



בית התפוצות
מוזיאון העם היהודי
BEIT HATFUTSOT
THE MUSEUM OF THE
JEWISH PEOPLE



For Immediate Release

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**“LIGHT AND SHADOWS” EXHIBITION ON CULTURE AND HISTORY OF IRANIAN JEWS
OPENS AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AT THE CENTER FOR JEWISH HISTORY**

WHAT:	Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews
WHEN:	December 3, 2013 – April 27, 2014
WHERE:	Yeshiva University Museum, 15 W. 16th Street, NYC, 212-294-8330
COST:	Adults: \$8; seniors and students: \$6. Free for members and children under 5
WEB:	http://yumuseum.tumblr.com/LightandShadows or www.yumuseum.org

***From Queen Esther to the Shah’s Rule, “Light and Shadows” Shares
Rich and Colorful History of an Ancient Jewish Community***

New York City, November 18, 2013 – Since ancient times, Iran has been a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures, and languages. *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews—on exhibition at Yeshiva University Museum at the Center for Jewish History* —tells the rich and complex history of one of the world’s oldest Jewish communities, which dates back nearly 2,700 years since the first Jews exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia settled in the Persian sphere. The exhibition opens on December 3, 2013, and will be on view through April 27, 2014.

Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews was created and organized by Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, Israel. It is presented in New York by Yeshiva University Museum and the Center for Jewish History, in cooperation with the American Sephardi Federation. Yeshiva University Museum, at the Center for Jewish History (15 West 16th Street) near Union Square in New York City, explores and interprets the artistic and cultural experience of Jewish life.

More than 100 objects including archaeological artifacts, illuminated manuscripts, Judaica and amulets, paintings, photographs, videos, and documentary ephemera are presented in Yeshiva University Museum’s Rosenberg and Winnick Galleries to highlight key features and themes of the long, complex, and vibrant history of Jews living in Iran.

The exhibition begins with the biblical story of Esther, who heroically foiled a plot to exterminate the Jews of the ancient Persian city of Shushan. Iranian Jews identify strongly with Esther and she is remembered through beautiful renditions of the book telling her story, amulets seeking her protection, and her tomb, which is still a pilgrimage site today.

Muslims conquered Persia in the seventh century CE and the lives of Jews there became progressively difficult. In the early 16th century the Safavid kingdom rose to power establishing strict Shiite Islamic doctrine, which discriminated against Iran’s religious minorities. Conditions worsened for the Jews, and the exhibition uses objects to illustrate life in the Jewish quarter (*mahale*) of various cities and some of the constraints caused by

Shiite edicts. A section is dedicated to the professions practiced by Jews. Many of these professions, such as working as peddlers, used-clothing vendors, jewelry-makers, producers and sellers of wine, and musicians and entertainers, were forbidden to Muslims.

Ironically, these circumstances led the Jews of Iran to play a key role in preserving the legacy of classical Persian music and poetry, and *Light and Shadows* features traditional instruments such as the *tār*, *setār*, and *santūr* and offers several examples of recorded musical compositions. Because the Jews were considered to be “People of the Book,” they valued literacy in both religious and secular texts. Persian literature was integral to Jewish community life, and the exhibition includes rare illuminated manuscripts and books.

In the mid-1800s, the Jews living in the city of Mashhad were forced to convert to Islam. As a result, they lived double lives, practicing Islam in public but privately maintaining Jewish customs. A special section focuses on the distinctive experiences of the “crypto-Jews” of Mashhad and includes miniature phylacteries worn covertly under a headdress; lavish garments for child-brides, who were betrothed at an early age to avoid marriages to Muslims later in life; and pairs of elaborately decorated marriage contracts, a Jewish version in Hebrew and a Muslim version in Persian.

Another section highlights a range of objects associated with religious practices, ceremonies, and rituals, which have a distinctive Iranian Jewish style. The consecrated space of the synagogue holds a prescribed set of religious objects and *Light and Shadows* includes an ornamented cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept as well as a number of silver finials, decorated with Persian motifs. Wedding ceremonies were a hybrid of Jewish and Persian traditions and were designed to ensure the health and well-being of the young couple. Each marriage was sealed with a formal contract (*ketubah*), among the most beautiful of Persian Jewish illuminated documents. Lastly, the Jews of Iran wore amulets to confer protection against harm and promote healing, and the exhibition includes a wide range of delicately engraved examples in silver and bronze.

The exhibition also examines the opening of Iran to the West starting in the late-19th century, the reign of the Pahlavi Monarchy, and the exodus of much of the Jewish population following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Photographs by Hasan Sarbakhshian document the Jews remaining in Iran today, a community that numbers approximately 25,000.

“*Light and Shadows* traces a long and remarkable story into the present day,” said Dr. Jacob Wisse, director of Yeshiva University Museum. “I think visitors will be especially struck by how the powerful contemporary photographs, featured at the end of the exhibition, demonstrate the continuity of Iranian Jewish traditions and resonate with the beautiful, early artifacts and images – even as they reflect the presence of the modern world.”

ABOUT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Yeshiva University Museum is dedicated to the presentation and interpretation of the artistic and cultural achievements of Jewish life. The Museum, founded in 1973, is distinguished by its wide-ranging and intellectually rigorous exhibitions and, as the cultural arm of Yeshiva University, by its strong educational mission. As a partner in the thriving Center for Jewish History and a participant in New York’s lively downtown cultural scene, Yeshiva University Museum makes a distinctive and important contribution to Jewish life and to the world of culture and the arts. The Museum’s rich and diverse collections preserve Jewish artifacts, art, texts and material culture for posterity, making objects accessible through exhibitions, educational programs, and research and conservational initiatives.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR JEWISH HISTORY

The Center for Jewish History is home to five partner organizations: American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum and YIVO Institute for Jewish

Research. The partners' archival collections span more than 700 years of history and total over 500,000 volumes and 100 million documents (in 23 languages and 52 alphabet systems). The collections also include thousands of artworks, textiles, ritual objects, recordings, films and photographs. At the Center, history is illuminated through scholarship and cultural programming, exhibitions and symposia, lectures and performances. We are home to the David Berg Rare Book Room, Lillian Goldman Reading Room, Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute and Collection Management & Conservation Wing. Public programs and fellowships here at the Center create opportunities for diverse audiences to explore the rich historical material that lives within our walls.

ABOUT AMERICAN SEPHARDI FEDERATION

Founded in 1973, the American Sephardi Federation/Sephardic House (ASF) is the center for the preservation of the history, traditions and rich cultural heritage of the Sephardi and Mizrahi communities as an integral part of Jewish experience. ASF celebrates the uniqueness of the Sephardi/Mizrahi culture through its National Sephardic Library & Archives, exhibition cases, educational and cultural programs, publications, the annual NY Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, and the Broome & Allen scholarship fund.

ABOUT BEIT HATFUTSOT – THE MUSEUM OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People is a vibrant, interactive educational and cultural institution dedicated to celebrating four thousand years of Jewish history and Jewish Peoplehood. Since its opening in Tel Aviv, Israel in 1978, Beit Hatfutsot has been telling the remarkable story of the Jewish People, engaging visitors of all ages, all religions and backgrounds, in the incomparable narrative of Jewish survival and thriving. Through its core exhibition, rich database, genealogy center, educational program and special exhibits, such as Light and Shadows, Beit Hatfutsot serves as an indispensable platform that provides all visitors from Israel and abroad, in person and online, with a deeper understanding of the Jewish people and the meaning of Jewish identity.

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