therefore, there is almost scholarly agreement that

motivations were not "Zionist" (Netzer 1981a, pp. 281–94; Netzer 2002, pp. 366–67). Even later, the primary motivations for immigration were practical rather than Zionist (Netzer 1981b, p. 241; A. Levy 1985, pp. 133–35; A. Levy 1998).[3]

She was a widow, but hardly alone. Surrounding her were the wider family of her late husband and several Mashhadi families who arrived during the first decade, all living in close proximity. They were quite prosperous, having established business posts in several cities, including one in London. Her eldest son's family was the first Mashhadi family of what would become an important Mashhadi community in London (Harounoff 1990, p. 14).

Nearly two decades later, she had to face her most challenging ordeal. As World War I broke out, two of her children, who were already married but were part of the same household, with her as matriarch at its head, had to leave. In response to the Ottoman demand to either embrace Ottoman citizenship or depart, the Aharonoff family accepted the challenge by leaving. They were part of a mass exodus of 45,000 Jews, almost half of the city's Jewish community (which comprised about 64% of the population)" (Barel 2012, p. 95). All left except the matriarch and perhaps her youngest son, around 11 years old.

The situation in Jerusalem was so dire that it forced many women into prostitution to support their families, and some even sold babies to obtain bread (Jacobson 2009, p. 85). Shortly after the war broke out, the most acute hardship that the residents of Jerusalem and Palestine faced during the war years was the famine, especially the wheat shortage (Jacobson 2009, p. 89). A wide range of diseases affected the residents of Jerusalem, leading to poor hygiene conditions, malnutrition, and a lack of adequate medical services (Barel 2012, p. 96). Seven hundred residents of the Bukharan quarter died during the war due to the lack of funding from Bukhara and the hardship of the war (Fuzailov 1988, p. 137).

The Bukaran Quarter, once the pride of new Jerusalem, had its houses requisitioned by the Ottoman authorities for their army. One of its grandest houses, the Moshayoff house, even became a prison (Wahrman 1991, pp. 32–33, 60–61). The Aharonoff house was also confiscated. Initially, Malka sought help from the men she knew, but when none came forward, she took matters into her own hands and went to government offices. However, her efforts yielded no results. Undeterred, she kept a watchful eye on the house, acting as a sentry, witnessing all the damage inflicted upon it. She was also quick to seize an opportunity when it arose: as the Ottoman army withdrew and the British occupied Palestine, they took over her house.

The trauma of the famine, diseases, harsh weather, and other hardships facing Jerusalem and Palestine at the time seemed to have left no trace on Malka. The mutual aid networks and Zionist–Sephardi relief committees that were available during this period also appear to have made no impact on her. All these are left out: a lamentation of 44 verses that she wrote in the Persian–Jewish language focuses solely on the confiscation of the house. Addressed to her children, it seems based on Lamentation (mainly Lamentation 1 with the closing verses from Lamentation 5). Her lamentation's refrain is similar to Lamentation 1: **her children are far from her, and her enemies are near.** However, concluding the lamentation, in a sudden change of tone, she calls out:

poor children of Israel
How long will you be in sorrow?
Gather all of you in Israel.
We will attain freedom forever.

Thus, in her lamentation, she elevates her private woes to religious and messianic themes and is, therefore, rewarded by the promise of redemption. For this purpose, she left out the more practical problems she had to face. While she attempted to have the decree rescinded, and though she failed, she felt revenge in the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. However, her aspirations reached beyond: she desired "freedom forever", and to achieve that, the sons of Israel had to follow her example and immigrate to the Land of Promise. It is highly significant that, despite immigrating within a Mashhadi group and living in close vicinity with other Mashhadis, the prophecies of the people of Israel constituted her

frame of thinking and not communal redemption. This was the same for another member of the same group of immigrants, Rabbi Shlomo Mashiah (Nissimi 2022). In fact, in the land of Israel, the community's custom of endogamy was also very weak until it practically disappeared. The community preferred the traditional religious view and political Zionist vision of Jewish ethnicity over their communal ethnicity.

Malka Aharonov's narrative demonstrates meaning-making and redemption through the narrative frame of the religious promise of homecoming to Zion. Though she faced immense hardships as a widow raising a family alone in Palestine and through World War I, she frames these challenges redemptively by concluding her lament poem with a call for all Jews to gather in Zion to attain "freedom forever". Even the loss of her home through Ottoman confiscations is reframed positively, as she sees their downfall as a form of revenge and validation of the dream of an independent Jewish homeland. Moreover, her emphasis on losing the house's symbolic importance, reminiscent of the destruction of the Temple, allows her to transcend the physical hardships of the moment. It reinforces the power of the redemptive narrative in shaping her perspective. By uplifting her private struggles into the overarching narrative of Jewish redemption and Jewish peoplehood, Malka could find meaning and empowerment in her experiences of migration and suffering through this ideological lens. This shows how the redemptive framework provided a way for Malka to conceptualize the challenges of her life in Palestine.

However, the growing number of immigrants to the Land of Israel of Jews in Bukhara and Iran at the end of the 19th century acted along lines similar to Malka's idea: a reading of biblical prophecies about the ingathering of the Jewish people and achieving freedom and applying it to their context (Nissimi 2022). This pre-Zionism had the same redemptive notion as political Zionism, if not more so, and likewise interpreted the ingathering as the precursor of the fulfillment of Jewish peoplehood. Indeed, the Zionist relief activity during World War I did influence others in the Zionist direction. But there is no sign of it in her lamentation and, generally, very little information about her. It is only her descendants that would give the story a thoroughly Zionist twist.

In the end, memory is not about what happened, it is about what is important to remember and to reiterate to the following generations. Later generations collapsed Malka's religious peoplehood into the Zionist political ideology in an instance of cultural translation (Bezalel 1997, p. 27; Bhabha 1994, pp. 283–303). Her descendants, no less than she, "remembered the hardships not even as challenges but as a fulfillment of an ancient prophesy. And her great nephew told a remarkable story about how the family remembered "her sons' carried my great-great grandmother by turns on their shoulders (Aharonoff 2021)—the very echo of Isiah 49:22:

> "Thus saith the Lord GOD: Behold, I will lift My hand to the nations, and set up My ensign to the peoples, and they shall bring thy sons in their bosom, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders."

Malka's story and how it was reconstructed involved the selective mixing and appropriation characteristic of cultural translation—both at the individual and communal levels over time. Her narrative emerges from navigating differences through a translation process. The redemptive narrative went down in the family and reconstructed the entire family's experience as a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy, rather than a painful relocation story. Religious prophecies retained their importance but were translated into political ideologies as later generations incorporated Zionist interpretations of redemption into their understanding of the past.

3.2. Esther Amini: From 'Concealed' to 'Visible': The Road to Gender Redemption

Like Malka's story, this, too, is based on an artistic expression. However, unlike the first, it was published as a memoir book. While Malka's immigration challenges were utterly submerged in the redemption of her People, Esther is redeemed as she finds individual revealment.

Esther Amini was born in the United States in 1949 to parents who had immigrated from Iran just two years before her birth. However, Esther's brief experience of immigration from NY to Jerusalem and then back, which proved to be a failed immigration and a failed marriage, is just an episode in a much more comprehensive narrative. According to Esther, the entire story is about immigration, considering that she was born in Queens, which she calls "a Persian diaspora". In essence, her parents, she contends, "in many ways… never left Mashhad, living their underground life here in the US so close to the surface" (Amini 2020, p. 282).

Esther's narrative seeks to recount her immigration story from her parental home, where she felt gender roles demanded she remain "concealed" to living in America as a whole person, "visible". In the following analysis, I explore how Esther's work underscores narrative as a means of processing both her inherited immigrant experience and personal development in transitioning from gendered restrictions to self-determined freedom. In this process, she condemns the community as restrictive, "the more I researched my family's history, the more I felt its weight pressing down on me, pushing me back millennia" (Amini 2020, p. 172). Religion, she and her parents embrace—outside the community.

As Esther explains, three factors compelled her family's immigration: "The first reason was the dire economic situation. The impact of World War Two on Mashhadi families was twofold—the German Nazi ideology exacerbated local animosity, and perhaps more tangibly, the Russian and British Occupation in 1941 severed regional trade routes, jeopardizing the livelihood of many families, jeopardizing the livelihood of many families (Majd 2016, pp. 527–62 esp. pp. 474–76; Netzer 1986, pp. 5–31).

Esther's family relocated to Tehran, "hoping that Iran's capitol would offer some sort of financial opportunity" (Amini 2020, p. 77). They were one step ahead of the community, which, following the war and another pogrom, eventually followed suit. Her father initially found affluence in Tehran as "the point man for the British army in Tehran", but ended with the British withdrawal in 1946. This renewed economic hardship made her father more amenable to his brother-in-law's invitation: "Come! Bring your family. America is good for Jews" (Amini 2020, p. 79). His move was well ahead of the larger community, with most heading to Israel in the late 1940s. It was part of the first large wave of Iranian immigration to the United States (Bozorgmehr and Douglas 2011, p. 10). It was also before the Jewish community in Iran rose significantly in socio-economic terms in the 1950s, and even more emphatically after the "White Revolution" launched on 26 January 1963 by the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which lasted until 1979 (Haddad 1984, p. 50; Menashri 1991, pp. 353–71). By the late 1970s, 80 percent of Jews belonged to the upper middle class, and 10 percent belonged to the economic elite (Sternfeled 2019, p. xii).

The second impetus was even more urgent and traumatic, becoming the narrative link connecting Esther's story with that of her parents. This particular reason not only allowed Esther to empathize with her parents and brothers, who "had suffered and bled, running for their lives", but also formed the basis of her insistence on the same right to "own" her life (Amini 2020, p. 87).

The immediate and pressing cause for their departure was a violent attack on Esther's brother, David, by his teacher, while she was screaming at him: "Dirty Jew!" (Amini 2020, 79). The Nazi propaganda during World War II and the political instability at its conclusion triggered antisemitic attacks on Jews (Netzer 1986, pp. 22–23). In Mashhad, always more sensitive to such tensions, they experienced the final pogrom that catalyzed the exodus of Mashhadi Jews from the city (Nissimi 2015, pt b, pp. 49–51; Patai 1997, pp. 92–101).

This attack galvanized her mother to urge the family to "escape the flames of hatred, fanaticism, bigotry, prejudice before they devoured her boys" (Amini 2020, p. 80). This incident also laid the foundation for a shared understanding between her mother, who sought redemption, and her father, who remained loyal to Mashhad, because it brought to the surface the long-term Mashhadi experience:

> For generations, our ancestors have lived underground lives, disguised as Muslims…
> we've been beaten and killed simply for being Jews. What was done to us was

done, but I won't let them *ever again*, I say *ever again,* tough my sons! (Amini 2020, p. 80)

The way Esther/her mother refers to their ancestors' plight is rather unusual. Typically, it is their courage and resistance that are celebrated, and indeed, Esther herself mentions it in this way (Amini 2020, pp. 171, 186, 282). However, for Esther, the Mashhadi experience stands for suffering and misery, especially as a female. Nevertheless, she seems to believe that the two miseries are mutually explanatory. So, she decided she would have none of that: "a legacy I wanted no part of" (Amini 2020, p. 172).

Rejecting her community did not go with rejecting religion. She is aware of how central religion is to her community, to their identity, and to their very becoming a community: posing as Muslims while living as underground Jews, these Mashhadi families had a singular mission: ensure Jewish continuity" and "so began the practice of secretly observing Judaism" (Amini 2020, p. 171). What is more, she experienced religion in the United States as unreceptive, othering, "If Yiddish isn't your mother tongue, you're not Jewish" (Amini 2020, p. 103).[4] But the warm welcome at the conservative synagogue became a direct tie to the Jewish people. Sitting in the Conservative synagogue "Shaare Zedek", they were experiencing, for the first time, "an aboveground synagogue with hundreds of fellow Jews... valued for who they were" (Amini 2020, pp. 104–5, cit on p. 105). This was one of the first steps Esther experienced in how she could translate her family and community's heritage into the new American norms (Bhabha 1994, p. 234). Later, with her second husband, she chose the biblical names Aharon and Miriam, but only one of them also had a family meaning. But religion, for her, was not a central feature of community life; she was already adept at mingling the old tradition with new in an individual mixture, a new cultural language she acquired.

The combination of the push factors and belief that America held promise for Jews compelled Esther's mother to insist, against her father's inclination, upon taking the arduous and dangerous route to the US for a better future for her sons. This traumatic departure was compounded by the hardships of the journey from Tehran to Mashhad, then to Kaboul, New Delhi, and Bombay, followed by a forty-day sea voyage to Shanghai and, finally, from there, to San Francisco and a flight to NY. This strenuous route was conveyed to Esther with such vividness that she considered herself fortunate that it had occurred before she was born, as she doubted her ability to endure it.

The power struggle her mother won to get them to America places each of the parents in a symbolic position for Esther. Her father represented Mashhad—its restrictions, protection, homeliness, and suffocation. Her mother embodies rebellion against Mashhad, where, at 12, she was forced to marry a man 20 years older, and where she resisted the chador that, to her, symbolized covering up women. "Mashhad lit a match, charred my youth, and robbed me of choices," her mother lamented (Amini 2020, p. 172). She embodies the redemptive narrative of immigration. For her, the forty days of the sea voyage were "just as it took the Israelites forty years to cross the desert and reach the Promised Land, we, in forty days, will complete our exodus" (Amini 2020, p. 97). Her mother certainly knew how to construct a redemptive narrative!

Her mother thought that was enough. She exclaimed to her daughter: "I burn chador and come to Am-ree-kah! Estaire, it good for you, no? I geeve you life!" (Amini 2020, p. 279). But Esther could not simply embrace America if she wanted to be whole, especially when it felt "untranslatable". Esther was resisting both her parental tradition and the new American culture. She had not yet found her own voice. Little wonder she felt she was underground, or one might say, it was the term she chose for a "third space" (Amini 2020, p. 35; Bhabha 1994, pp. 55, 71; Biti 2021, pp. 43–58). Her father threatened to be deeply hurt and could exile her from her parental home. She, their American-born daughter, was still expected to toe the line. The problem for Esther was that they left the chador behind, but "the Iranian drive to keep women veiled still prevailed" (Amini 2020, p. 172). The cultural divide between a patriarchal culture and Western gender roles is not an uncommon challenge.[5] For Esther, who felt half-immigrant and half-second-generation, the divide was

more complicated, because her rebellion was not directed only at her parents, but also at her own heritage.

She had to carve her own journey and narrative for her to be able to accept her mother's redemptive narrative and her father's centrality in her identity and life. She constructs her story as a story of immigration from her parental home, enduring the pains of an Iranian immigrant similar to her parents—they were suspect Jews upon arrival, and she was a suspect Jew in her Hebrew school (Amini 2020, pp. 103, 237–238; . . .)[6] To Americans, she was Iranian, and in American society in the 1950s, "if you had darker skin, spoke with a thick accent. . .wore. . .chadors, you were a pariah" (Amini 2020, p. 48)".[7]

These were the years of the American "melting pot", when the ideal of a homogenous society of many cultures was perpetuated. In its idealistic inception, the concept served as a political symbol embodying the ideology of America as a land of opportunity, where factors such as race, religion, and national origin were envisioned not to impede social mobility. In reality, the process was essentially one of "Anglo-conformity" (Hirschman 1983, p. 398). For individuals from the south of Europe and the Middle East, Jews or otherwise, the question of Whiteness was also added to their struggle for acceptance. The first Syrian people who migrated at the turn of the 20th century struggled to prove "whiteness" to achieve citizenship status. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 ended Asian exclusion and race-based citizenship, but favored white immigrants (Gualtieri 2009, pp. 52–80, 168–9).

It is remarkable that, although Iran is not an Arab country, she was called "Arab" (Amini 2020, pp. 122–23), perhaps because of her skin color. Or possibly, Esther is trying to convey a feeling that, to Americans, all Muslim countries were the same. However, before the 1960s, most Arab immigrants were Christian and tended to assimilate (Salaita 2005, p. 149). One wonders if Esther's narrative externalizes her feeling of strangeness, mainly based on the cultural characteristics of the Muslim world.

She tells of her "underground" years when she studied and read in stealth when her father admonished her, "Stop thinking" (Amini 2020, p. 35). In exploring the clash between traditional Iranian family values and mainstream American culture, particularly concerning gender roles, Esther's narrative sheds light on the intricacies of the dual miseries she associates with her heritage. As she recounts her 'underground' years and the tension between traditional Iranian family values and the more liberal ideals of gender equality and individualism in America, the connection becomes apparent. She thought her father's behavior could be explained by the harrowing fear of "the threat and the dead reality, Allah Daad day [forced conversion day in 1839] must have hung over his head like a guillotine blade" (Amini 2020, p. 34). Because, through his cultural prism, she would become unmarriageable—the ultimate shame. She does not explain the connection, although the custom of marrying the daughters young so that no Muslim would come asking for her is well known (Patai 1997, pp. 231–32). "Men marry beautiful women with smiling eyes, not shriveled eyes wedded to thoughts!" he explained. She thought it was their underground heritage that marked them off (Amini 2020, pp. 33–34). Nevertheless, the tension between traditional Iranian family values, including a rigorous notion of female gender roles and behavior, and mainstream American is hard to escape. The idea of female virginity and chastity, frowning upon divorce as a calamity for the entire family, is in stark contrast with gender equality, individualism, and self-fulfillment. It is perhaps not surprising that women tend to adopt American norms faster than men (Tohidi 1993, pp. 175–217). Sociological research shows that men might regard these women as "poisoned by the West" and go back to Iran or ask family members to obtain a more traditional—"domestic"—spouse (Hojat et al. 2000, pp. 429–30). Navigating between Iranian and American gender norms could be analyzed through Bhabha's lens of negotiating cultural translation and the tensions that arise at sites of cultural differences.

Then, she achieved her "immigration" to the dorms of university. However, instead of embracing her newfound freedom, she returned to "Mashhad"—her parental home and her father's values—after receiving her degree. There, she entered into an arranged marriage to a man of her father's choice. The marriage proved unsuccessful, and her mother's support

during the divorce marked the final break from home. This experience endowed her with a new ability to incorporate the stories of both her parents. In her closing words, she used her community background not as a restriction, but as invigoration, transitioning from a concealed state to being visible in her redemptive narrative:

> I think back to. . .—all the women who came before me, reduced to silence. . . unable to leave their stories behind. I think of pop, amplifying soundlessness and secrecy. . .
>
> And I'm left feeling I must. To stand against. . .suppression. Against piercing silence and fear of words, I must tell their story and mine—a story only I can tell.
>
> As for feeling unmothered, I now know I was mistaken—because she modeled defiance. . .
>
> Pop was right. There is nothing more dangerous than a girl with a book (Amini 2020, p. 282).

Tracing Esther's evolving narratives over time reveals her journey of making sense of her mixed heritage and experiences, showcasing the healing power of narrative. As a baby, she metaphorically "spun a protective cocoon" (Amini 2020, p. 45) and became voiceless. In contrast, the book serves as a self-treatment, allowing her to construct and narrate her community's strategy of identity formation in opposition to the surrounding society. Esther recounted and embraced her parents' struggles during and after immigration, re-making her quest for personal freedom (Amini 2020, p. 186). Claiming her story on her own terms facilitated her healing while embracing the empowerment in her mother's narrative of female defiance/self-determination. Integrating her own experiences with her mother's narrative provided liberation and purpose. Esther's catharsis stems from fully embracing the duality and complexity of finding self-worth within the narratives of both her mother and father. This moment marks the first time she feels "whole" and the emergence of a newfound empowerment, even a sense of "dangerous" strength.

Esther's memoir powerfully illustrates the transformative potential of reclaiming one's history and embedding it within a social/political context through narrative. The process proves to be both psychologically and culturally liberating, offering healing for immigrants and their descendants. But while Esther came to peace with her tradition, the community as a living body is left out of the story. Esther opted out.

Both women shared their poignant experiences of the challenge posed by immigration, and both articulated a redemptive narrative that sought to imbue their struggles with meaning. For Malka Aharonov, solace was found in a call for Jewish ingathering—a collective Jewish redemption. In contrast, Esther Amini discovered her redemption in her empowerment as a woman.

Yet, the primary contribution lies in recognizing that both women were integral to a multi-generational narrative. Malka drew strength from her family and community but found meaning for her troubles within the prophetic redemption of the Jewish people. Her descendants then continued this narrative, which became a Zionist narrative.

Esther recognizes the support of the Mashhadi community (Amini 2020, pp. 119–22), but she feels suffocated by what she understands as its gender roles. She came to terms only with her parental home and *its* traditions. This is a tradition that she interprets as an individual infused with dignity and equality. Both narratives were constructed through successive generations, each cohort reframing the narratives and continually reshaping what is now seen as a single storyline.

4. Mass Immigration Redemptive Narratives: Between Community and Nation

This section examines the redemptive narratives of Aharon Namdar and Mehran Bassal as they navigated immigration and integration. Both started out holding Zionist perspectives. Through their experiences settling in differing contexts, Aharon remained in Israel, reconstructing the meaning of his challenges within a Zionist framework, whereas Mehran started education in Israel, but subsequently crafted an alternative redemptive path

in New York with family and community. Their contrasting yet still redemptive journeys highlight the role of redemptive narratives in providing coping and healing perspectives during integration.

4.1. Aharon Namdar: Hardships of the Melting Pot and Zionist Redemption

Aharon came to Israel in 1950 at the age of 5 with both his parents and grandmother on his father's side. They were sent to Beit Nehemia, a border settlement near Jordan, and during one of the terrorist attacks on their settlement, his mother was murdered. This defining loss shaped his early years, as he was then sent to national religious boarding schools. Now an intellectual living in Israel, Aharon maintains a uniquely nuanced perspective informed by his background (Namdar 2020).

He claims the incentive for immigration to Israel was the outcome of "the dreams of generations"; they were "immigrating to Jerusalem, not running away from the forced conversion". Another interviewee of the same age who was also relocated to Beit Nehemia remembers her mother: "crying after each lighting of the Shabbat candles that she wants to get to Jerusalem" (Sherman 2020). Jerusalem was the symbol and place of prophetic ingathering and redemption. Most interviewees were not very articulate when required to explain what Zionism meant to them. One informant claimed that Zionism was his parents' incentive for immigration, but when asked what Zionism meant in his parental home, he answered: "There was none [no discussion about it]. Look, they were, I would say, hard up but were working for their livelihood. These were the days of the State's first years; it wasn't simple". Indeed, it is relatively rare to find an articulate expression of a Zionist ideology. But many, if not almost all Mashhadi informants in Israel, framed their immigration story within the Zionist narrative. They would use the religious–prophetic redemptive narrative of history as a prophecy fulfilled by Zionism.

He spoke very little about the hardships his family met. They came first to "a transit camp near Beit Lid, then to shacks . . .near Rishon [=Lezion] to a ma'abara [=a temporary immigrant and refugee absorption camp], then to moshav Beit Nehemia in 1953. For three years, we struggled with transit camps and shacks". Esther Sherman—his contemporary and neighbor, elaborated:

> They brought us first to a ma'abara . . . in a think Pardes Hanna. . . they put us on top of some hill. The hill was covered with thorns, and there was no water. They brought a tank of water, and we stood in line with glasses to drink a glass of water. They set up tents there, and we were there. . .later they built us shacks in Beit Nehemia. Only later, slowly, did they build us houses of concrete (Sherman 2020).

Aharon did not elaborate on these hardships. But he conceded that it was "a dream with a painful awakening". He did not speak of disappointment and thought his hardships were not extraordinary compared to those of other newly arrived immigrants and other Israelis. Instead, he claimed that "it was hard on everyone" and that it was "the times". But, at the same time, he poignantly described the men in "faded suits" in the synagogue on Shabbat. These faded suits seem to be a metaphor for faded dreams, and the metaphor was used as a veil to express hardship without an outright complaint. He also talked of the shame he felt of his home during his education because the schools completely suppressed any sign of Sephardic culture, as befitted the high tide of the "melting pot" policy in young Israel. The melting pot is a concept that was imported from the American experience, where it started as Israel Zangwill's advocation for complete Jewish assimilation, to the point of intermarriage, as a solution to the problem of Russian Jews (Silver and Mark 2020, pp. 242–56). In Israel, this concept symbolizes the Zionist vision of fostering a unified Israeli society by gathering and integrating diverse Jewish communities in their historic homeland. It likens the formation of a new national identity to combining disparate ingredients in a pot, ultimately creating a homogeneous mixture (Gorny 2001, p. 55). It is perhaps most closely associated with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister. In a speech in 1951, he described Israel as a motley crew (erev-rav)—"because they do not mix fast nor easily, rather it is a meeting of various and far away tribes. Or perhaps more correctly—a collection

of misjoined tears" (Ben-Gurion 1980, p. 171). These efforts aimed to create a single Israeli identity based on the adoption of the Hebrew language and culture, which often meant downplaying or discouraging the preservation of Mizrahi (non-European/Western Jews) cultural traditions.

Namdar accepted the outcome of the melting pot, not because he was unaware of its problematic influences. It was "the trampling of Sephardi culture", indeed "the East (Eastern culture and history) was erased... when I felt there was a problem, and even when I felt hurt, I preferred to stay positive". He was aware not everyone had the "inner powers to look beyond injustices". After all, "it was a generation of exile and redemption". One wonders if the exile was truly over when leaving Iran (Namdar 2020).

This is not a self-evident stand. Since the Wadi Salib protest and riots in 1959, social and political movements have emerged to address issues of inequality and recognition for Mizrahim. These movements have sought to rectify historical injustices and promote greater equality and cultural diversity in Israel. Present-day Israel is still bedeviled by the economic, social, and even cultural differences, some would say schism, between Jews of European extraction and the "others".[8] In this context, Aharon's conciliatory tone is redemptory rather than complaining, and his reward is his part in a national achievement. In this post-factum acceptance of the melting pot policy and the recasting of the formidable challenges of Israel's early years as a collective struggle, Aharon could reconcile his past within a framework of national contribution and redemption.

Accepting the traditional Zionist view, which inherently provides a framework for transforming what might have been perceived as past 'victimhood' into a positive narrative, Aharon went even further, as he "came to feel an immense pride. I realized that they were heroes". Thus, he attributed the immigrants, who were broken by the hardships of immigration, an active role and agency at a time when the challenges they faced eroded their culture and, consequently, their self-esteem. Thus, through his narrative, cultural repression transformed into participation in the birth of a new nation. As he shared his life story, he could reclaim and utilize his challenges as material for a positive narrative that reflected strength and achievement. In the face of prejudice, he undertook two strategies: to integrate his negative experiences to elevate his sense of worth—"it was hard for everyone", but he emerged as a winner. Secondly, he cultivated an empowered perspective on his fellow immigrants, directly contributing to an increased sense of self—"they were heroes" (Namdar 2020; Semmler and Williams 2000, pp. 54, 58–59).

But this success came at a price. When asked about his identity, whether he was a Mashhadi", he reiterated his parental background but for himself, "In what sense am I Mashhadi? Hardly anything. I know the story. Since I learned how to pray, I have prayed in the Ashkenazi style... I love the traditions and food, but I don't think I left much to the children, to my descendants". While educated away from home, Namdar was aware that the Mashhadi community's traditions of strong familial bonds and commitment to parents had helped to preserve identity for generations prior. However, for Namdar, these traditions felt like a sealed past, as integration policies pushed immigrant communities to assimilate and prioritize a singular national Israeli identity.

While aware of the Mashhadi traditions through family history, the prayer styles of his homeland had been lost to him personally over time and distance from that culture. At school, on the surface, Namdar seemed to accept and mimic the Ashkenazi prayer promoted as expressing Israeli national identity. However, through this act of mimicry, as described by Bhabha, Namdar could also navigate the pressures of assimilation and negotiate his shifting hybrid identity. For Namdar, the Ashkenazi style became more than mere mimicry—it came to represent a "third space" where his displaced communal ties could find new expression alongside participation in the dominant Israeli society. Namdar's experience demonstrates how later generations engage in cultural translation, selectively adopting new influences to replace cultural practices lost over time and migration.

In this way, Namdar's story exemplifies the core aspects of cultural translation outlined by Bhabha. Through selectively appropriating redemptive narratives and prophetic

perspectives from his Mashhadi heritage, Namdar reframed hardships into a story of identity, community, and achievement. His articulation of self in the "third space" of Ashkenazi prayer also demonstrates navigating the pressures of absorption policies. Namdar illustrates how later generations translate cultural roots and communal ties into evolving personal meanings within new contexts over time. By recontextualizing the past through story, Namdar engaged in cultural translation that emerged from his experiences with early Israeli nation-building processes.

4.2. Mehran Bassal: From National Redemption to Communal Fulfillment

Zionism was no panacea and did not have the same healing force for everyone. Although Mehran underwent a double migration from Iran to Israel to the United States, he still carries a lasting love for Israel. However, only in the United States did his family and community bring a sense of wholeness (Bassal 2022a, 2022b).

Mehran was born in 1960 in Tehran. He immigrated to Israel in 1978 to start his studies in a preparatory program at Tel Aviv University. His immigration was just at the end of high school towards pursuing higher education, as "it was customary to go overseas for college". The destination could seem no surprise, to the point of fulfilling a dream:

> My father always dreamt of, ok, we should move on, when we were little, we used to go to Israel a lot of times, summertime, a few times he used, he used to cry, yeah, we got to move to Israel soon, you know, he was talking about that.

> It was part of our lives, it was part of what our hearts beat for, and we visited Israel a few times and we always loved everything.

But this was not quite the usual move. Many, if not most, of my interviewees told me that the United States was the popular destination. Mehran's older brother was no exception, as he had gone to his studies a year earlier in the United States. In fact, by the late 1970s, the number of Iranian students studying abroad had surpassed all other countries. This was due to a sharp rise in demand for higher education within Iran that exceeded the available capacity of domestic universities at the time. By 1975, Iranian students were the largest group of foreign students in the United States, and during the next three years, the numbers doubled each year, from 7.795 in 1975 and 13,928 in 1976 to 25,086 by 1977 (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988, p. 8).

But 1978 was also the year of revolutionary upheaval (Keddie 2006, pp. 214–39). Thus, 1978 saw a remarkable rise in Iranian immigration to the United States, from 34,855 (an all-time high) to 40,716, which was far surpassed the following year. About 20,000 out of the 80,000-strong Jewish community of Iran immigrated, as all religious minorities were starting to feel insecure (Littman 1979, p. 5).

Therefore, Mehran's immigration to Israel fulfilled his love for the state and Land of Israel. However, it also fulfilled a practical need. The combination of passion and necessity that Mehran sees in his father's immigration—"there was a, a forced movement, he chose, he came to Israel"—is no less accurate about himself.

The year he spent in Israel before his family joined him was hard. He was homesick and missed "the food, the home food, the Persian food, the, like, I asked my Mom to send me dried foods, like, in Iran we have dried foods", and he missed his family. But he missed having Persians around him: "There were a lot of Persian students in Haifa and the Technion, but in Tel Aviv, there were only two or three". In her memoir, Farideh Goldin speaks of her "parents' exile" in Israel; Israel was not redemption for everyone (Goldin 2015, pp. 93, ff.; Ben-Dor 2006, pp. 135–62).[9] Yet, Mehran seemed to overcome the strangeness well enough to feel that he "was already used to Israel, and I liked it".

However, at least for his father, the more significant opportunities in the United States were beckoning. Less than a year after their arrival, his parents left Israel to visit Mehran's older brother. Visitors and students were both common types of international migrants from Iran to the U.S., and their numbers climbed sharply from an annual average of about 39,583 in 1970–77 to the highest figure of 130,545 in 1978. His parents decided that (Zionist) dreams apart, America was the land of promise, and they re-immigrated.

But they were not the only ones who found that the Zionist redemptive narrative failed to suffice to surpass the loneliness of the immigrant. Meheran followed suit. Indeed, he felt sorry to give up on Israel; he emphasized that his love for Israel was imparted to his children and especially to the youngest son, who is "me on steroids". So, it is little wonder that the son "is doing what I tried to do to my, to my parents, I tried to stay in Israel, but they convinced me not to". The dream was deferred by one generation. Perhaps redemption, according to this dream, is on hold.

The full significance of the difference between these two immigrations becomes apparent when we examine his distinct attitudes toward the challenges posed by each immigration experience. The story of immigrating to the United States is characterized by an absence of notable challenges. This outcome is a result of his narrative; America, rather than Israel, was destined to be his new home. It was where he could craft a new identity in alignment with the course of his life.

The crux lies in the profound transformation of his relationship with the community. He rediscovered his Mashhadiness in America. Previously, in Iran, Mashhadiness stood in contrast with the modernity of Tehran and was even something one tried to shake off, "also a little, me and my cousins and my siblings were a little also defensive about it, and, you know, we tried to be, to talk Tehranian and be Tehranian". He may have strategically distanced himself from overt displays of Mashhadi affiliations not to reject his roots, per se, but to reduce perceptions of difference/otherness as a "Mashhadi" among Tehran's dominant culture. This allowed for a hybrid negotiation of his identity within Tehran—performing some level of cultural alignment with the urban standard while maintaining aspects of his familial Mashhadi traditions internally. In this period, his Mashhadiness was expressed primarily through his family connections. His social circle as a high-school student included Mashhadis, other Jews, and Muslims. In Tehran, he navigated multiple cultural influences within Bhabha's "third space" concept by strategically positioning his Mashhadi identity. Only:

> When we came to New York, ironically then the Mashhadis made their own synagogue, and then I became more familiarized with Mashhadis and became more of a of belonging to the community in a more, in a more tangible way.

Although he has reservations about the community and the exclusive turn it took:

> But in America, when you, when a whole community came to a new place and, you know, you are scared, you gather together, we made our own synagogue, we went there, so everybody, everybody became more of a, more tribalized and more isolated. . .

It is quite clear how deeply he appreciates the community's contribution to overcoming difficulties when "you are scared". This was also a symbolic reappropriation of his Mashhadiness. Familial and religious traditions took on new meaning in his hybrid, multilocal experience. No longer facing perceptions of being "other", he actively engaged with the Mashhadi community, which became a crucial site of cultural affirmation and a source of spiritual continuity. Through iterative processes of cultural translation across contexts, religion and community were resignified in positively redemptive ways.

Therefore, his narrative of the migrations shows that they did not result in a double trauma. His move to the United States brought him the strength of a community and, through it, the opportunity to feel complete once more. His family and the community's support overshadowed and mitigated the adjustment challenges, almost to oblivion. After being pressed, in a second interview, he admitted:

> So, no, I wouldn't know which one is more difficult. If anything, I remember the difficulty in America more than I remember the difficulty in Israel. But you reminded me that, yeah, I also had some difficulty then, yes.

This amelioration was indeed tangible. Together, they pooled their resources to create a social capital network, a migrant's most valuable asset (Waldinger 2001, pp. 16–17; Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2001, pp. 229–30). Mashhadiness proved exceptional as it was valued: not all Iranian Jews were as lucky (Netzer 1984, p. 84; Mladinov 1989, p. 248).

However, more importantly, it provided a new perspective. It acted as a prism through which he viewed all new experiences, not as challenges but as opportunities. Israel became a country to visit and love from afar once again, while a sense of wholeness was attained in the United States.

While Mehran experienced two migrations, he voluntarily disclosed the hardships of the first (Israel), but glossed over the difficulties of the second (US). The explanation for this discrepancy is that Mehran lacked the support network of his Mashhadi identity/community in Israel, a newfound support system he later found in the US. This support, along with strengthening his Mashhadi identity and sense of community, re-framed hardships retrospectively as opportunities rather than challenges. It allowed him to distance himself from difficulties in the United States psychologically. In other words, discovering his Mashhadi identity in the US helped Mehran to cope practically and narratively, enabling him to selectively frame the migrations differently over time.

Both informants found religion extremely important in their lives, albeit in a very different manner. Aharon is part of the Religious Zionist movement and identifies with its ideals, especially with those of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook (1865–1935) (Lax 2023). It also means that he is prone to reading Zionism as part of the fulfillment of the prophecies of Jewish ingathering to the Land of Israel. Indeed, to a large extent, mainstream Zionists saw their ideology as a return to and continuity of the Hebrew Bible. However, more practical views of providing a refuge to persecuted people also existed.[10] In any case, it was a politicized, secularized reading (Conforti 2023, especially pp. 4–10 in pdf; Shapira 1997, pp. 645–74; Shapira 2004, pp. 11–41). Religious Zionism took in the whole deal: a halakhic reading of the Hebrew Bible and a Zionist (largely secularized) reading of the redemption prophesies.

Mehran is also religious, but does not formulate his religious ideas within a political framework. Religion is closely connected to his core ideals—the family and the community. He believes the community should find a way to educate towards a unifying "modern–Orthodox" version of Judaism. Mehran is confident that there is a correlation between community members' attitudes towards religion and their adherence to the community. He fears the wear and tear in the community over the degree and version of religious commitments is a significant challenge to the community's future.

His use of the term "modern–Orthodox" takes on more significance, as it demonstrates the adoption of American religious categories to think about changes within his community. Joel Marcus, a member of the ASF board of directors, presents a perspective emphasizing non-Ashkenazic Jewish communities as examples of religious pluralism, demonstrating values of excellent tolerance and mutual respect (Ben-Ur 2009, p. 4). However, divisions, which have an institutionalized expression in Jewish American society, have infiltrated Jewish Middle Eastern communities as well. What used to be seen as diverse levels of observance have become lines of tension, particularly in the Mashhadi case, undermining a historical characteristic of the community: inter-communal marriages. These tensions have mainly infiltrated the community via religious schools, which some Mashhadis termed ultra-Orthodox (Nissimi 2007, pp. 113–16). Their strict observance and what is designated as a lack of tolerance towards looser observance is attributed to the fact that they are run by Ashkenazi Jews who are unfamiliar with Sephardi traditions. Educational institutions focusing on Jewish studies, whether in formal or informal settings, generally omit information concerning Jews from non-European regions. This approach supports the claim that the 'Ashkenazic' character might contribute to inner communal friction, as it tends to present Judaism as a singular, monolithic tradition. The sole recognized diversity is through Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations, delegitimizing any deviation from the strict Orthodox line (Ben-Ur 2009, p. 189).

This is a clear example of cultural translation/hybridity at play. Mehran is blending discourse from his American context with discussions about navigating religiosity within his Mashhadi–Jewish identity. This indicates that his conceptual framework has

been shaped by negotiating multiple cultural influences, even when discussing religious traditions central to his heritage and community.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how Mashhadi Jewish immigrants constructed redemptive narratives by analyzing oral histories and life stories as primary sources. Examining tales of individuals like Malka, Aharon, Mehran, and Esther across time periods revealed diverse frameworks of meaning-making. For early arrivals such as Malka, religious prophecies of peoplehood shaped the endurance of hardships in a sacred redemptive framework. Her descendants translated this within evolving Zionist perspectives.

Narratives from different eras demonstrated the fluid yet intersecting roles of religion, community, and family in meaning-making. For early immigrants, redemption lay in religious visions of ingathering, though Aharon imbued these with evolving political significance. Mehran drew resilience from communal ties amid some religious strains. Esther navigated gender restrictions through immigration frameworks while critiquing inherited "Mashhadi" traditions, tying her to communal identity.

Later narratives demonstrate fluidity, as Aharon drew political meaning from religion amid Israel's absorption pressures. Mehran exhibited resilience through communal ties, yet faced religious strains. Esther navigated gender restrictions through a redemptive immigration framework while critiquing inherited "Mashhadi" traditions.

Bhabha's hybridity and cultural translation theories aptly captured these identity negotiations occurring across migrant waves and situations. Comparing life stories situated variably in history enhanced insights into dynamic negotiations of religious, communal, and national affiliations within the shared Mashhadi experience over generations.

The unique features of the Mashhadi migration experience as a community have been subtly woven through the narratives—Malka's migratory group, Aharon's neighbors, and Mehran community activity. However, it is Esther who, while critiquing what she perceives as the "Mashhadi" heritage as suffocating for women, succinctly captures the essence when describing her family's initial years with the first Mashhadi families in New York: "These caring and concerned families were the belt around their waists, holding them up"(119). Strong family and community ties inherently characterize Mashhadi migration.

However, allegiance to the community proved far from universal. While deeply community-oriented, Malka found solace through collective religious visions rather than communal identity alone. Her descendants translated this redemptive framework into ardently Zionist terms. Thus, this demonstrates the changing role of community as narratives evolve through cultural translation over time.

Furthermore, religion, one of the most central characteristics of the community's identity, was also vulnerable. For early immigrants like Malka Aharonov, redemption lay in religious prophecies of Jewish peoplehood and ingathering in Zion. Religion also informed and framed Aharon's redemption narrative, though it took on a political reading. But Mehran's redemptive narrative of communal cohesion is, to some extent, threatened by religious pressures.

This research enhances the understanding of dynamic identity negotiations within the Mashhadi experience by taking an interventive oral history approach and comparing life stories situated differently.

Examining other immigrant communities' oral narratives through this diasporic qualitative lens may reveal further patterns in redemptive meaning-making over time. This research also raises questions about transnational ties' roles across generations. While grounded as a historian's exploration, incorporating quantitative methods could offer a more comprehensive picture. Overall, this qualitative examination provides a nuanced understanding of redemptive meaning-making processes among immigrants through their own voices over time.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Bar-Ilan University, 30 April 2020.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Notes

1   Gerd Baumann would see all religion as a social boundary because a social creation (Baumann 1999, pp. 69–80). They had a way of celebrating Passover and Hanukkah in underground conditions: (Dilmanian 2000, pp. 48–49); there was also a way of commemorating Sukkot (Ben-Zvi 1966, pp. 333–34). They also had special burial customs (Patai 1997, pp. 268–72; Ḥaklai 1982, p. 5). Special commemorative practices were part of forming their Identity (Nissimi 2007).

2   The Israeli Foundation of Science funded the research voices of immigration, during which all these interviews were collected.

3   Netzer and Levy count as Zionist only those immigrants with ties to the Zionist Organization. Only Yehoshua-Raz attributes Zionist motivations to the early immigrants (Yehoshua-Raz 1992, p. 140).

4   Sukkot was also posed as a test (Amini 2020, pp. 237–38).

5   See similarly, the tale of the experience of a young woman who came to the US at 16 talks about her difficulty in acculturating as she tended to look upon "Western women as unrestrained and promiscuous" (Zarnegar 2021, p. 96); yet it appears that just like in Esther's family, women tend to accept the new Western values/ways faster than the men, (Hojat et al. 2000, pp. 419–34).

6   The first Sephardi settlers in the 1920s were thought not to be really Jewish by the city's Ashkenazi Jews (Angel 1970, p. 91). This persisted until third-generation American (Angel 1970, pp. 126–29). On the denial of shared ethnicity by Ashkenazis of non-Europeans in the US (Ben-Ur 2009, pp. 108–49).

7   Pollsters repeatedly found that immigration was not widespread—in general, regardless of the country of origin (Fussell 2014, pp. 479–98).

8   For a much-acclaimed and much-debated example of a present-day expression of such a schism, see the journalist book (Ben Haim 2022).

9   In both cases, it seems that their fate as Oriental Jews had a part in their feeling of dislocation and rupture. However, see also a television documentary film, "Eretz Israel—Jewish exile in Palestine before and during World War II", Volkmar Geiblinger Film Production 2018, https://www.nationalfonds.org/detail-view/4237, accessed on 31 October 2023. The emigration of Austrian Jews to Israel/Palestine before and during World War II. The situation here was gravely different to other places of refuge such as the USA—the term "exile" seemed only to apply to a portion of those who fled there, people who had always felt somehow "other" and that they did not belong.

10 Surprisingly enough, given the stand of present Religious Zionism, Rabbi Yaakov Reines (1839–1915) viewed the return to the Land of Israel in the framework of the refuge concept (Seidler 2012, pp. 176–90). One should not take this reading too far; Reines' ideological and political activity were both national and religious, and his attachment to the Land of Israel—as "our holy land" lay at the bottom of both, as did his reading of the national awakening as the hand of Divine Providence, (Shapira 2003, esp. pp. 395, 398).

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