

Rabia

The female mystic Rabi'a (717-801) became one of the most celebrated Muslim teachers, and is considered one of the first true Sufis. She was born free, but sold into slavery at her parents' death. Later, she was freed "by a miracle," and took up residence in a small cell outside of Basra. Her biographer, the great medieval Sufi poet Attar relates that she was "on fire with love and longing" and that men accepted her "as a second spotless Mary." She was one of the first of the Sufis to teach that Love alone was the guide on the mystic path.

She expounded other mystical ideals, as well, not the least of which was a true humility. These two tales, one told about Rabi'a and one told about the Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov, who lived about a millennium after the Sufi saint, show just how proximate were the Jewish and Muslim mystical paths. The story told about the Sufi went like this:

"It is said that Rabi'a met one of the Gnostics and asked him his state, and he replied: 'I have trod the path of obedience and have not sinned since God created me,' whereupon she replied: 'Alas, my son, thine existence is a sin wherewith no other sin may be compared.'"

The Baal Shem Tov expressed a similar sentiment about "sinners" in the following teaching tale:

"I let the sinners come close to me, if they are not proud. I keep the scholars and the sinless away from me if they are proud. For the sinner that knows he is a sinner, and therefore considers himself base – God is with him, for He 'dwelleth with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.' But concerning him who prides himself on the fact that he is unburdened by sin, God says, as we know from the Gemara: 'There is not enough room in the world for myself and him.'"

These two tales are so closely linked that it almost appears as if the Baal Shem Tov is offering an explication of Rabi'a's slightly more cryptic utterance.