My Persian Carpet: A Family and Cultural Legacy

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Abstract:

Life is full of and driven by symbols of all kinds. There is almost an unlimited number of visual symbols throughout the world used by countless cultures to represent them, their rituals, their beliefs, their connection to the world and to each other. One way that Jews maintained contact with each other over the centuries, without inviting unwanted suspicion, was sending non-verbal messages via common objects laced within the material culture of their adopted homes. It is well known that Jews, since the year 70 CE, have sojourned, to use the Biblical term, in countries where they were considered outsiders, or what today we would call "the other." They were people without a land of their own and dispersed to every country and in almost every region on Earth, either voluntarily or under duress. Jews have always found a subtle "secret" way of communicating with each other even at a distance, perhaps just to say that "you are not alone" or even more specific messages that have yet to be unraveled and revealed. It is my wish to attempt such a revelation here with a single object, a turn-of-the-century Jewish Persian carpet with which I am personally familiar.

Keywords: Persian, carpets, Jewish, decorative arts, iconography, hidden symbols, semiotics

Life is full of and driven by symbols of all kinds. We have also seen cross-cultural use of symbols, changing the meaning completely when used for a purpose removed from their original context. For instance, the swastika, to Buddhists and other non-Western cultures, is an ancient universal symbol that signifies auspiciousness and good fortune, as well as plurality, eternity, abundance, prosperity and long life, whereas in the hands of the Nazi regime, the same symbol came to represent to the world brutality, hatred and evil. Additionally, in Nazi Germany, pink triangles were used as one of the Nazi concentration camp badges to identify male prisoners who were sent there if they were homosexual. Intended as a badge of shame, the pink triangle has since been reclaimed and re-purposed as an international symbol of Gay pride and the Gay Rights Movement.

There is an almost unlimited number of visual symbols used throughout the world by cultures to represent them, their rituals, their beliefs, their connection to the world and to each other; these are generally benign. The study of these symbols can be found in the discipline of semiotics.[1] On occasion, a scholar will examine an apparently mundane object from a new perspective, e.g., a semiotic one, and will enlighten his audience to something completely new and fascinating based on

its visual symbolic elements, as well as the meaning of the number combinations in which those elements appear.

I recently discovered such symbolic content in the design of what I believe is a "Jewish" Persian carpet, i.e., one woven by Jewish weavers in the Persian (Iranian) city of Isfahan. I inherited this carpet from my maternal grandmother several years ago. Rife with images of flowers and Jewish ritual objects, these visual symbols are grouped in numbers ranging from one to thirteen throughout the carpet. This lends mystical meaning to centuries-old Jewish objects that heretofore had been hidden in plain sight. My carpet was probably created in the late 19th or early 20th century in today's Iran.[2]

This sudden revelation is what led me to scrutinize and then research the symbolic program that appers to be present in my carpet. There is an ancient tradition of symbolic imagery woven into Persian carpets, particularly prevalent in the Safavid Era (1502-1736), especially its capital: Isfahan[3] (Noroozy 2011). "During a period in the early Safavid dynasty the pictures and patterns found in carpets often held symbolic connonatiations, conveyed through visual puns. Moreover, it seems that the second meaning carried in these puns usually involved a religious message relating to the spiritual tradition of Muslim mystics" (Cammann 1978, 124). Though I don't believe that the patterns and meaning of the symbols in my carpet are of Muslim derivation, but rather Jewish, the idea of using visual symbolism and specific colors expressing both a quotidian, as well as a certain spiritual content in the creation of Persian carpets, seems to be present. This surely was not lost on the Jewish population, particularly the Jewish carpet weavers of Isfahan.[4]

The Jewish presence in Iran is one of the oldest in the diaspora, dating back to the 8th century BCE, but the largest migration of Jews to Persia came at the time of their expulsion from Israel following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in Jerusalem ca. 586 BCE. Babylonia was subsequently conquered and annexed by Persia's Cyrus the Great, who emancipated the Jews and allowed them to return to their homeland: the Land of Israel. However, many also relocated to Persia. Typical of Jewish exiles adapting to their new "homes" after expulsion, they learned to adopt local traditions and assimilate them, including objects created by skills artisans like carpets, while for instance, dwelling in Persia. Furthermore, the Jews seem to have had an active role in the development of Iranian, or Persian history, society and culture, so it should come as no surprise that the Jewish carpet weavers would incorporate the use of traditional Persian symbolic imagery into their own carpet designs. (Sarshar 2011)

Since 70 CE, the year that the Romans, at the direction of the Emperor Vespasian and under the command of his son Titus, destroyed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (Josephus 1960, 547-88)—the central focus of all Jews throughout the world even today—and laid waste to much of Israel, the Jews have sojourned, to use the Biblical term, in countries where they were considered outsiders, or what today we would call "the other." They were people without a land of their own and dispersed to every country and to almost every region on Earth, either voluntarily or under duress. Their lives and their security were always precarious. One way of maintaining contact with each other and to

send an expression of solidarity, was to transmit non-verbal messages via common objects masked within the material culture of their adopted countries. This helped to evade unwanted attention and/or suspicion. It allowed Jews to feel a small comfort in the midst of a sea of strangers (non-Jews or Gentiles), but it is also what gave them hope, so that they could continue to live their lives without feeling completely alone or isolated. It allowed them to feel some modicum of peace under often trying conditions, whether it was in the Middle East, Asia, Northern Europe or the New World.

The foremost authority on Jewish carpets and their symbolism, Anton Felton, relates that Jews have been well known fabric weavers for millennia. He based this observation on a wealth of written and visual evidence that he has meticulously gathered. He states that Jews have always found a subtle "secret" way of communicating with each other (Felton 2013). Perhaps it was a way to say that "you are not alone" or possibly, it was a way to send more specific messages that have yet to be unraveled and revealed. It is my purpose to attempt such a revelation here with a single object with which I am personally familiar: my maternal grandmother's Persian carpet.

Before the 15th century, Jews had resided in Spain for centuries, were very well integrated into Spanish society and high Spanish culture with their trades, such as metal working, weaving and other decorative arts (Felton 2013). Beginning as much as a century before and with the ushering in of the Renaissance, there was a growing pressure from the Vatican to "purify" and be rid of undesirables; i.e., almost exclusively, the Jews.[5] This pressure eventually resulted in the institution of the Spanish Inquisition, an institution that often targeted the Jews for persecution, particulary those who converted. A decree was issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to expel all of them from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492.[6] Even before this Church-sanctioned persecution, many Jews converted to Christianity as a survival tactic but still practiced Judaism in secret; they were known as "Conversos" or the more perjorative term, "Maranos" (Spanish for swine). The imperative of survival effected the lives of these Converso Jews in that they led precarious parallel lives – parallel because they lived double lives; one being the false public life of a Christian and the other the true private life of a Jew. It was precarious, because if their secret came to the attention of the Inquisition, they would be tortured, publically humiliated and executed.

Celebrated 12th-century Jewish Torah scholar and physician, Maimonides, a.k.a. Rambam, advised, and here Felton paraphrases the Jewish scholar, "that to save life by converting to another faith was permissible so long as one remained faithful in one's heart and, as soon as possible, returned to the full life of a Jew."[7] (Rambam 1995, 208) This was always the intention of the Conversos of Spain.

Felton relates that the Jewish artisans of 15th-century Spain ocassionally created items of decorative art for the Spanish elite that on first glance, were beautiful examples of the period's indigenous craftsmanship. At the same time, these works often contained symbolic references to Jewish life. Thus, if a fellow Jew saw them, they would know that the item was created by their compatriot and secretly expressed uniquely Jewish sensibilities. Christians patrons viewing the same item would only recognize its beauty and the traditional Christian symbols included therein. Such

solidarity made Jews feel a measure of comfort in the fact that they were communicating with each other as Jews, even though many of them had "converted" to Christianity to save themselves and their families from torture and death.

Secret catch-phrases, poetry and artefacts all had double meanings. A good example of this is a 15th-century Spanish lamp with a crucifix on top, but eight oil lamps on its base. A Christian would appreciate it as a beautiful work of decorative art with an aesthetic and symbolic connection to Christianity, while the Jewish viewer would recognize the eight lamps as signifying the eight days of Hanukah, otherwise known as the "Festival of Lights," and feel that connection to the Jewish craftsman who had created it, as well as the redemptive character of the holiday (Felton 2013).

My carpet has a similarly "hidden" symbolic design, even the same allusion to Hanukah and the idea of redemption, woven into its seemingly traditional Persian (in the old Safavid tradition) composition and motifs, though in a much more nuanced way and on a much more complex level. Symbols are ways of telling a kind of story in such a subtle manner that only the initiated can read them. Jewish decorative objects, including Persian carpets, are sometimes infused with such iconography. Felton writes that "Symbols sort us out into cohesive groups with shared non-verbal understandings, for words often fail to articulate the deep truths of consciousness and distort and corrupt what we struggle to convey" (Felton 2013). He goes on to say that "Jewish carpets are significant cultural chronicles of the Jewish people, giving insights and understanding which might not otherwise be available" (Felton 2013).

Fig. 1. This is an image of the turn-of the century Persian carpet that lies in my living room.

To make a long story very short, one day, I was sitting in my living room where my carpet lies, and glanced down at it just as I had many times before (Fig. 1)

Its dominant color is a deep blue and the flowers and other motifs are combinations of scarlet, white, blue and yellow. I

discovered that these colors, along with purple, were often associated with the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place located at the center of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the one destroyed by the Titus and the Romans in the year 70 CE. These specific colors are even mentioned by Flavius Josephus, the famous Jewish historian to the Roman Emperors Vespasian and Domitian (Josephus 1960*)* in his 20-volume tome. So, aside from the visual symbols that are peculiar to Jewish culture, even this particular choice of the color scheme can be seen to relate to the carpet's Jewish iconography.[8] I have found that the majority of Persian carpets' general chromatic field is red or green rather than blue, which indicates that it was possibly the blue that was chosen by the Jewish weavers as an easily recognizable Jewish symbolic color scheme without being too blatantly different.

I never thought twice about any iconographic implications inherent in my carpet until that epiphanic moment as I sat there staring down at it. On this particular day, I was nonchalantly glancing at the carpet's outer border, the one closest to where I was sitting, and I noticed for the first time, in a moment of revelation and astonishment, mirror-image dreidels incorporated into the design of one of the border flowers at my feet (Figs. 2 and 2a). I asked myself, "Am I really seeing what I think am seeing?"

Fig. 2. This is one of six "dreidel flowers" on the outer-most border of the carpet.

Fig. 2a. This is a simple, but common example of a contemporary dreidel. It and an almost infinite number of variations, are still used today in a games played by all Jewish children on Hanukah each year.

The answer to myself was, "Absolutely." I scrutinized the other Floral patterns around the entire outer border and saw that this particular double dreidel motif was undeniably repeated three times on each of the two long sides of my 9' x 12' carpet. That led me to start perusing the rest of the carpet. The more I explored, the more I discovered.

I started to examine the carpet's other flowers because much to my fascination and delight, they were clearly arranged in flower types and groups. At first, I didn't really understand the significance, but I came to that realization soon after. As I walked around the carpet's perimeter looking for other Jewish motifs besides the dreidels, I noticed that on one of the short sides there was an isolated "double-flower" motif in the center of the outermost border (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. The "double-flower" motif on one of the outer borders.

I then walked over to the opposite side and noticed that there were two "single-flower" motifs separated from the other flowers that flanked them, in the center of the outermost border and an inner border adjacent to it (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. The "double single-flower" motif on the outer border opposite the the "double-flower" motif on the other side of the carpet."

Upon researching the motif, I discovered that my carpet was most probably manufactured in Isfahan, Persia (modern-day Iran), because of these four flowers. They are not found in such an isolated configuration in all Persian carpets, but most commonly those manufactured in the central Iranian cities of Isfahan and Kashan.

Next, I began to count the flowers as they appeared in bunches on the carpet, symmetrically arranged and "pointing" toward the center (Fig. 1). I had already established that the numbers 1 and 2 were clearly present. Eventually, I counted flowers bunched in groups that went all the way up to the number thirteen.

Apparently, the clever Jewish designer did not want to arouse any suspicion, so within the symmetricval arrangement of the flowers, typical of Persian design, the numbered order appears as mirror images all around the carpet's central array. Interestingly, the weaver and/or designer of this carpet also wanted it to look like a standard Persian Isfahanian carpet, so he/she arranged all motifs in a symmetrical pattern, disguising the use of Jewish symbols within the traditional patterns in this way. If these groups of flowers are looked at in the correct fashion, there are different combinations that "add up" to traditional Jewish mystical numbers. I thought to myself that this was most likely not coincidental. Then it occurred to me that there is a song that Jews sing at the end of the Passover seder every year (it is called *Echad Me Yo-day-ah* or Who *Knows One?*) that lists various Jewish mystical concepts according to the number associated with them, such as God is one, the Tablets of the Law are two, the forefathers are three, etc., all the way to thirteen, which, consistent with mystical

Jewish thought, signifies the thirteen attributes of God or the thirteen articles of faith formulated by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*. (Rambam 1994, 151-58.) Only Jews would recognize such a significant though apparently esoteric connection.

I was beginning to get excited. But then I asked myself, why are there dreidels (only in the borders), objects related to the festival of Hanukah, and simultaneously, flowers numbered in a way that relate to Passover, in the main, central field of the same carpet? As I stated earlier, the more I explored, the more I discovered, and the more compelled I was to try and unravel the mystery contained within the seemingly random array of symbolic floral images. I continued to scrutinize the patterns and the motifs and discovered that in the center of the carpet was a blue, scarlet and white flower composed of several small flowers that made up the whole (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. This is the flower at the center of the carpet toward which every other group of flowers seems to point in a symmetrical pattern. This flower seems to be related to the six "dreidel flowers" on the outer borders as it relates to the Festival of Lights or Hanukah but also to the same Passover song mentioned above.

It has eight red flowers on the perimeter plus one red central flower (all relating to the eight days of Hanukah, and the Hanukah menorah which contains nine candle holders), as well as four white flowers on the inside. If you take eight red flowers on the perimeter, the four inner white flowers and add the single, central flower, it adds up to thirteen, thus relating this motif to both the Festival of Hanukah and to the Holiday of Passover.

The number nine is clearly alluding to the nine candle holders on the *Hanukiah* or the traditional Hanukah candelabra or menorah, as well as to nine months of preganancy (one of the mystical numbers in the Passsover song mentioned above). I was ruminating over the connection

between the two holidays and their symbols and why they appeared together on my carpet. Perhaps this object of Jewish decorative art was some sort of message, but what could that message possibly be?[9]

Although it might seem very complex visually, the message could be simple; perhaps a family or family member in Isfahan was informing the family that had emigrated to North America, of their itinerary (the carpet was purchased by my grandmother at auction in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 1936, and by then it was already quite old). Perhaps, the Persian branch of the family or a relative would be leaving Isfahan, around or after the festival of Hanukah which occurs in December, on their way to the New World, and hoped to join the family at the other end of the journey by Passover, which generally occurs in April. Perhaps the carpet was shipped from Persia to Canada ahead of their departure as a silent message indicating their impending arrival. (Yerushalmi 2009, 43-44).[10]

As Felton noted, to a Jew, the holidays of Hanukah and Passover represent very important ideas associated with Jewish history and Jewish culture. (Felton 2013, 1) Hanukah represents perseverance in challenging times and enduring harsh conditions, i.e. persecution and isolation, as well as standing up for what is right, and never forsaking faith in the Almighty's redemption of righteous people because of fear, i.e. rule under the Seleucid Syrian Greeks. Passover has come to represent the liberation and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people from the oppression and religious suppression of Egyptian Pharaonic rule. This subtly symbolic program could similary be associated with the contemporary oppression of the Jews of Persia in the late 19th century and their quest for freedom and redemption, wishing to join their liberated and spiritually redeemed relatives in the New World, where such instituional and widespread persecution was relatively unknown (Yerushalmi 2009, 43-44). The iconography found in the carepet's design could be seen by non-Jews as simply a beautiful traditional Persian/Isfahani design, while it would instantly be recognized by Jews as specially symbolic of Jewish solidarity, ritual and the celebration of something uniquely Jewish.

The carpet also contains more universal and less festival- or holiday-oriented Jewish motifs, thus reiterating the "Jewishness" of it. For instance, on either side of the central flower described above, there are two pairs of the Hebrew letter "shin" accompanying two sets of three flowers.[11] (Fig. 6, 6a and 6b)

Fig. 6. This image shows the two pairs of three-flower motifs with their accompanying "mystical" Hebrew letter "shin," reiterating the significance of the number three.

Fig. 6a. Detail of one of the set of three flowers with their accompanying Hebrew letter "shin."

Fig. 6b. A typical Hebrew letter shin.

They are incorporated into the arrangement of three symmetrically placed flowers, further emphasizing and enforcing the significance of the number and the sign. This letter, to Jews, has very special mystical meaning, because it is the first letter of one of God's several biblical names: Shaddai. Still in practice today, when Jewish men put on Tefilin (a.k.a. phylacteries) each day before saying the morning prayers, they wrap one of their arms in a leather strap and at the end, weave the piece of leather between their fingers in the shape of the letter "shin," symbolic of this iteration of God's name. The number three in Judaism, like in Christianity, is significant. It is the number of the forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who represent the very birth of Judaism. The shin is basically a three-pronged form, and it was reinforced by the symbolic nature of the three flowers adjacent to which they are placed.

Another signifcant symbol that is pervasively present on the carpet is the eternal flame (or "ner tamid") (Fig. 7, 7a and 7b).

Fig. 7. The "bookend" ner tamids.

Fig. 7a. Detail of one of the "bookend" ner tamids.

Fig. 7b. A pair of ner tamids situated on the carpet independent of the main array of flowers of which many are present.

Fig. 8. An Image of one of two flower arrangements facing the central flower motif that if looked at properly, shows an arrangement of the the mystical number 18

It is found throughout the carpet. The "ner tamid" clearly resembles a stylized flame with a blue center, a white outer bloom and a red or scarlet perimeter consistently throughout the carpet. Though it is subtly woven into and adjoined to many flowers, it is usually a separate flower "part" and not included in the specific number of blossoms in each group. This motif represents Jews' eternal faith in God and their timelessness as a people. The meaning of the eternal flame, according to Jewish sages is that it is a symbol of God's never-ending presence in the community and in their lives. Almost every synagogue, no matter what denomination, has an eternal flame near the ark that holds the sacred Torah scrolls, reminding the congregation of God's enduring presence.

And finally, I could argue that the special arrangement of certain flowers on the carpet could also add up to another important Jewish symbol as expressed through a number: the number eighteen. The Hebrew word for life is "chai," and its letters "add" up to eighteen, a number pervasive

in Jewish culture and practice from mystical numbers to everyday ornaments, such as necklaces and other forms of decorative art.[12] If a Jew wants to give an ancient and humble though peculiarly Jewish monetary gift for a milestone in a person's life, such as a bar mitzvah or a wedding, or just as a charitable donation, the symbol or the monetary amount minimally given is almost always, without exception, eighteen dollars and increments of eighteen (Fig. 8).

Furthermore, another aspect to the symbolic character of the carpet to explore and interpret, is the specific varieties of flowers included in the design, each of which has a symbolic meaning of its own, but this requires further research. I will reserve that for a subsequent article. Suffice it to say that Jewish carpets, i.e., carpets woven by Jewish craftsmen in this particular case, in the Iranian city of Isfahan during an ongoing period of persecution, as well as a time of cultural vitality, but also with the hope that they could find freedom in the New World, were made to look like traditional Persian carpets; they contained all of the same kinds of motifs and general symmetry, so as not to arouse unwanted attention or suspicion. At the same time, there is an ancient tradition of lacing Jewish symbols into Jewish crafts, coins, wall paintings, lamps, etc., from all over the world, created in countries where Jews had the emotional and psychological need to "stick together." These were used to express the idea that they were not alone. (Felton 2013, 1) Despite the harsh treatment they received from their reluctant and pathologically suspicious hosts, these symbolic objects say that Jews must endure and, they have endured. The Jewish People have always believed that there is strength in solidarity and this notion has sustained them through thick and thin for more than 3,000 years. This Perisan carpet is one elegant and eloquent example of such a notion.

Endnotes:

1. The word Semiotics, which later became an academic discipline, first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1850. It was defined as a cross-disciplinary field that focuses on the use of symbols to convey ideas.
2. The patterns and colors used and other specific motifs on my carpet, point to the fact that it was likely made in Isfahan, Persia. There were two cities whose unique fingerprint regarding patterns in carpet design, link my carpet to them. They were Isfahan and Kashan. Friends of mine who are Persian Jewish immigrants came to America with just about only the shirts on their backs, so to speak, but they also brought two family heirlooms, both hand-woven, woolen Persian carpets. One of them actually had the word Kashan, written in Farsi, woven into one of its borders. It shares certain characteristic elements with my carpet, but is also different in many other aspects.
3. The Persian carpet as we know it was born during the Safavid Dynasty—the ones with intricate floral patterns having central medallions and sprays of flowers scattered across a plain field. The Safavid kings took what was then a purely tribal craft and elevated it to an art form by building carpet workshops in Isfahan, Kashan, and Kerman (which remain major carpet weaving centers today). My carpet possess this same array in its design.
4. Isfahan was the capital of the Safavid Dynasty until the Afghanis invaded and ended that period of Safavid rule over Persia. Isfahani carpets are thought to be among the most beautiful and of the highest quality Persian carpets to this day.
5. During the reign of Henry III of Castile and Leon (1390–1406), Jews faced increased persecution and were pressured to convert to Christianity.
6. The King of Portugal issued a similar expulsion edict in 1493.

7. The actual source is Rambam, trans. by Eliyahu Touger, *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, Chapter 5, 1. The entire house of Israel are commanded regarding the sanctification of [God's] great name, as [Leviticus 22:32] states: "And I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel." Also, they are warned against desecrating [His holy name], as [the above verse] states: "And they shall not desecrate My holy name." What is implied? Should a gentile arise and force a Jew to violate one of the Torah's commandments at the pain of death, he should violate the commandment rather than be killed, because [Leviticus 18:5] states concerning the mitzvot: "which a man will perform and live by them." [They were given so that] one may live by them and not die because of them. If a person dies rather than transgress, he is held accountable for his life."
8. Red symbolizes beauty, wealth, courage, luck, joy and faith; Blue symbolizes power or force and solitude (an allusion to the coming of the Messiah and the After Life); White stands for purity and cleanliness; and yellow stands for the sun, and the joy of life.
9. One day, my wife saw me struggling over the possible meaning of these symbols, and offered a possible solution. She suggested that perhaps this carpet was a message from one family to another, or from one family member to the family that dwelled in a faraway place, perhaps across the world; Canada, for instance.
10. Yerushalmi writes, "Centuries of persecution have not failed to stamp their effect in deep, broad characters upon the Persian Jews. Despised and persecuted, they are unable to command respect, or to arouse feelings of humanity in the breasts of their oppressors." It should be no surprise that the Jews of Persia began to seek safe havens in other parts of the world including the United States and Cananda at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century.
11. Pointed out by a friend of mine with whom I was studying the carpet.
12. According to Jewish mystical thought, every Hebrew letter, first appearing in the Torah, has a numerical value and a mystical value.

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