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Shalom/Salaam: A story of a mystical fraternity

If you believe the narratives of modern Zionists and Islamophobes, Jews and Muslims exist in a natural state of animosity. The relationship between the people of the two faiths is, according to this story, typified by massacres, oppression and antagonism, and the current situation in Palestine is just one episode in a long history of conflicts. Islam, according to many such narrators, is a religion of violence, incomprehensible to a Judaeo-Christian West which seems keen to forget the common origins of all three faiths.

Thomas Block's fascinating, humane and meticulously-argued book is a valuable antidote to such trends. Although the setting for much of Block's research is the medieval period, he makes it clear that he sees that era's intimate relationships between Muslim and Jewish thinkers, scholars and holy men as a valuable precedent. Although the Mizrahi (Middle Eastern Jewish) religious-right Shas party is a force for division and hatred in Israel, other modern Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish commentators and campaigners, such as David Shasha and Sami Shalom Chetrit, see the Arabic culture and history of many Jews as a potential instrument for understanding and change in Palestine and Israel. Block's book could be an important piece in explaining to a largely ignorant wider world how this puzzle of language, religion, identity and politics fits together.

The core thesis of Shalom/Salaam is that during the medieval period, the tolerance of Muslim authorities in Iraq, Egypt and Al-Andalus towards their Jewish populations and the resulting close relationships between Jewish and Muslim thinkers led to exchanges of spiritual ideas and practices which resulted in a revivification of Jewish spirituality. In particular, says Block, Jewish religious leaders reacted to a period of spiritual stagnation by turning to Sufism for ideas about how to pray, how to relate to and interact with the Divine, and for spiritual practices such as retreats and cleanliness. And, says Block, the influence of Sufism on Judaism was not just a temporary interaction, lost in the mists of time, but a source of ideas and practices which continues to resonate in modern Jewish spirituality, from the intense religiosity of the Hasidism to the Kabbalah, made newly fashionable by stars such as Madonna. As Block writes in the Introduction: "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".

Block's book opens with a brief history of Jewish communities in the early Muslim world. He notes the important position which Jewish religious life



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occupied under the Abbasids and Fatimids, the openness with which Muslims debated with “Magians, materialists, atheists, Jews and Christians” in 9th-century Baghdad and the close business, residential and cultural relationships between the communities in medieval Babylonia, Egypt and Al-Andalus. Along with a chapter setting out the basics of Sufism, this provides the background.

The core of the book follows, four chapters tracing in sometimes complex detail the relationships between Sufi and Jewish religious thought and practice in four main spheres. The first is the Cairo Jewish community under the leadership of the great Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides and his descendants. Reacting to a period of ‘spiritual decline’ in Judaism, they turned to Sufism to revive Jewish religious practice and re-engage its spirituality, rather than concentrating on secular rivalries and material concerns. In the second of the core chapters, Block examines the writings of major Sephardic Jewish figures such as Solomon ibn Gabirol, Bahya ibn Pakuda and Judah Halevi from Spain and Andalusia, some of whom had direct contact with Sufis and other Muslim religious figures, while others wrote poetry or theological works influenced by other Sufi-inspired Jews. Thirdly, Block traces Sufi echoes in the development of Kabbalah in Spain and later in Jerusalem, Safad and Akka under Mamluk and early Ottoman rule. Here, he acknowledges that Sufi influence is often distant, relying on books written centuries earlier and largely unrecognised by early Kabbalist scholars as incorporating Islamic ideas, but insists that a clearly identifiable thread can still be discerned. Finally, he looks at the evolution of Hasidic Judaism in Turkey and Eastern Europe in the 18th century, again touched at a great distance by the echoes of Sufi practices but also possibly influenced more directly by the Ottoman origins of the discredited 17th-century Messiah figure, Shabbetai Zevi.

As Block emphasises, few of these Jewish thinkers fully acknowledged the influence of Islam on their work. Many of the earlier figures, including Abraham Maimonides and Rabbi Hanan-El, argued that although their immediate sources were Sufi Muslims, the ideas and practices themselves sprang from the prophets and priests of the Old Testament, that they had been lost to the Jewish people after they were scattered by the Babylonians, Assyrians and Romans, and that they were being reclaimed and rediscovered. Other writers may not have realised that they were working with Islamic influences, but drew their ideas from Jewish mystics who had had direct contact with Sufi practitioners. And early Hasidic mystics, including the Baal Shem Tov, who founded the tradition in late-18th-century Ukraine, almost certainly had no idea that the Kabbalistic texts which he drew inspiration from included echoes of Sufi spirituality from 600 years earlier.

Thomas Block admits that his ideas, or at least the conclusions he reaches, are controversial. He acknowledges that Paul Fenton, the Sorbonne professor named as a major source of information and inspiration, arrives at a very different point, saying that it is ‘excessive’ to think that Sufi influences on Abraham Maimonides in the 12th century had a long-lasting impact on Jewish spirituality. Block is refreshingly honest about his lack of conventional academic clout, and often refers to the ‘leaps’ he makes in identifying Jewish spiritual practices – especially those of the later Kabbalistic and Hasidic periods – as having Sufi roots. But he speaks openly and compellingly of his

passion for the subject, and for the decade of exploration which has led him from his first sceptical encounter with the idea that ‘the children of Isaac and Ishmael’ were not ‘longtime enemies’ to a conviction that the two faiths and peoples are ‘deeply interlaced’ at their ‘spiritual centre’.

There are flaws in this book. The publishers, Fons Vitae, let the volume down with a distractingly scrappy layout, and the poorly set titles detract from the text’s clarity. Tighter copy-editing wouldn’t have gone amiss. Thomas Block’s background (he comes from the Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish community and is an artist and peace activist) means that he seems to write primarily for a Jewish audience, so the chapter setting out the history, theology and practices of Sufism may be superfluous for Muslims. A similar chapter clearly introducing the history of Judaism from, say, the Roman expulsion to the time of Maimonides might have been useful for secular, Christian or Muslim readerships. Like many writers eager to find ethnic and religious harmony in an Andalucian idyll, the era is sometimes over-glossed, although the sharp decrease in tolerance after the Almoravid invasions is obliquely referred to. General readers more interested in the broad issues raised in the book than in the theological minutiae of Sufi-Jewish relations may find the detailed tracing of ideas and connected texts across the main body of the book slightly repetitive – though it is necessary to reinforce Block’s contentious main point. And, infuriatingly, there is no index.

But to focus on these issues is churlish. Block’s non-academic background is in some respects a blessing, in that his book is readable, accessible and free from jargon. More importantly, it is also a brave and significant contribution to the literature on the relationship between Islam and Judaism, and between Muslims and Jews, at a time when many would have us believe that this relationship is innately and unchangeably one of hostility. Even if, as Block admits is possible, readers are not convinced by his conclusions about the influence of Sufi thought on medieval and modern Judaism, the underlying narrative of an often close, warm and tolerant relationship between the two faiths is undeniable – and sufficiently compelling that Block is now working on a novel based on the same research (which I for one will be pre-ordering). Whether you simply didn’t know that such a relationship existed, or believed that it was confined to the Golden Age of Al-Andalus, or wish to deepen your understanding of the fruitful co-existence that is (despite current events) possible between Judaism and Islam, this book is a must-read.

Reviewed By Sarah Irving, Australia



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