

III. Embracing Tradition

EMILY SEHATI Interview

WELCOMED: Tell us where you're from and what your Jewish experience felt like growing up?

Emily Sehati: I grew up in Ventura, and the Jewish community there felt much smaller than people assume when they hear "California." Being Jewish could feel personal and also visible, because there weren't many Jewish families around me. My dad is Iranian-Israeli, and my mom is Russian and converted, so my Jewish experience at home was shaped by a mix of inherited tradition, chosen tradition, and immigrant memory. That mix shaped how we understood ourselves culturally and religiously.

For me, I experienced Judaism from a Persian, Mizrahi, non-Western Jewish perspective, and Jewishness for me was inseparable from my Mizrahiness. Faith encompassed my family life, our stories, and a continuity of self shaped by what you hear, what you eat, what you celebrate, and who is around the table.

The strongest memories for me are the family gatherings. We had huge family Shabbats, sometimes forty people on a Friday night, and big seders. Passover especially was one of my favorite holidays because it felt like these pockets of culture opened up and became visible in a concentrated way. The holidays offered whole sensory worlds of ritual, family, and specific traditions that felt both unique to us and connected to a larger culture.

Food is a huge part of that lived identity too. There are foods that are specifically Persian Jewish in a way that marks belonging, like gondi. For me, Jews are an important part of Iranian culture, though many Iranians thought of us as non-Iranian. My father was never considered Iranian when he lived there. Among his peers, he was always labeled a Jew first.

As my dad describes it, his home country rejected him, and that shaped what we retained from his history. Even though Farsi is his native language, he always spoke Hebrew in our household. He chose the language of a place that welcomed him, even if he was still seen there first as an outsider, as an Iranian. I find it ironic that my dad was seen as Iranian outside of Iran more than inside it.

My dad is still remarkably spiritual and raised us with a fairly conservative religious upbringing. I think part of what's so striking is that many Iranian Jews who came to the U.S. leaned toward being culturally Iranian and more secular religiously, but my dad chose a different path. When life became dangerous in Iran, Israel rescued him. That story became central to how we understood belonging, safety, and loyalty. It makes sense, then, that he did not treat Judaism as optional or purely private. For him, religion offered continuity and survival, and Israel was tied to that continuity in a very personal way.

He also served in the IDF in his early twenties, and I grew up with a nuanced view of the Middle East. I think that is part of why he pushed away Iranian identity: not because Persian culture disappeared, but because he never experienced Iranian national belonging, while Israel offered it.

At the same time, the Persian cultural influence remains prominent in our family. It is intensely spiritual in its language, expressions of belonging, poetry, music, and the way people connect even to small things. I still grew up with Persian music in the house, though not as much as I would have liked, and with this rich Iranian cultural sensibility alongside a deep, protective attachment to Jewish identity and Israel. My Judaism began with family survival stories and developed into a spiritual understanding of life, rather than beginning with doctrine.

I found that spirituality here at Stanford too, both on a communal level and in terms of what I believe. I have always believed in G-d and loved religious holidays as well as daily prayer, but where I came from, a rabbi did not offer the kind of inspiration I found here at Stanford. So now, for the first time in my life, I am reflecting deeply on my values, how they translate into Judaism, and how Judaism fits into my life. Judaism was naturally integrated at home, and now I have to make time for it. That has never felt like a burden, but rather a transition I never expected to be so significant.

On campus, I am involved in Hillel and Chabad. I try to listen to Chabad Rabbi Dov Greenberg speak every Friday, and even during the Yom Kippur sermon, his ten to fifteen minutes can have a profound impact on the rest of my week, because he helps connect simple lessons to deeper meaning. You can see his passion and the way he wrestles with these ideas, and it is the first time I have seen that in my life outside my family's kind of cultural Judaism. He helps me connect my Judaism to every detail of my life. It is a safe space to ask questions.

I am also the co-president of the Stanford Israel Association with Yoni Ahoron, who also took Zionism in the Novel with Professor Berman. That class was life-changing. It helped me reconstruct the broad term Zionism through various media and backgrounds, both Palestinian and Israeli alike.

I am hoping to find more experiences like that at Stanford that make room for conversation and for religious and cultural understanding. I see possibilities for that every day on an individual basis between friends, and I know it is possible between communities too if we learn to hear one another. My Judaism is the most central part of my identity, and I look forward to continuing to grow spiritually. There is no final conclusion to my relationship with G-d. It is continual. I welcome the chapters that challenge my relationship with G-d and the experiences that come with them.