



Harry Kreisler: Welcome to a “Conversation With History.” I’m Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies. Our guest today is Roya Hakakian who is a writer, journalist, poet, filmmaker and author. Her most recent book is [Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran](#). Roya, welcome to Berkeley.

Roya Hakakian: Thank you for having me.

HK: We’ll talk about your book in a minute but let me get a little about your background. Where were you born and raised?

RH: I was born in raised in Tehran, in Iran, and I came to the United States in 1985 when I was 19.

HK: And looking back, how do you think your parents shaped your thinking about the world?

RH: Well, in many different ways that is almost impossible to fit into a sound bite, but my father having been a poet and who continues to be a poet left a great influence on me and made me absolutely fall in love with not so much literature but the task of writing. Because for all the years that I was growing up it seemed that my dad always had something to run away from everything else in the world to. He had a sanctuary regardless of where in the house he was or what was happening around him. He could always pick up a notebook and a pen and be in a world of his own, and I think that made me embrace writing more than anything as a sanctuary, also.

HK: And your mother?

RH: My mom was – is probably the most generous person, giving person I’ve ever known, and she actually made me think from very early on what sort of a woman I wanted to be. Looking at her I decided that I didn’t want to get married because I would have to give everything over to the task of creating a family, I didn’t want to have children because I didn’t see myself all that interested in

doing the things that she was doing. And so, in a way, I shaped an opinion about how I wanted to be based on the things that I saw my mother do, which in many ways out of generosity, were things that she found herself doing, and in many ways were things that inhibited her from her own self-development, which is not something that I wanted to do.

HK: Your book, which is about your growing up years, is subtitled “A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran.” It’s really a chronicle of what you saw and what you did, especially from the time of the fall of the Shah until after the ayatollahs come to power and you leave the country in the mid-’80s, 1980s. And there is a lot going on in your formative years, and I think first of all, we should mention that your family was Jewish in Iran during this period. So, being Jewish in Iran, Persia – how did that affect you, when you look back at all of that? Because clearly your family retained their identity but at the same time, you definitely are an Iranian.

RH: Absolutely. You see, the reason we’re having these conversations, or this particular conversation, is because I am now in the United States and it’s thirty years later. So, this very much is a retrospective conversation. When I was 12 and the Iranian revolution was taking place, I distinctly remember no one was thinking, even prior to that, about religion as an issue. Iran, at the time that I was growing up, and even slightly prior to that, in the ‘60s and ‘70s, was religiously a very egalitarian place, especially as far as huge cities like Tehran where I was growing up or other big cities were concerned. I didn’t grow up having the sort of preoccupations as a Jewish person that my mother or my father had had. My father was very much a target of bigotry where he grew up, which was a very small village in central Iran. My mother had experienced a great deal, too. But in my years these things were quite passé. We were modern people with modern aspirations and talking about each other’s religions didn’t seem like a chic thing to do. And revolution especially, unlike what it seemed to people outside of Iran, and particularly in the United States, to the rest of us in Iran, educated, urban folks, again in big cities, was not about a religious undertaking. It was...

HK: That is, the revolution now, you’re talking...

RH: Yeah. I mean, retrospectively I came here, I was working in television news and I saw what you saw. You only saw clerics on the streets, and you saw the “down with the United States” chants, and you saw the burning of the American flag, and so I don’t blame you for having formed the notions about the Iranian revolution that you did. For us in Iran, it was about all the great things that have brought revolutions about in history. It was about freedom, it was about democracy, it was about women’s rights, it was about all the things that we thought modern Iran should have. And so, in that space nobody talked about religion. The revolution made it even more passé to entertain or discuss those issues. So, I didn’t grow up thinking or debating these things until well into my teenage years when things that I’m sure you would want to talk to; the mullahs took over, and so the rules kind of changed.

HK: It’s interesting because – I recommend your book highly to the audience. It’s beautifully written and there is a chapter where your extended family gathers for a Seder, and it mixes both a

sense of maintaining the tradition with a kind of whimsy that one has in all cultures when families get together. But it's kind of interesting – so as Jews you were secular in Iran, as you just described but you maintained a piece of your identity with a commitment to the Jewish tradition.

RH: Absolutely. And so, when I – it was only in my encounter with American Jews, when people asked me, “So, what were you? – were you reform, were you conservative, were you orthodox?” I began to kind of think about, so what were we really. And then I realized that these divisions, as you well know – and I didn't, it took me a while to get it – are in some ways divisions that belong to democratic societies in which Jews have lived free enough to think of their own differences from one another, and therefore they have created sub-divisions in which each feels more comfortable than the other. As Jews we were something that is hard to describe. We observed – some of my best memories about my childhood are my synagogue memories, and it had to do with the fact that my father would hold my hand, we would walk – the synagogue was within walking distance and it was part of the school that I attended. And more than anything I remember playing with the other children, eating afterwards with the rest of the community, but it wasn't about a broader religious agenda. We were together and it was how we experienced each other as a community, and that was precisely what I loved about it and what I continue to love about it and wish to pass on to my own children.

HK: Your book is rich in human portraits but also rich in the way that it touches important themes, tradition versus modernity, freedom, identity, identities, and it's interesting, these moments of awakening that you have in the book. And I'm reminded of one in which under the Shah's rule you're watching a friend read a magazine, a women's magazine, and there're pictures in the magazine of women in different roles, and you as a very young person were taken by the image of the woman truck driver. I raise this because there were aspects of what the Shah was doing, which was bringing modernity to Iran, and you actually capture that, but in the end you see that it has come with the denial of freedom, and so on. But talk a little about that because in a way the Shah's regime was friendly to the Jews so that being Jewish – you could wear it lightly on your sleeve, it didn't really matter.

RH: Right. And I think that Shah, in general, was the force behind the religious egalitarianism that came to Iran. You know, the Bahais were also far more comfortable under the rule of the Shah than they are, say, today.

HK: This is a minority sect in Persia. We should tell our audience who the Bahai are.

RH: Yeah. The Bahai is a religion that began about a hundred-some years ago and it is an offshoot of Islam and as such very much under persecution in today's Iran, because in the Muslim tradition, at least the way it's practiced in Iran, leaving Islam is a big issue and therefore Bahais who have left the tradition are heavily persecuted and live terribly in Iran's rule today. Going back to your question, I think it was part of Shah's bigger strategy of bringing modernity into Iran to take away and try to soften religious boundaries in Iran, and it absolutely worked. We didn't have Jewish

ghettos in Iran. You couldn't point to a neighborhood and say, this is a Jewish neighborhood. We had Jewish neighborhoods but they were upscale neighborhoods where people lived and Jews happened to populate them heavily. So, it was very, very interesting to live at a time that was such a good time, not only for Iran but also for the cause of equality among various minorities in Iran. I think what made those years so memorable not just for me, but those years continue to be memorable in the minds of other exiles who now live in the United States – and as you know, California and especially Los Angeles is home to the largest community of Iranians outside of Iran – is the fact that those were the greatest years in modern history of Iran where issues of religious differences had become so pale culturally. I have often been stopped by other Iranians who have said to me, “You know, it's only after we've come to the United States where Iranian Jews now say, ‘I'm an Iranian Jew.’ When we were in Iran nobody said anything other than, ‘I'm an Iranian.’” And it's true. However, I also find myself having to kind of add the detail that we were all Iranians – but I should say that those were for the '60s and the '70s – and I think it came at a cost, which was that whatever Jews practices, or however it was that they experienced their Jewish tradition, it was very much done within the boundaries of the Jewish community. By that I mean that it was not something that had come as a result of a mutual understanding between Muslims and Jews. It was not that the Muslim community really knew who we were, not just as Iranian citizens but also as Jewish citizens. It had come at the cost of the Jews exercising however it was that they were Jewish sort of behind closed doors and displaying their Jewish identities overtly outside of their homes and outside of that sort of boundary. And I wish that hadn't been the case. I wish we as Iranians in those years had been better known, and I wish perhaps in the future we get to enrich the Persian culture in more overt and bolder ways than we have thus far.

HK: At one point you characterize – let me see if I can find the quote – you're characterizing as a Jew your relations with the Muslims, and I'm paraphrasing now that it was like wearing a comfortable piece of – of clothing that's very comfortable, whereas...

RH: Pajamas.

HK: Pajamas, right – and that when you mingled with Muslims, although you had very good relations with them, you were more careful about what you were wearing. Talk a little about that, because there was an element of a conscious Jewish identity that you characterize beautifully.

RH: Thank you. It's true. You asked me earlier how it was that I felt myself as a Jewish person and I catch myself even in this conversation contradicting myself, saying, oh, we were all the same, and then you quote this and I remember that we weren't all the same [laughs]. So, it's true. The ways that I knew there was something different were very, very subtle, and so when Muslims were around I always knew that these people were outsiders, which is to say that they were not bad outsiders or good outsiders but they were outsiders. And so, I was on my best behavior, which I describe as kind of wearing my Sunday's best, and when we were among relatives or other Jewish acquaintances it was very comfortable. You didn't have to watch what it was that you were saying, you didn't have to worry that whatever language you used might offend someone else. So, it was very much that, and it

was very much the fact that I knew the neighbors who were not Jewish were outsiders, but I hadn't categorized them in any other way than a group of outsiders.

HK: We're going to talk about the revolution in a minute but I want to have you become a writer first and talk a little about writing, and you're more than a writer because you're a journalist, you're a poet, so you cover the gamut. Now you were 19 when you emigrated from Iran and you had really no English when you came over but you write such beautiful English. So, I'm curious as to how you work in these various different mediums. As a writer, what do you see as the skills that you have to have as a writer and how do you write? You learned much from your father, as you just described, but talk a little about that.

RH: Well, I did look in my own resumé a few years ago and I saw documentary filmmaking, poetry, reporting in journalism, and most recently book writing, and I had somewhat of a personal crisis because I said to myself, "So, what am I?" And I had to answer that question for myself and in the process of kind of thinking that through, because it didn't look all that different to me – I always felt that I was doing the very same thing regardless of what discipline I was exercising – it's about storytelling, and I think storytelling is what connects all these dots. I'm not a techy filmmaker in the sense that I know how to use a camera but I don't know how to be inventive with it, I don't have a passion to figure out what's the latest digital camera model that could do such-and-such to pictures, I have a passion for storytelling. And I think that is what really is the connecting theme between all these various disciplines. And so, I may go from one into another but I'm always doing the very same thing regardless of which one it is that I'm doing. I became a writer as a result of the Iranian revolution because the revolution, again, unlike what Americans were seeing, unlike what Europeans were seeing, was a literary revolution for me and my generation, and the generation prior to my own. I was called to the cause by the greatest poets living in Iran in the '70s and '80s. I fell in love with their work, and as a result, with what it was that they were selling, which was the revolution at the time. The greatest person, the greatest influence on my life, was a poet who died several years ago, named Ahmad Shamlu, whose poetry took me several years to get and he was very difficult when I first started to read him, when I was 13 and 14, but when I finally understood one of his poems, and it came on an August afternoon when I was trying to read one of his poems for the hundredth time and I had picked up the book one last time, thinking that this is the last time I'm going to read this and then I'm going to put this book down and kiss this guy off for the rest of my life, I finally understood the poem. And my life was perfectly, literally, irreversibly transformed as a result of that one reading when I finally understood what he was saying. So, I became a writer during a time when poetry, literature was entwined with the concept of change, and with the concept of having collective convictions and a sense of collective commitment to Iran.

HK: And you write in one of your opinion pieces that – and I'm paraphrasing now and trying to summarize – you're really saying that you associate poetry and passion with the revolution, but when the revolution must correct itself because it's gone awry, then that's when prose and empiricism needs to come into play. Is that a fair statement of what you're saying?

RH: I'm really impressed. You've actually really read my stuff. [laughs] It's true. I think in many ways poetry in Iran – well, poetry globally – is having a hard time anyway. And I think in Iran it's compounded by the fact that poetry was the language of the revolution for the educated, modern, city dwelling people in Iran, and once the revolution didn't fulfill its promise the vessel of the revolution, which was the language, was something that people turned their backs on, and I think that's somewhat to be blamed for the additional fall of poetry from its historical pedestal in Iran. And I think additionally, we as Iranians have had such a strong tradition of poetry writing, and we've had Rumi, we've had Hafez, we've had so many great giants in poetry writing, that our prose had suffered for many, many years historically, until the last thirty years. I think as a result of the revolution, as a result of the disillusionment in the revolution, we have turned to other mediums such as filmmaking and painting but also prose writing, which I think isn't such a terrible thing to have happened.

HK: In one of your essays you write about Akbar Ganji, who was a guest on our program a while back, and I think you're saying that prose is necessary for the kind of critique that he was making as Iranians came to see what their revolution had wrought.

RH: Absolutely. For us, I think, at least for me, sort of a young budding poet in Iran during the time of the revolution, poetry was all about emotions, very feverish emotions, too, not just ordinary "I feel blue" sort of emotion but passionate, "Let's go make a fire" kind of emotion. And so, that was necessary for the sort of lyrical works of literature and poetry that it created for many, many years, and many decades, in modern poetry of Iran. But at the same time, you can't do everything that you must do in literature but having these very intense emotions. You must take them off, so to speak, put them in a pot, put them on the stove, let it simmer and kind of stir it and look at it, examine it, taste it, add spices to it, in order for it to process itself and become something else, which I think is the sort of work that if you're constantly writing these passionate pieces you would never allow yourself to do. I think prose writing gave us the opportunity to kind of say, okay, intense emotions are good and fine but let's set them aside for a while and let's look at this in a way that we have not looked at it in the past, and I think prose writing has given us the window to look at ourselves and everything else in a way that we don't often do.

HK: So, your poetry is in Persian, or Farsi, I guess, but you write beautifully in English. So, the question is, do you think in Farsi when you write in English, before you write it down? What's going on in your mind?

RH: Who knows? [laughs] Or who wants to know? I think – I have to tell you a very funny story. When I first wrote the first draft of this book, Journey from the Land of No, I turned it in to my editor, and I think I had written it primarily with my Iranian head. My editor read it and after about a week, she called me up and said, "You know, Roya, this is really, really, really very beautiful but what does it mean?"

HK: [laughs] I see.

RH: And I knew exactly what she had meant. It didn't offend me but I knew, as soon as she said that, that I had written that in the same way that we write poetry, or I wrote poetry in Persian and got away with it, which is make things beautiful, be really intense about them and let myself off the hook, if meanings were not absolutely clear or delivered. You can get away with a great deal of ambiguity if you're writing poetry because you kind of want people to go away thinking about what the hell it was that you meant by such-and-such for days on end. But you can't get away with that in prose. And you can get away with even more of that if you write in Persian than if you write in English because according to Strunk & White, in English you must be simple and clear and concise as you can possibly be, and these are probably the three rules that Iranian prose writing, or Persian prose writing, would never recommend to you. We try to be complex and unclear, and as ambiguous as possible, or that's how we have been thus far. And so, I realized that somehow I have to marry these two aspects of my identity, my Iranian self with my American self, my drive for creating beautiful metaphors with my drive for being simple and concise and clear. And so, the result was this book, I hope. It's not a paradox but...

HK: But that helps us understand. There's a writer emerging in the book, what you're writing – but you're capturing your persona in the revolution. I want to explore that now with you, but I do want to quote you, yourself, where you say, "But I had a dream with eyes wide open, had seen what none of my siblings had. I had become the family's witness." Then later you write, "Because I was too young to be elbowed I fashioned a personal reconnaissance I thought of as human osmosis, learning the untold by breathing the vicinity. Years later I realized that the proper term for the technique was journalism." Now in this book, you are a young, budding revolutionary but there are two moments I saw as turning points in which your revolutionary zeal confronts the truth of the revolution. One incident that struck me was, you're in a Jewish school, it's a good existence, the revolution comes, and then the day after the revolution you suddenly have a new woman principal who is a fundamentalist and a totalitarian, I guess, and as part of that bureaucratic, "you'll do it my way" way of thinking, she announces to the class that your Passover holiday is cancelled. So, the young revolutionary Roya takes upon the task of leading a revolution against the revolution. Talk a little about that because that struck me as a very important incident for you.

RH: Yes. I was reading, in preparation for writing this book, a series of books that had inspired me in the past, and one of them was Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce. And of course, during that period I was avoiding calls from my editor who was wondering where my manuscript was. I wasn't ready to turn anything in, I was trying to just find my voice in this piece. And halfway through Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, I came upon the speech about the clock of hell, and the religious speech that Stephen Dedalus was listening to, and I realized I had heard this speech before. Up until that moment, I had completely suppressed the memory of this principal out of my mind, and it was only when I was reading Joyce that I realized, this sort of fundamentalist talk rings familiar to my ears and it completely brought back the memory of this principal. It was the first moment that in my entire life, for the first time, I was encountering – or experiencing sort of this Muslim/Jewish tension, because this principal who took over our school had come to convert us.

She had come with an agenda to try to get us, a group of Jewish girls, to convert into Islam. And of course, that sounds very scary whenever I say that, but I suppose the only consolation is that she never managed to do anything, and after the book was published I got various emails from Zoroastrian Iranians, and Christian Iranians, saying, “Oh, you know, after she left your school, she came to ours and she didn’t convert us either.” So, there’s great irony in that. But it was the first moment that I realized that I was a Jewish person and here was a fundamentalist Iranian who had other plans for me and wanted me to do something that I was unwilling to do. And I suppose the comedy in all of this is that it was also my first chance to apply the lessons of the Iranian revolution, which was to organize a rebellion. I was one among a few others who did that, but we had a Passover uprising. We wanted our full eight days of holiday and we organized, we broke a few windows and we stormed out of school, didn’t come back until the end of the holiday, at which point she started to investigate and create files on every single one of us, which until twelfth grade, until I left Iran, really haunted me. We paid dearly for that but it was a great thing to do.

HK: And you know, your narrative in the book, and your storytelling of this episode, really captures the terror that was imposed on you as a young person and this realization. Now there’s another incident which struck me as – because what we’re talking about here is your emerging consciousness, your poetic self confronting what the revolution was becoming, and that is the incident where you come home and your father has taken all your books and diaries and for your own safety destroyed them. So, you are a writer who suddenly has to confront this contradiction that your father who loves you and is trying to protect you essentially does this deed to protect you, and he must know what that deed means because he is a writer, also, and he’s taught you to be a writer.

RH: Yeah. I think – I forgave my father even a day after that. It didn’t take me years to forgive him. I forgave him even the next day because the most dangerous period in the history of Iran, in the last thirty years, were the years between 1981 and 1985. Those were the years that the revolution was very young and a lot more merciless, and the regime was a lot more brutal than the regime is today. Because the regime today is a mature phenomenon with a certain sense of confidence about its accomplishment and its power. In 1981, the revolution was very young and the regime was quite insecure about its own existence, and therefore exercised far more brutality than it has ever since. So, people who come out of Iran and talk to me – we kind of reminisce about back then – keep telling me, “Oh, don’t worry, it’s not like that anymore. It’s much better now.” And I believe it. So, I lived through a time that people who had sneakers on, or had glasses, just like the time of the Khmer Rouge, looked too much like somebody who was well read, and you know, glasses signaled erudition, and they were hauled away to prison because they didn’t want book readers on the streets, loose. And so, I really did know how dangerous it was to be keeping the sort of diaries that I was keeping and the sorts of books that I was keeping. So, I knew sooner or later someone was going to destroy those things, whether it was the revolutionary guards storming our house and finding my stash, or my father – one of them, I knew, was finally going to do it. And of course, I’m glad that it was my dad as opposed to the revolutionary guards. But you know, I suppose – again, it’s all retrospective thinking – when you are 14, 15, 16, and 17, and these monumental things happen to you, of course they’re traumatic, no doubt, but outside of the trauma,

if you're lucky enough to still have your brain intact, and have some capacity intact, to process and think about things, you might arrive, and hopefully you do arrive, at some sense of insight and meaning. And I think up here in my factory, this was something that was happening over and over, encountering life in Iran on a daily basis. I managed somehow – and it's completely strange to me because I don't do it now as an adult – but as a teenager I was constantly looking at these experiences that were highly traumatic, they should have completely obliterated and destroyed me, but I would just distance myself from it and say, so what does this mean, and what am I going to take away from this. And I think what I took away from all of those experiences, including this moment of watching all the books I loved, every piece of writing that I'd ever created, burn, I realized that I was also thinking that I will do this for the rest of my life, I will reproduce these things, and I will continue to tell whatever sense – whatever perception of the truth that I have for the rest of my life. And so, in a way, it enabled me to always – it gave me this memory of something grand that I was responsible to continue to report for the rest of my life.

HK: What was the source of that ability to draw strength? Was it that you had already become a witness observer, was it the love of your parents and your Jewish background? What do you think made you able to see these terrible things in that way?

RH: I have to ask my therapist.

HK: [laughs]

RH: I don't know, exactly, but I...

HK: You can't call a friend on this program.

RH: I can't use a lifeline. [laughs]

HK: That's right. [laughs]

RH: I really think it was all of those things but most importantly, I think I already had role models and my role models weren't people I was living with, although they were quite a decent bunch. My role models were the poets I had fallen in love with; it was Ahmad Shamlu, it was **Feru Farzad** [?]. I already had them, and I thought, "What would they do?" and my answer always was that they would certainly find a very beautiful and memorable way of capturing those experiences. And that's what I went on to do.

HK: Your book is multilayered, and again, I recommend to my audience that they read it because we can't do justice to it now. But one of the things one really has a sense of is that you have a powerful sense of freedom because of this experience of coming to the United States and observing how freedom was betrayed by the revolution in Iran. I'm curious what you have to say about freedom and how you think it can be nurtured by people who are outside a place that they have left.

So, in part we're talking about Persian expatriates who are concerned about Iran but also, this gets into U.S. policy because the U.S. policy has been driven by this notion that it can intervene in places – perhaps we've learned lessons from Iraq – and that we can bring freedom, and there are people like you in Iran, young people, who are ready to receive freedom. What is your take on that now, after all of this experience you acquired then and in America?

RH: Well, up until the age of 18, my only experience of what a society was, was my experience with Iran, which was really strongly shaped by my teenage years, adolescent years, which had taken place under the rule, the brutal rule, of the post-revolutionary regime. When I came to the States, the sense that I was now free wasn't something that dawned on me the next morning when I woke up. Freedom is not something that you feel, like a shot of morphine into your veins, or a sugary drink that you suddenly gulp. In its best sense it is something that you get to after several years, or after a long period of time. It's an awareness that sets in. And it was precisely that for me, and it took several years, long after I had arrived, until one day I realized that if I were to go back to Iran I could never, ever re-program myself to live the way I had lived. Now let me give you an example to make that really clear. A year after I was in the United States, I met a boy in college, and I liked him, and we were on the street, and he wanted to hold my hand. I told him, "You can't hold my hand. We're on the street." This was New York City and he said, "But this is New York," and I was like, "You can't hold my hand! We're get arrested." And I knew how silly that sounded, even as I said it. I was intelligent enough to know that there were no revolutionary guards on the streets of Manhattan but my emotional sense of who I was didn't know that. My psyche didn't know it, my brain knew it. And so, it took many years until I stopped looking like this, all the time, and I stopped believing that someone was following me all the time, and I also stopped believing or thinking that somebody else was going to look into, or ask to look into, my purse to search me. The day that I thought I could never go back and live in Iran again was the day that I realized that there was no way in hell I was willing to let anybody, let alone a 17-year-old wielding an AK-47 on his shoulder, ever stop me on the street to look into my bag or search me. I think that was the day I had a glimpse of what it meant to be truly free. Now I feel very strongly about this, about this realization, and I feel very strongly about my own responsibility to do something for the current generation in Iran. The problem is that we live in the United States and up until this new administration we had an administration which had cultivated a foreboding in us that if we said anything, we could become alibis in another war. So, in many ways a lot of people chose to be silent because to them, or to all the rest of us, the threat of a war was much larger than censorship, and so if we had to choose between two evils, war being one and censorship and oppression being another, we thought the lesser evil would be censorship and oppression. But perhaps that has been alleviated now with the new administration in power, and we can go back and re-evaluate what it is that we as human beings must do. Because I think about the absurdity of the fact that if I hadn't gotten on a plane sometime in August of 1984, and hadn't crossed a couple of thousand miles over into another country, into another continent, my life would've been vastly different than it is today. And there is great injustice in that, and of course I think we have a responsibility to help not just with Iran but with every other injustice that goes on in the world. It's part of what we must do as global citizens, but I hope the lesson in all this is that we come up with solutions other than military ones. But that doesn't mean

that we have to exercise less vigilance or less commitment. We have to be as committed if not more, as vigilant if not more, to make sure that we do something to alleviate things that should be as reprehensible as cholera, as reprehensible as the diseases that we're fighting. These are social diseases, no different from all the other diseases that we're fighting wars against.

HK: You're uniquely placed, because of your experience and your writing about those experiences, to look at tradition and modernity and to compare tradition in Judaism versus tradition in Islam, basically. And I'm curious, now talking to you as a woman, what you see as the problems of navigation for women to experience the freedom that they're entitled to and the constraints in religions, and in the most fundamentalist aspects of those, that prevent that from happening. How do we bring all this together, and are young Muslims doing that in Europe where they pick and choose, as did Jews when they are in the Diaspora, picking and choosing, retaining symbolic elements of their religion but finding a way to modernity and freedom? I'm curious about how you see that problem, because there is a problem there – right? – I mean, the way women are treated often in especially Islam.

RH: I think – well, the sort of Judaism that we practiced in Iran was very much in the context of the Islamic society before or after the revolution, so we were a lot less liberal in a way that we exercise Judaism in Iran within that context than we are here. So, I think something incredibly interesting happened when I came to the United States because suddenly Jews seemed a lot more tolerant, a lot more capable of tolerating otherness, the sort of things that were unheard of in Iran. I mean, intermarriage in Iran is synonymous to the death of a child, as I discuss in the book, and the things that are so readily and frequently happening within the Jewish community, in the United States, and in some ways are celebrated. A convert to Judaism is sort of a – you score a point if you get a recruit – is the kind of thing that could never happen in Iran. You were a Jew and you couldn't be anything else, and if you were not a Jew you could never become one. It was as simple as that. So, I think in many ways our tradition was certainly a Jewish tradition in Iran but the context in which we operated, the social context, was very much informed and shaped by the limits of the society in which we lived, which was Iran, and that was an Islamic Iran. Now having come here, having come to the United States, I see already some great changes happening within the Iranian communities who are exercising Judaism within the limits of a democratic society, being the United States. I'm hoping that a similar thing can happen to Muslim communities who have been transplanted from various parts of the Middle East which had operated within the boundaries of very totalitarian systems and are now in the west, where they, too, find that they can reshape, reconfigure and redefine the boundaries of religious behavior in the new setting. And I think that's inevitable. I think inevitably they will realize that it's far more easier to get along than to define ourselves with hostility against one another. That's what I hope.

HK: Well, on that positive note, I want to thank you very much for being with us today and sharing your extraordinary experiences, and I think people will want to read your book, [Journey from the Land of No](#) to just see how your narrative, your beautiful narrative, takes us to new levels of insight about Iran and about identity. Thank you very much for being with us.

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RH: I really enjoyed it. Thank you for having me.

HK: And thank you very much for joining us for this “Conversation With History.”

[End of Interview]