

Shed a Tear for Safed

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We read sometime ago in the Washington Post (“Allegations of Racism and questions about a town’s character”), about the continuing desecration of a once fertile Jewish-Muslim mystical fraternity. The article notes: “In the winding stone alleys of this Galilee hill town, a centuries-old center of Jewish mysticism, a campaign is underway. It is being waged by the town rabbi, Shmuel Eliahu, who along with other area rabbis issued a religious ruling several months ago forbidding residents to rent apartments to Israeli Arab students from the local community college. The rabbi has warned that the Jewish character of Safed, long revered as sacred, is at risk and that intermarriages could follow if the students mingle with the locals.”

The funny (or sad) thing is that Safed was once a center of Jewish-Muslim mystical co-mingling, where Jews studied with Islamic mystics to better understand and expand their own Jewish faith. I detail this 16th-17th century “Golden Age” of Safed in my recent book, *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity*. Here is a small taste of what I said, and what represents a lost history that flies in the face of the small-minded racism of the city’s current inhabitants:

“The small town of Safed, in the Upper Galilee in the Holy Land, emerged as the center of Kabbalistic studies about 40 years after the expulsion of the Spanish Jews (1492). Jewish legend held that all the souls of the righteous dead passed through Safed on their way to the Cave of Macpelah, the first door of Paradise on Earth – so perhaps some of the more righteous living figured that they would get a head start. In addition, the little town was close to Meron, the birthplace and tomb of the supposed author of the Zohar, Simeon ben Yohai (c. 2nd century). From the late 15th century onward, Jewish mystics from far and wide gathered in the small hill town. Recent exiles from Spain, wanderers from Poland and Germany, Rabbis from Egypt and other North African countries and even a few stragglers from Yemen filtered into Safed to study and continue to expand the Kabbalah. The convergence of these many strains of Judaism precipitated a revival in the small town, bursting into spiritual flame between 1540-1570.”

Not only did the greatest Kabbalistic minds concentrate in the village, but a thriving community of Sufi mystics also was in residence there, providing the Jewish thinkers with a firsthand look at Islamic mysticism. For instance, the important Kabbalistic practice of seclusion (hitbodedut) mirrored similar activity by the Rifai Sufis who used seclusion cells, or zawiyyas, on the mountainside across from the town to practice khalwa. Undoubtedly, this provided the Jewish mystics with an immediate view of the practice.

Although not as widespread as it had been earlier in Spain, Egypt and the Holy Land, congenial relations between followers of the two religious paths certainly were not unheard of. Rabbi Hayyim Vital (d. 1620; Damascus), an important source of Kabbalistic lore for the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760, founder of Hasidism), related that his theological discussions with Islamic dignitaries prompted him to study the Arabic tongue, so that he could better appreciate the nuances of their ideas.

The Middle Eastern Sufi as-Sha’rani (d. 1565), operating a few decades prior to Vital, noted that not only did Jews come and study with him, but also that many found so much worth in his Islamic mystical teachings that they often embraced Islam. His claim can hardly be dismissed, as half-a-century later, Rabbi Abraham Gavison of Tlemcen (c. 1605; Algeria) concluded his Hebrew translation of the Sufi al-Ghazali’s mystical poetry with these words: “I have translated the poetry of this sage, for even though he be not of the Children of Israel, it is accepted that the pious of the gentiles have a share in the world to come and surely heaven will not withhold from him the reward of his faith.” As late as the 18th century, Kabbalists still had regular contact with the Sufis, such as the Moroccan Rabbi Halifa ibn Malka (c. 1750).”

It is truly sad how this long and often positive relationship has been subsumed in the political hatreds of the current day. If only today’s rabbis and inhabitants of Safed would look a bit more closely at their own history, they would find a time when the surrounding Muslim community welcomed Jewish exiles, and shared with them mystical insight.