

Principles

Wednesday
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Tom Block: Untold story of Muslim & Jewish mystics

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REDISCOVERING THE BAL SHEM TOV:
This is a detail from artist Tom Block's painting of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th-century founder of Hasidism. Block writes:
"Unflinchingly ecstatic in his constant companionship with a living God, he built his mystical system out of a the ideas of earlier, Sufi inspired Jews, turning away from the staid worship of northern European orthodoxy." Want

something truly provocative to discuss at [Passover](#) next week? Or, if you're among the 2 billion Christians approaching Holy Week and thinking about the history of Jerusalem: Want to revolutionize your understanding of what has unfolded across the Holy Land between Jews and Muslims? **Today**, you'll hear from author Tom Block on his years-long search to produce:

"[Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity.](#)" Think of unveiling ancient mysteries much like you'll find in the pages of a Dan Brown novel—**except** that "Shalom/Salaam" is factually accurate—and you'll have some idea of the importance of Block's book. Through "Shalom/Salaam" we travel through the centuries, discovering how much Jewish mystics learned from Muslim scholars, especially the Muslim mystics known as Sufis. Rather than enemies, these two groups shared ideas back and forth—forever changing both traditions.

WHAT IS SUFISM?



SUFI POET

AND MYSTIC RUMI, by Tom Block, who writes: “Rumi’s most important influence on the history of Jewish/Sufism was his open-mindedness to and respect for the belief systems of all religions ... This attitude, which emanated from the man and his teachings, helped permeate later medieval Sufism, further opening avenues between Sufis and Jews in Spain, Egypt and the Holy land.” **M**ost Americans have heard the term [Sufism](#), but know little about the tradition other than that Sufism produced one of the world’s most popular poets: Rumi. Fans of Rumi—and there are millions around the world—may associate Rumi’s Sufis with the famed white-garbed mystics who whirl in their spiritual practice: the so-called Whirling Dervishes, who actually are the descendants of Rumi’s [Mawlawi Order](#). (If you’re not familiar with Rumi, who reportedly is the best-selling poet in the English language today, [then you may enjoy our 3-part series with Rumi translator Coleman Barks.](#))

WHAT IS TOM BLOCK REVEALING

IN THIS UNTOLD STORY OF MUSLIM AND JEWISH MYSTICS?

You'll hear from Tom in our interview (below), but this book is so unusual, here's a very brief excerpt so you can catch some of his ground-breaking excitement:

More than a decade ago, as I explored the thought of spiritual masters from many faiths, I came across a brief allusion to the influence of Sufism on a few medieval Jewish thinkers. Although this at first appeared to represent little more than an unsubstantiated claim, the possibility of such a relationship struck me as not only fascinating, but also deeply important. This supposed mystical fraternity ran contrary to the contemporary narrative between the children of Isaac and Ishmael; it was a subject that I, as a Jew interested in my own spiritual roots, felt compelled to explore.

Jews and Muslims, as I understood it then, were longtime enemies. How could it be that a spiritual link existed between the two, which might have influenced medieval Judaism? At that time, I thought that association between Muslims and Jews involved nearly 1400 years of enmity, and a present-day battle over a piece of land in the Middle East, which both People claim.

...

Far from coming across evidence of one or two discrete medieval interactions, I discovered more and more articles, buried in little known journals stretching back more than a century, concerning Jewish mystics and thinkers who studied with, and took on the ideas of, Islamic mystics and thinkers.... In virtually every case, the research of these scholars has been sequestered in obscure journals and academic tomes. This information has never reached the general public. Books on medieval Jewish mysticism are being written today that do not include a single reference to Islam or Sufism. ...

By the time I closed my last, faded folio and looked at my notes, I was able to trace an unbroken line of Islamic mystical influence on the development of Jewish thought and practice from the inception of Islam into today's Jewish liturgy and contemplative practice.

HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR INTERVIEW WITH TOM BLOCK ON MUSLIM AND JEWISH MYSTICS

DAVID: What's your own religious background?

TOM: I'm Jewish. I belong to a synagogue, a Reconstructionist congregation. I was raised in a pretty much secular Reform Jewish home and over the years I have become deeply interested in the human spiritual search for meaning in its many manifestations. I've found that spiritual search sometimes dovetails—but not always—with organized religion. I am definitely a Sufi soul, not much given to strict religious practice, but Sufism has deeply influenced me as I've studied more about it.

DAVID: To break through years of unwillingness to bring these connections to the general public, it seems to have required an unusual writer like yourself. You're not an academic, which you admit in the opening pages of your book. You're perhaps better known as a painter and peace activist. How do you describe your profession?

TOM: In a nutshell, everything I do throughout my creative work—from plays and art to this new book—everything comes from my desire to make the world a better place. For the Shalom/Salaam project, I've done academic research, created paintings and I'm also working on a novel based on these materials.

DAVID: Fascinating. I felt like I was jumping into a real-life Dan Brown investigation here in your book. I should say: I love the fun of Dan Brown thrillers, but his books are notorious for screwing up their history to meet his fictional needs. Your new book is completely non-fiction. But—now you're planning a novel, too?

TOM: This history is difficult for many readers to follow. I've now written this non-fiction book that explains the history for general readers. But these discoveries I'm describing are really exciting. This is page-turning material and the way to convey that excitement, next, is to write a novel with a version of these historical events.

DAVID: Make sure you keep in touch, so we can tell readers when your novel finally is available. Clearly, this is a passionate concern in your life.

TOM: This research completely counters everything I thought I knew, earlier in my life, about Jewish-Islamic relations. The deeper I got into my research, the more clearly I saw that there is a 1,000-year-long timeline of influence between these two religious movements.



DETAIL

of MOSES MAIMONIDES PAINTING: Tom Block writes, “Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.), one of the most important philosophers in Jewish history, played a seminal role in infiltrating Sufi ideas into the heart and soul of Jewish practice. His well-known works on Jewish life and law—the Guide for the Perplexed, Mishneh Torah, and other writings, all of which are still studied in Yeshivas and schools today, were deeply infused with Sufi philosophy.” DAVID: Describe what people will find on your website in the section related to this new book. We’ll put a web link to it at the end of our interview.

TOM: In the Shalom/Salaam section of my website, you’ll find images of specific medieval mystics who influenced each other or were influenced by connections between Judaism and Islam at some point in history. You’ll find Rumi there and Moses Maimonides. You’ll find 10 Sufis and 10 Jews—images that illustrate the interactions that my book explains. The paintings form an art show—a way to introduce these ideas to groups.

DAVID: Have you shown these paintings?

TOM: Yes, I’ve had shows of this work with Muslim artists and each painting has a very brief page with it explaining the relevance of each person to the overall history.

DAVID: Are these your own artistic impressions of what you think they might have looked like? Or did you use historical reference material in shaping their images?

TOM: I put together a complete set of visual references for each one—sometimes from a historical painting or sculpture of the person. My own Rumi image is based on a well-known image of Rumi that was painted in the 16th or 17th century. The Maimonides image I created is based on the sculpture of him at Cordoba where he was born. I do reinterpret the images as an artist, but in every case I'm trying to represent a connection with earlier images in the history of these figures.

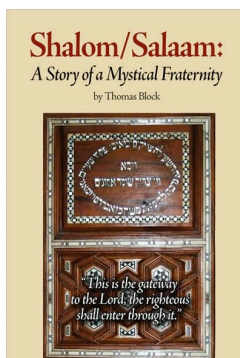
DAVID: In my own long career as a journalist covering religion, I've read countless books about Judaism and I can truly say your book is unique. That surprises me and it may surprise other readers.

TOM: You're right. This does represent a complete reconsideration of Judaism as it is understood today. There's no world religion that has been picked apart more carefully than Judaism, but there is a shocking lack of interest in these connections with Islam.

I'm showing that there is a far more profound interrelationship between these two religions than current politics would allow you to expect. The two faiths are lashed together at their mystical core. So many books have been written about all the injustices that one group committed against the other group—but I don't think there are two world religions that share more than Islam and Judaism.

I'm just at the beginning of this work, now that the book finally is published. That's a major first step. Next, I'm working on a novel to spread the story in another form. In everything I do, I'm working with others who care about peace. We want to spread this unknown narrative that runs counter to what we think we know about Islam and Judaism. My goal is to use all the forms in which I work to try to spread this history. It's such an important tool for reconciliation and peace.

CARE TO READ MORE?



- **BUY TOM BLOCK'S BOOK:** You can order [Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity](#) right now from Amazon.
- **VISIT TOM BLOCK'S WEBSITE:** The images from Block's paintings accompanying today's story appear on his website with further historical analysis. [Here is the homepage for artist and author Tom Block](#). To dig deeper into the cast of characters in "Shalom / Salaam,"