A Mystical Entanglement: The Jewish Gift to Islamic Mysticism

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My friend David, who recently moved to the United States from Israel, said that he was looking forward to living in a place where the stones didn't ooze history. "It will be so nice," he said, while still living in Tel Aviv, "to live in a country where the earth itself doesn't moan about past injustices and ancient hatreds."

Indeed, so much of the current horror in the Holy Land is predicated on memory - the memory of 2000 years of wandering; the memory of a bloody war for independence, the memory of injustices, fresh and long past. But buried in this rubble of historical enmity between Muslim and Jew are fragments from another story: The virtually unknown tale of Muslim mystics turning to their Jewish cousins for help in building their own spiritual system. In this tale, Jews and Muslims took tea together, studied collectively and used Jewish mysticism to create Sufism, or the spiritual core of Islam. In a relationship that has so little current context for peaceful coexistence, this particular account can provide an important lesson in the potential for Palestinians and Jews to live side-by-side.

Mysticism defines the most hallowed ground of any religion - the place where prophets, seers and religious leaders operate. For Jews, much of the prayer book and Bible were dependent on these religious adepts, men and women who moved beyond the banal to forge a direct connection with God.

Islam is no different, and Sufism operates as the thrumming heart and soul behind the laws and prayer of the practicing Muslim. In the years of its infancy, however, Sufism drew unabashedly from Jewish sources and even Jews themselves, threading a particularly Jewish sensibility into the burgeoning Muslim mystical force.

Islamic mystics turned to Jews to answer a variety of mystical needs. In addition to the Prophet Muhammad's familiarity with the Jewish religion, early Jewish converts to Islam brought with them the stories from their heritage, known as *Isra'il'iyat*, which told of the *Banu Isra'il*, the pious men of ancient Israel. One of the most famous early Islamic mystics - and the man considered to be the "patriarch of Muslim mysticism" - Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) introduced numerous *Isra'il'iyat* legends into the Muslim spiritual stream, stories that went on to become representative of *Islamic* mystical ideas of piety. Even an early biographer of the Prophet Muhammad included in his work many legends and stories of virtuous behavior that he attributed to the "People of the Torah," an inclusion for which he was roundly criticized by his contemporaries, because he had explicitly pointed out the Jewish influences on the Prophet!

Another Muslim from this era, Malik ibn Dinar, head of the second generation of Islamic mystics and an important force in the formation of Sufism, quoted liberally from his well-thumbed Jewish religious tomes. In fact, he borrowed specific ideas from the Talmudic "Hasidim," Jewish mystics that became legendary for their devotion to God. As the early Sufis had much in common with the Hasidim of Talmudic times, the Islamic spiritualists could well be seen as the Hasidim's spiritual progeny, through the administration of early Islamic mystics like al-Basri and ibn Dinar. Indeed, al-Basri even credited the Jewish king David as originating many of the practices that characterized the Sufis, down to the specific woolen garb that identified them!

This flirtation with Jewish sources did not fade with the passing of the first few generations of Sufis. An eleventh century Islamic practitioner in Toledo, Spain, ibn Said, boldly stated that his Jewish contemporaries had a special understanding of the prophets and the story of Genesis - and that Muslim scholars looked to them for guidance in these areas. "This People (the Jews)," he stated, "is the house of prophecy and the source of the prophetic message of mankind and the majority of the prophets - the blessings and peace of Allah be upon them."

A couple of hundred years later, Sufis were still turning to Jewish volumes for inspiration. Ibn Arabi, a 13th century Sufi who was considered one of the greatest medieval Islamic mystical thinkers, turned to Jewish sources in lieu of those from his own religion. Specifically, he borrowed mystical ideas of humanity and its relation to God directly from Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, perhaps the most important *Jewish* theological tract created during medieval times. In fact, even before the death of the great Maimonides, Jewish teachers were explicating his *Guide for the Perplexed* in Islamic madrasas, or schools, to Muslim students!

Perhaps the height of Jewish/Sufi symbiosis was achieved in the person of a 13th century Sufi in Damascus, Abu ali ibn Hud. Ibn Hud spent his time teaching Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* to students of all religions. Not only did he purportedly wear an ill-concealed Yarmulke under his turban as a show of respect for the Jewish religion, but when asked to teach a spiritual seeker, he replied, "Upon which road: the Mosaic or the Muslim?"

My friend David's sense of the oppressiveness of history in the Holy Land - a history that seems to demand the acting out of Hannibal's code (an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth) -- is certainly shared by many Jews and Muslims. However, if David and the other denizens of the Holy Land were to listen a little closer to those seemingly mute stones built into the walls around Jerusalem, they might hear the whispers of another story - one that bespeaks a time when Muslim mystics turned to their Jewish cousins for help in creating the beauty of Islamic mysticism.