

Joseph Setarehshenas: Preserving Iranian Jewish History Online



By Karmel Melamed

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Almost 14 years ago, local Iranian Jewish businessman Joseph Setarehshenas decided to create an online forum to preserve Iranian Jewish history, culture and information, which slowly has been fading from his community's memory after its 40-year exile from Iran.

Setarehshenas created Farsi language 7dorim.com. It has become a labor of love for him and connects Iranian Jews worldwide.

"I realized our history and culture is slowly fading away because the Jewish community in Iran has diminished substantially over the last 40 years," Setarehshenas, who is in his late 60s, said.

“So I started the website almost single-handedly as a way of trying to save that information in perpetuity.”

The website contains photos of 400 prominent Iranian Jews from the community’s history; panoramic photos of Iran’s 110 operational and defunct synagogues; photos of important Jewish sites such as the tombs of Esther and Mordechai; 27,000 individual photos of Jewish headstones from Tehran’s Jewish cemetery; and hundreds of pages about the community’s 2,700 year history and culture.

The website’s name means “generations” in Hebrew, and the site has become a major part of Setarehshenas’ life. He has spent two years and took four trips to Iran to take photos of Jewish sites, and to collect oral and written history from Jews still living there.

“My hope is that those who truly love Judaism and Iranian Jewish history or culture will help me in any way possible to complete this website.”

“I really did not have problems from the authorities [in Iran],” he said, “since they knew my work for the website was not political, but rather to preserve the Jewish community’s history.”

Setarehshenas, who currently works at his beauty supply store in Encino, said he has spent a total of \$200,000 of his own money and up to six hours a day working on the website. He primarily works alone, preparing the site’s written content and interviewing individuals from the community living in Los Angeles and New York, but he also occasionally receives help from his children and a few Jewish volunteers in Iran.

Local Iranian Jewish community members praise Setarehshenas’ efforts to keep their ancient history alive.

“The site has and still is documenting the oral history as well as all the monuments, [and] services that Jews have achieved in many different spheres in Iran,” said George Haroonian, a local Iranian Jewish activist. “It is a gem in all the works that our contemporaries are doing.”

Setarehshenas said he has a substantial amount of content and 50,000 photos he has not been able to post due to a lack of time, help and funding.

“I realize that I am getting older and cannot continue this endeavor forever,” he said. “My hope is that those who truly love Judaism and Iranian Jewish history or culture will help me in any way possible to not only to complete this website, but ultimately set up a physical center where this information can be made available to everyone to enjoy.”

https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/310302/joseph-setareh-shenas-preserving-iranian-jewish-history-online/