

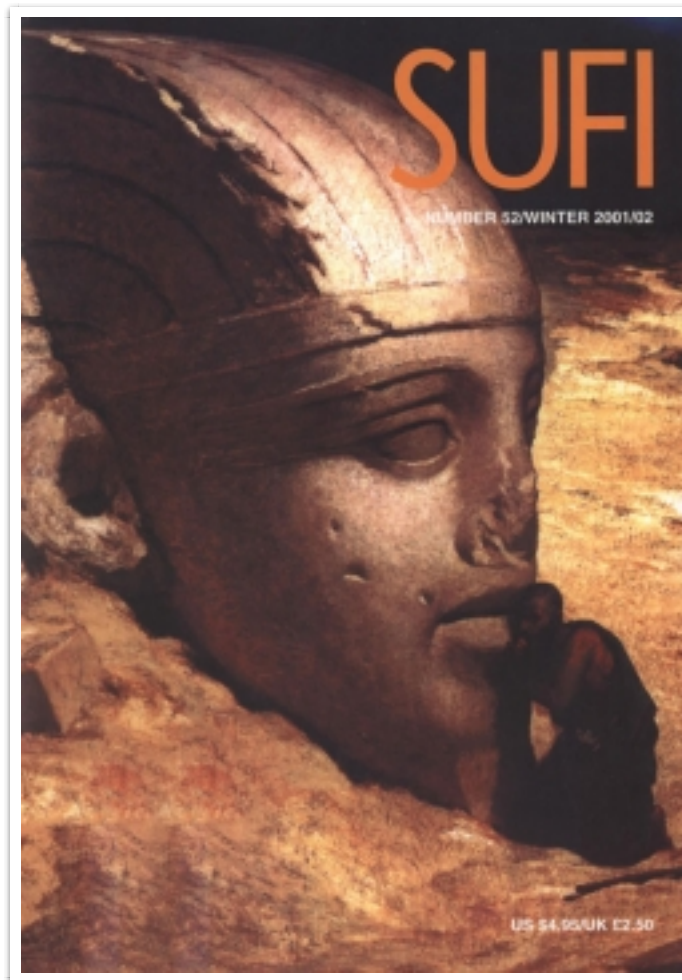
Abraham Maimonides: A Jewish Sufi

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The open-minded practice of Sufism is known as a mystical system that can easily attract believers from other religions. Today, as in the past, Jews, Christians and followers of other religions have flocked to this practice, studying under Sufi masters and learning the Sufi Way. The Sufi chronicler Idries Shah has outlined past Sufi influence on St. Francis of Assisi, the Troubadours, St. Augustine, the Rosicrucians, Maimonides, the Jewish Kabbalah and a host of other medieval and modern religious movements.

[1]

While much of this contact is incidental or indirect - Sufism reached St. Francis, for instance, through the writings of a Jewish intermediary translated into Latin - there was a time of profound Sufi influence on the direction and thought of the mystics of the Jewish religion. Though it is buried beneath centuries of historical disregard and even outright denial[2], the fact remains that more than 700 years ago, Jewish leaders not only had a wide-ranging dialogue with Islamic mystics, but also borrowed liberally from them to bring an *Islamic* brand of pioussness into medieval synagogue rites. In the 13th century, Abraham Maimonides, son of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, not only wrapped Islamic mystical practice into his view of Judaism, but also considered himself a *Jewish Sufi*, a practitioner of both Jewish and Islamic mysticism!



Starting with Abraham Maimonides, Sufism played a seminal role in the development of Jewish spirituality, strongly influencing the direction of the Kabbalah and, later on, the growth of Hasidism. As improbable as it sounds, the Sufi innovations in the Jewish religion begun by Abraham Maimonides were almost assuredly the single most important thing to happen to Jewish spirituality since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

Abraham grew up in a truly multi-cultural world, where Moslems, Jews and even Christians interacted in one of the most accepting societies in the history of man. Unlike our current epoch, when the voices of hatred speak far louder than those of friendship, medieval Egypt was a place of mutual respect, protective laws and surprisingly strong and positive relations between the religions. It was also a time and place rife with Sufis and Sufi thought - and Jewish libraries often contained books by such masters as al-Ghazali, as-Suhrawardi and al-Hallaj, all dutifully transcribed into the blocky Hebrew script of the local Jewish population. Sufis and Jews knew each other, read each other's books and even compared notes on spirituality and the quest for divine union with God.

Abraham was smitten with the Sufi way. However, if he were just another Jewish heretic, his Sufi beliefs would have been relegated to the footnotes of Jewish history - and Jewish mysticism would have remained just that: A purely *Jewish* response to this sometimes-inexplicable world. As it is, however, Abraham Maimonides was one of the most respected Jewish authorities of his epoch. As *Rayyis al-Yahud* -- the head of the Egyptian Jews, a position that he took over from his father -- he wielded power both locally and abroad.

Abraham, who rose to his position at the tender age of 19, proved to be an able social administrator as well as a creative religious theoretician. Like his father, he was approached from near and far to handle religious disputes, questions of social and *halakhic* law and even marital questions. Unlike his father, however, he was hardly indecisive about his own feelings toward the Sufis, being convinced that the Sufi discipline had been inherited by the Islamic mystics from the ancient prophets of Israel and that they (the Jewish Sufis) were reclaiming an authentically Jewish doctrine from Islam. As Abraham himself said, "Thou art aware of the ways of the ancient saints of Israel, which are not or but little practiced among our contemporaries, that have now become the practice of the Sufis of Islam, on account of the iniquities of Israel." [3] And not only was Abraham certain that the Sufi way defined, in fact, a lost Jewish mysticism, but also that the Jewish/Sufi practice was a necessary precursor to a messianic epoch, at the threshold of which he stood. Abraham saw in Sufism a mystical discipline that would prepare one for achieving the sublime state of prophecy! [4]

What made Abraham such an important figure in the dissemination of Sufi thought throughout the Jewish world was that he did not break with traditional Judaism in order to practice a Jewish brand of Sufism. In fact, one cannot imagine a spiritual heir more dedicated to his predecessor than was Abraham. Moses Maimonides' groundbreaking work in Jewish thought and philosophy had met with substantial resistance -- especially in the rabbinical academies of southern France. As such, Abraham spilled much ink in defending his father's positions. In all of his extant writings, he quoted liberally from his father whenever the opportunity presented itself. [5]

At the same time, however, Abraham Maimonides, wrapped the beliefs and the actual practices of the Sufis into his Jewish worship. He justified this paradoxical situation -- believing that Jewish law must be strictly adhered to, while advocating Sufi-like reforms -- by reading Sufi attitudes and beliefs into the distinguished history of Rabbinical thought. [6] He sprinkled not only his commentary with Sufi terminology and beliefs, but his correspondence, as well. And it is important to remember just how far-reaching was his correspondence. Regarded as one of the major rabbinical authorities of his time, Abraham was consulted on legal matters by correspondents as far away as Syria, Yemen and the Holy Land. [7] It is almost certain that he used these contacts to further spread his Sufi beliefs.

In his own synagogue, where he was the head Rabbi, he introduced controversial new practices, including frequent prostrations and ablutions; the raising of the hands in supplication; praying while standing in rows and other specifically Sufi-inspired ritual. [8] While many of the more traditional Jews in Egypt had significant troubles with Abraham's open Sufi practice, his civic position as head of the Jews allowed him to bring these Islamic practices into the very heart of Egyptian Jewish rites.

His own mystical masterpiece, the 2500-page *Kifaya*, spent the first three chapters re-hashing his father's thought and laws - and then a fourth section spelled out in minute detail the *tariqa*, or Sufi mystical path of enlightenment. In this fourth portion, Abraham enumerated the specifics of the Sufi Path, including sincerity, mercy, generosity, gentleness, humility, faith, contentedness, abstinence, mortification and solitude. He also mentions that upon successful completion of the "path" and the achievement of divine union with God, the searcher is to wear special clothes, which were, coincidentally enough, the Sufi garb. Abraham Maimonides took some pride in mentioning that he, himself, wore the> [9] implying that he had not only followed the Sufi Way, but had completed it! This same book, the *Kifaya*, had already spread to distant lands in his own lifetime, taking with it his ideas on Sufism.

Abraham used the power of his office to advance the Sufi cause, placing Jewish/Sufis in important positions throughout the Egyptian Jewish community. Ultimately, Abraham's position as head of the Jewish community *and* a pre-eminent Rabbinical scholar allowed his Sufi leanings to influence not just his local and temporal surroundings, but the direction of Jewish mystical thought at a seminal point in the development of Jewish spirituality. The 13th century, during which Abraham was active, was a time of tremendous fertility in Jewish thought and religion - some would argue that it was the most productive and creative epoch in the entire history of Jewish mysticism. [10] It was into this lively loam that Abraham injected the seeds of Sufi thought. It would not be too far of a stretch to say that the Sufi leanings of Abraham influenced virtually all mystical writings in Judeo-Arabic over the next two hundred years, the formative years of the Kabbalistic system! [11] In fact, his works were still being studied by Kabbalists in 16th-century Safed, where the Lurianic Kabbalah was setting the scene for the entrance of Hasidism onto the Jewish mystical stage.

Virtually every Jew - and many non-Jews - have heard of Moses Maimonides, thought of as the quintessential rationalistic Jewish theologian. But almost *nobody* is aware of that his son, Abraham, who operated, as well, as head of the Egyptian Jews, turned forever the course of Jewish mysticism in the direction of their cousins, the Sufis of Islam. Jewish practitioners today of the Kabbalistic sciences and Hasidism certainly have no idea just how much of the *Sufi* Way is wrapped into their daily devotions.

NOTES

[1]. *The Sufis*, Idries Shah

[2]. To appreciate this tight-lipped response to the facts at hand, we need look no further than three of the greatest historians of Jewish mysticism and philosophy from the last century. For instance, Gershom Scholem, the pre-eminent Kabbalistic scholar of the 20th-century, went so far as to specifically state that Sufism had *no* discernible effect on the development of the Kabbalah. And A.S. Halkin, writing about the same time as Scholem (the middle of the last century) states that: "In all the vast literature of the Kabbalah, there is no trace of a non-Jewish source or influence." Lastly, Martin Buber, the acknowledged master of scholarship on the Hasidic mysticism, points out similarities between two specific teaching tales (one Sufi and one Hasidic) and then immediately states that this in no way proves "any inner connection between Sufism and Hasidism alone." I can think of few of areas of scholarship that have been so successfully quelled due to political and cultural taboos.

[3]. Quoted in *Treatise of the Pool* (intro), Fenton, pg. 8

[4]. *Jewish Mystical Leaders of the 13th Century*, Fenton, pg. 150-151

[5]. *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Goitein, pg. 145

[6]. *Jewish Mystical Leaders of the 13th Century*, Fenton, pg. 136

[7]. *ibid*, pg. 141-142

[8]. *ibid*, pg. 139

[9]. *ibid*, pg. 144

[10]. *The Books of Contemplation*, Verman, pg. 8

[11]. *Jewish Mystical Leaders of the 13th Century*, Fenton, pg. 149, 151

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