Sufism and Hasidism: Shared Spiritual Tales

by Thomas Block

Positive interactions between Jewish and Islamic thinkers from the founding of Islam (622) until the fall of the Spanish Caliphate (1492) led to deep Muslim influence on the Jewish religion, including meditation practices, mystical grammar, retreat and supererogatory prayers, liturgical imagery and other specific inspirations that reverberate to this day. For nearly one millennium, Jewish thinkers studied Islamic spiritual methods, using these Quranic-based ideas to help revitalize the religion of Israel. I have detailed this dynamic in my recently published book *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity* (Fons Vitae Press, 2010).

One surprising exchange that I did not discuss in my book, however, was the migration of teaching tales originally told of Sufi masters around the Mediterranean, Middle East and Arabia in the eighth-fifteenth centuries, into the Jewish spiritual stream from the time of Moses Maimonides (12th century) through European Hasidism in the 18th and 19th centuries. These shared tales further highlight the strong connection between Jewish and Islamic spirituality, and the specific manner in which the one (Sufism) affected the other (Hasidism).

Even today, these stories represent one of the most important manners in which Sufi and Hasidic masters teach their students the spiritual pathway to God. Aphorisms, vignettes and longer accounts express the wordless foundations of these spiritual systems. They serve as a vital mechanism for the leader to share his wisdom in a manner that is both provocative and approachable.

The re-attribution of the Islamic tales to Jewish thinkers further highlights the important influence of Sufism on Jewish spirituality. As we will see in the stories outlined below, in some instances the ideas expressed in the original Sufi account were unknown in Rabbinic Judaism, or even ran contrary to certain historic Jewish

ideals. Their movement from Islam into Judaism represents yet another manner in which the religions of Isaac and Ishmael became linked at their spiritual cores.

Shared Tales

Given the wide-ranging and important similarities between the two systems, it is not surprising that the teaching tale, as well, sometimes played a like role for Hasids and Sufis. However, what *is* remarkable is that specific stories told by and about Jewish spiritual leaders had first been related about Sufi masters—oftentimes, several hundred years before. For many centuries during medieval times, teaching tales representing Islamic ideas found their way into the Jewish spiritual vernacular, occasionally even being retold many centuries later about Hasidic masters.

A number of tales can be traced directly to earlier Sufi shaykhs. Their avenues of entrance into Judaism are not hard to discern, with many of the stories inserted into the Jewish spiritual lexicon via such "Jewish-Sufis" as Bahya ibn Pakuda (11th century), Abraham Abulafia (13th century), Isaac of Acre (13th century), Hayyim Vital (16th century) and others. Moses Maimonides and the Egyptian Jewish-Sufis (11th-15th centuries) also played an important role in assimilating specific tales.

Moses Maimonides

Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), considered by many to be the most important Jewish philosopher since the fall of the Second Temple (c. 70), utilized a Sufi tale to express the spiritual ideal of "equanimity." This Sufi concept was novel within Jewish worship, and according to Moshe Idel, even ran contrary to some Talmudic teachings.[1] Conservative Judaism's Rabbi Pamela Gottfried from Atlanta also indicated that she could find no precursor for this spiritual ideal within Rabbinic Judaism.

However, Maimonides accepted it, advocating a "joyous equanimity in the face of the vicissitudes of life."[2] For Sufis, the

1 Idel, Moshe, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 124.

2 Blumenthal, David, *Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism* (www.

attainment of disinterest in what other people think is a vital rung on the ladder of spiritual realization. Due in part to Maimonides' acceptance of the Islamic ideal, the concept of equanimity (*hishtawwut* for Jews) became central to Jewish mysticism, as well.

Reaching a spiritual level of unconcern with the opinions of others was seen as a precursor to enlightenment. In a Hebrew translation (found in a medieval Egyptian-Jewish library) of the great Sufi theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the idea of "equanimity" was presented as a necessary antecedent to acceptance of the Divine Essence:

> According to the Hebrew version of al-Ghazali, the Sufis have a fixed path by which they attain communion with God, which involves several clearly delimited stages: 1) separation from the world [*faqr*]; 2) indifference or equanimity [*hishtawwut*]; 3) solitude [*khalwa*]; 4) repetition of God's name [*dhikr*] and 5) communion with God [*ittihad*].[3]

Equanimity, as a station along the path of spiritual realization, was so respected by Moses Maimonides that he retold a story about a Sufi adept to illustrate its importance. As Abraham Halkin, the 20th century scholar who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, noted, Moses Maimonides related the tale in a letter to a fellow rabbi, referencing "a sage and great philosopher."[4] The story would be taken up by later Jewish thinkers to represent a new *Jewish* mystical station.

Maimonides' related:

> And it happened once that a sage and a great philosopher were traveling on a ship and sat in the place of the refuse, until one, that is, one of the people of the ship, came and urinated on him on the place of the refuse, and he lifted his face and laughed. And they asked him: "Why do you laugh?" He answered them: "Because is it now absolutely clear to me that my soul is on the highest level, because I did not at all feel the disgrace of this thing" . . . And the

js.emory.edu/Blumenthal), p. 4.

3 Idel, Moshe, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 107.

4 Halkin, A.S., "Classical and Arabic Material inIbn Aknin's 'Hygiene of the Soul," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research 14* (1944: 27-147), p. 67.

heretic who was forced to convert to Islam by the Ottoman Sultan, as Rumi had spent the majority of his years in Turkey where Zevi lived and studied, some 400 years later.

Hidden Saints

A story told about the Hasidic Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (d. 1786; "melekh" means "king" in Hebrew) clearly originated with an earlier Sufi source, being traced back to Abdul-Qadir Gilani (d. 1166), the founder of the Qadiriyyah Sufi lineage. The Hasidic version of this story went like this:

> Rabbi Gabriel, a disciple of Rabbi Elimelekh's, once went to visit his master in a carriage he had rented from a man of uncouth bearing who—to his annoyance—insisted on telling him coarse and improper jokes during the entire drive. When they came to the Rabbi's house, Elimelekh ran towards the coachman, greeted him with great happiness, and scarcely noticed Rabbi Gabriel. On the way back, Gabriel wanted to perform services for the man who had been treated with such respect, but was rejected with a curt phrase.
>
> A few months later, Rabbi Gabriel went to the city and there saw the coachman talking to a mason. He followed the two men to their inn, unobserved, and heard one say to the other: "At Melekh's you hear a bit of truth, but nowhere else." And the other repeated: "At Melekh's you hear a bit of truth!" Then they happened to see the Rabbi in the corner and shouted at him, "Get out! What are you doing among common folks?!" And there was nothing for it; the Rabbi had to go.[11]

The Sufi version, which was told some seven hundred years prior about the Sufi shaykh who was also known as the "king:"

> Such was the repute of Abdul Qadir that mystics of all persuasions used to throng to his reception hall, and the utmost decorum and consideration for traditional manners uniformly prevailed. These pious men arranged themselves

11 Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim I*, p. 263.

> in order of precedence—yet they vied with one another for the attention of the Sultan of the Teachers, Abdul Qadir. His manners were impeccable, and nobody of low intelligence or lack of training was seen at these assemblies.
>
> One day, however, the three shaykhs of Khorasan, Iraq and Egypt came to the Dargah, guided by three illiterate muleteers. Their journey from Mecca, where they had been on a pilgrimage, had been plagued by the inelegance and caperings of these men. When they saw the assembly of the Shaykh, they were made as happy to think of their release from their companions as they were by the desire to glimpse the Great Shaykh.
>
> Contrary to the usual practice, the Shaykh came out to meet them. No sign passed between him and the muleteers. Later that night, however, finding their way to their quarters, the three shaykhs glimpsed by accident Qadir saying goodnight to the muleteers. As they respectfully left his room, he kissed their hands. The shaykhs were astonished and realized that these three, not they, were the hidden shaykhs of the dervishes. They followed the muleteers and tried to start a conversation. But the chief muleteer only said: "Get back to your prayers and mumblings, shaykhs, with your Sufism and your search for truth which has plagued us during 36 days' travel. We are simple muleteers and want nothing of that."[12]

The belief in hidden saints was of primary importance to the Sufis—many Sufis consider that the spiritual health of the world is dependent on these veiled adepts (called *qutb*, or "poles," around which the axis of the world revolves). Jewish spiritualists agree, holding that hidden saints are the foundation of the world. In both traditions, the hidden saints can be so well concealed that they themselves are unaware of their vital function!

Another interesting aspect of the Sufi tale was the inclusion of the number "36"—referring to the number of days traveled by the hidden Islamic saints with the "pious" shaykhs. The number

12 Shah, Idries, *Tales of the Dervishes* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 178.

36 represents the exact number of hidden, righteous men that the Talmudic (Jewish, c. 2-5th centuries) masters claimed wandered the earth at all times. These two stories are strong testament to the intertwining of the Jewish and Islamic mystical streams, where the influence of ancient Jewish mysticism might have touched the development of Sufism—and then Islamic mysticism re-introduced these ideas to later Jewish thinkers!

Obviously, the exact topology of this tale of hidden saints changed from the earlier Sufi version to the Jewish account told many hundreds of years later, but the meaning and even the symbols remained remarkably similar, considering the 700-year lag between the telling of the story about the one "king" and the other. In addition to the importance of the hidden saints, in both Sufism and Hasidism, the idea of a pure soul, unadulterated by the "mumblings and prayers" of the "righteous," was held in even higher esteem than the recognized scholar. Obviously heretical to the established religious order, this shared tale evinces why sometimes both Sufis and Hasids have had trouble with the more traditional practitioners of their respective religions.

This Too Shall Pass

Another tale concerning the impermanence of this world clearly migrated from Sufism into Jewish worship. Rabbi Michael Bernstein noted in the *Philadelphia Jewish Voice* (March 2008) that a tale attributed to King Solomon (c. 950 B.C.E.), actually can be traced to Sufis sources, and specifically Farid ad-Din Attar (d. 1221). This tale, like much original Sufi content within medieval and modern Judaism, was simply "back-dated," and retroactively attributed to the ancient Jewish king. The tale, as told within the Jewish tradition:

> A king once asked his most trusted advisor to craft an artifact that would at the same time evoke solace in times of misfortune and humility in the face of great prosperity. After some time the advisor produced a ring on which was etched in Hebrew the following phrase: *Gam zeh ya'avor*: "This too shall pass."[13]

13 Bernstein, Rabbi Michael, *The Philadelphia Jewish Voice*, March 2008.

Rabbi Bernstein notes:

> This story, usually associated with King Solomon, has taken its place among the legends of the Jews. Its message, that neither suffering nor exultation is a permanent fixture in life, fits the basic tenor of *Jewish* traditions. Until the 19th century [however], there is no Jewish source for this tale, but it appears in Persian Sufi writings during the Middle Ages. Perhaps not coincidentally, it is the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad who cites this story as a well-known parable.[14]

The original Sufi tale as it is found in the writings of Attar:

> A great king summoned his wise men. He ordered them: "Create for me a saying that will stabilize my inner state. When I am unhappy, it will bring me joy, and when I am happy, it will remind me of sadness. It cannot be too long, as I want to keep it with me always."
>
> The wise men consulted and considered deeply the king's command. Finally, they returned to the king bearing a small box. In it was a ring, and inside the ring were the following words: "This too shall pass."[15]

This message achieved resonance beyond even the Jewish and Muslim spheres. In his Wisconsin State Fair Address (September 30, 1859), President Abraham Lincoln attributed this same parable to "an Eastern King" and commented: "How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!"[16] Lincoln spoke during a very different era than our own, however: this iconic American president also honored an Islamic leader, the Algerian Abdul Qadir (d. 1883), a direct descendent of his namesake and 12th century founder of the Qadiriyyah

14 Ibid.

15 Quoted in Fadiman, James and Frager, Robert (editors), *Essential Sufism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 80. A much longer version of the tale can be found in Bayat, Mojdeh & Ali Jamnia, Mohammed, *Tales from the Land of the Sufis*.(Boston & London: Shambhala Publications: 2001), pp. 67-71.

16 Bernstein, Rabbi Michael, *The Philadelphia Jewish Voice*, March 2008.

Sufi order, for the Algerian's work in saving Christians during an attack by Druze in Damascus in 1860.

The Necessity of Involvement

Another tale that was first told by the Sufis and then retold almost one thousand years later treats the Sufi and then Hasidic belief that one must be involved in life: that social action is a central aspect of spiritual practice. For Sufis and subsequently Jewish practitioners, one could not simply remove oneself from society and live in a contemplative state, concentrating only on one's personal relationship with God. One vital aspect of mystical appreciation stems from interaction with the world *as it is*, with finding God in the everyday moment and with alleviating the pain of others.

The Sufi tale originated with Dhul Nun al-Misri (d. 860),[17] though it was still being retold within the Sufi tradition as late as the 19th century, by Sayyed Sabir Ali-Shah (d.1818), a saint of the Chisti Order. The Sufi tale, "When the Waters Were Changed," is as follows:

> Once upon a time Khidr, the Teacher of Moses, called upon mankind with a warning. At a certain date, he said, all the water in the world that had not been specially hoarded would disappear. It would then be renewed, with different water, which would drive men mad. Only one man listened to the meaning of this advice. He collected water and went to a secure place where he stored it, and waited for the water to change its character. On the appointed date the streams stopped running, the wells went dry, and the man who had listened, seeing this happening, went to his retreat and drank his preserved water. When he saw, from his security, the waterfalls again beginning to flow, this man descended among the other sons of men. He found that they were thinking and talking in an entirely different way from before; yet they had no memory of what had happened, nor of having been warned. When he tried to talk to them, he realized that they thought he was mad, and they showed hostility or compassion, not understanding.

17 Shah, Idries, *Tales of the Dervishes*, p. 20.

> At first he drank none of the new water, but went back to his concealment, to draw on his supplies, every day. Finally, however, he took the decision to drink the new water because he could not bear the loneliness of living, behaving and thinking in a different way from everyone else. He drank the new water, and became like the rest. Then he forgot all about his own store of special water, and his fellows began to look upon him as a madman who had miraculously been restored to sanity.[18]

One of Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's (d. 1810) stories is remarkably similar to the Sufi tale.[19] The story, as told by the Hasidic leader:

> A king once told his prime minister, who was also his good friend, "I see in the stars that whoever eats any grain that grows this year will go mad. What is your advice?" The prime minister replied, "We must put aside enough grain so that we will not have to eat from this year's harvest." The king objected, "But then we will be the only ones who will be sane. Everyone else will be mad. Therefore, they will think that we are the mad ones. It is impossible for us to put aside enough grain for everyone. Therefore, we too must eat this year's grain. But we will make a mark on our foreheads, so that at least we will know that we are mad. I will look at your forehead, and you will look at mine, and when we see this sign, we will know that we are both mad."[20]

As Rabbi Alan Brill of Seton Hall University notes: "The bottom line of both stories is the necessity of forgoing enlightenment to participate in the world."[21]

Morality

The aforementioned represent a few examples of individual tales

18 Ibid., p. 20.

19 Quoted in Brill, Alan, *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, www.kavvanah.wordpress.com.

20 Quoted in Ibid.

21 Ibid.

that flowed directly from Islam into Jewish mysticism. There are further instances of Hasidic tales that show the clear influence of Sufi teachings, though an exact Sufi match has not yet been found. Sometimes, the message in the Jewish tale is clearly at odds with traditional Jewish religious law, though in line with Islamic precursors.

Acts that would have been considered sins in mainstream Judaism or Islam took on esoteric meaning for both spiritual paths. Since mystical practitioners viewed *everything* as belonging to God alone, they developed a vision of stealing that was unlike that stated by the exoteric laws of their respective religions. Additionally, the achievement of the mystical state of *hishtawwut* (equanimity) meant that a practitioner of either path would never take thievery in a "personal" way, as their ego had been completely effaced through prayer and correct living. The act of stealing had everything to do with the actor, and nothing to do with the "victim." This story was related about the Sufi shaykh Sa'adi (d. 1292):

> A thief entered the house of a Sufi and found nothing there to steal. As he was leaving, the dervish, sensing his disappointment, threw him the blanket on which he had been lying.[22]

A tale along the same lines was told about the Sufi al-Junayd (d. 910), who was also a *qadi*, or judge, in the city's law courts:

> It is said that one night a thief entered Junayd's house but found nothing to steal except a shirt, which he took. The next day, Junayd passed through a bazaar and saw his shirt being sold by an auctioneer. The prospective buyer was insisting that someone be provided who would testify that the seller really owned the shirt. Junayd stepped up and said, "I am ready to testify that it is his."[23]

Similarly, a short legend was related about the Hasidic Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zbarazh (d. 1800):

> One night, thieves entered Rabbi Wolf's house and took whatever they happened to find. From his room, the *tzaddik* watched them but did not do anything to stop them. When they were through, they took some utensils and among them a jug from which a sick man had drunk that very evening. Rabbi Wolf ran after them. "My good people," he said, "whatever you have found here, I beg you to regard as gifts from me. I do not begrudge these things to you at all. But please be careful about that jug! The breath of a sick man is clinging to it, and you might catch his disease!"
>
> From this time on, he said every evening before going to bed: "All my possessions are common property," so that—in case thieves came again—tthey would not be guilty of theft.[24]

22 Quoted in Fadiman, James and Frager, Robert (eds.), *Essential Sufism*, p. 143.

23 Ibid., p. 189.

Clearly at odds with the teachings of mainstream religious law (and perhaps even common sense), the compassion and lack of vindictiveness in all three of these tales bespeaks an attitude at odds with what we generally consider traditionally "religious." They underscore the difference between exoteric views of "morality" and those of realized souls.

Sufi scholar Titus Burckhardt noted how the sentiment expressed in these stories stems from a saying in the Quran:

> Instead of identifying himself with his empirical "I" he (the "perfect man") fashions that "I" by virtue of an element that is symbolically and implicitly non-individual. The Quran says: "We shall strike vanity with Truth and it will bring it to nought" (21:18) . . . To the extent that he is effectively emancipated the contemplative ceases to be such-and-such a person and "becomes" the Truth on which he has meditated . . . hence the incompatibility between the spirit of Sufism and the "moralistic" conception of virtue, which is quantitative and individualistic.[25]

In these tales concerning thieves, the basis of Sufi (and, later, Hasidic) ideals—of true, forgiving, unbounded love and equanimity of the sort that would make it impossible for a person to feel

24 Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim I*, p. 161.

25 Burckhardt, Titus, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2008), p. 11.

"wronged" by any action of another person—were exhibited in a surprising manner.

The Sinless Sinner

An interesting pair of tales concerning an 8th century Sufi, and then an 18th century Hasid seem to offer a call and response, regarding ideas of sin, self-awareness and the true mystical path. First, the tale told about the female Sufi saint Rabi'ah of Basra (d. 801):

> It is said that Rabi'ah 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."[26]

The Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) addressed the issue of "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 uncleanness." 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."[27]

These two tales are so closely linked that it almost appears as if the Baal Shem Tov is offering an explication of Rabi'ah's slightly more cryptic utterance. Coupled with the two tales of the mystics' attitude towards the thieves, we begin to appreciate the depth of love and forgiveness of these systems—and how these paths did not always square with either the *Shari'ah* of Islam or *Halakha* of Judaism.

True Worship

26 Baker, Rob and Henry, Gray (editors), *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 172.

27 Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim I*, pp. 71-72.

Another theme common to both spiritual systems is the idea that people should worship God *only* for the joy of doing so—and not out of *fear* of God's wrath or *desire* for some kind of "reward" (such as worldly riches or eternal paradise). Either of those goals represents "desire," and the retention of the personal ego in the aspirant, a veil that grows between the seeker and God. If a practitioner is concerned with the hereafter, it implies that they have not effaced themselves completely, to focus entirely on God. As the Muslim saint Rabi'ah noted:

> O my lord, if I worship Thee for fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship Thee for hope of Paradise, exclude me thence; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not from me Thine eternal beauty.[28]

Rabi'ah was also quoted in the following teaching story:

> One day, Rabi'ah was seen running, carrying fire in one hand and water in the other. They asked her the meaning of her action and where she was going. She replied: "I am going to light a fire in paradise and pour water on hell, so that both veils [hindrances to the true vision of God] completely disappear."[29]

A short tale told about the Baal Shem Tov was very much in the same vein as those told about the Sufi saint a thousand years before:

> Once the spirit of the Baal Shem was so oppressed that it seemed to him he would have no part in the coming world. Then he said to himself: "If I love God, what need have I of the coming world!?"[30]

A similar tale was told about the Maggid of Mezhrich (d. 1772), the second great Hasidic leader, which evinces a similar theme:

> Silently, his wife held the hungry child. It was too weak to cry. Then—for the first time—the Maggid sighed. Instantly the answer came. A voice said to him: "You have lost your share in the coming world." "Well, then," he said,

28 Quoted in Fadiman, James and Frager, Robert (eds.), *Essential Sufism*, p. 229.

29 Ibid., p. 86.

30 Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim I*, p. 52.

"the reward has been done away with. Now I can begin to serve in good earnest!"[31]

The Sufi saint Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. 777) explained this ideal of desire-less worship a thousand years prior to the Hasidic rabbi:

> Covet nothing in this world or the next, and devote thyself entirely to God and turn thy face to Him, having no desire for this world or the life to come. To covet this world is to turn away from God, for the sake of that which is transitory, and to covet the next world is to turn away from God for the sake of that which is everlasting; that which is transitory passes away and its renunciation also perishes, but the renunciation of that which is everlasting is also imperishable.[32]

Two motivating factors, fear of God's wrath and hope for some ultimate gain from God through service, are considered necessary conjuncts of the religious experience in exoteric Islam and Judaism. For Hasidism and Sufism, however, the joy of love—and love alone—is reason enough, and in fact the *only* true reason, to worship God with all one's being. If the coming world only becomes another hindrance between the mystic and God, then even that must be done away with!

While Sufis and Hasids value the exoteric practices of their respective religious paths, such as prayer, following the law, aiding the poor and other normative practices, they also feel that these rituals might become an end in themselves, at which time they can be another veil between a searcher and God. For instance, the Sufi Bayazid Bistami (d. 874) said: "The thickest veils between man and *Allah* are the wise man's wisdom, the worshiper's worship and the devotion of the devout."[33] A traditional Sufi maxim also held: "A donkey with a load of holy books is still a donkey."

A beautiful teaching tale concerning the Baal Shem Tov relates

31 Ibid., p. 99.

32 Quoted in Smith, Margaret, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), p. 183.

33 Quoted in Fadiman, James and Frager, Robert (eds.), *Essential Sufism*, p. 111.

virtually the same message:

> Once the Baal Shem stopped on the threshold of a House of Prayer and refused to go in. "I cannot go in," he said. "It is crowded with teachings and prayers from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. How could there be room for me?"
>
> And when he saw that those around him were staring at him and did not know what he meant, he added: "The words from the lips of those whose teaching and praying does not come from the hearts lifted to heaven, cannot rise, but fill the house from wall to wall and floor to ceiling."[34]

Erotic Love

Sufism also strongly influenced Jewish mysticism through the eroticization of certain prayer and meditation imagery. New to medieval Jewish worship with the 13th century Kabbalistic work *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Illumination), the idea of using sensual and even sexual imagery to describe the approach to and then fusion with God through meditation has had a lasting influence on Jewish esotericism.

The lineage from medieval Sufis, to medieval Kabbalists (in this case, Rabbi Isaac of Acre, d. 1350) and then to 18th century European Jewry can be traced without too much problem through a tale about a princess. Although the story originated within Islam, the exact provenance has not been found. It then passed from Isaac of Acre (14th century) to the 16th century Safed Kabbalist, Elijah de Vidas (d. 1592), who included it in his book *Reshit Hokhmah* (The Beginning of Wisdom), which had a strong influence on Hasidism. Here, the passionate yearning and love of God that defines the Sufi Way became systematized within Jewish spiritual thought:

> Thus we learn from one incident, recorded by R. Isaac of Acre, of blessed memory, who said that one day the princess came out of the bathhouse, and one of the idle people saw her and sighed a deep sigh and said: "Who would give me my wish, that I could do with her as I like!" And the princess answered and said: "That shall come to pass in

34 Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim I*, p. 73.

the graveyard, but not here." When he heard these words he rejoiced, for he thought that she meant for him to go to the graveyard to wait for her there, and that she would come and he would do with her as he wished.

But she did not mean this, but only wished to say that there are great and small, young and old, despised and honored all equal, but not here, so it is not possible that one of the masses should approach a princess. So that man rose and went to the graveyard and sat there, and devoted all his thoughts to her, and always thought of her form. And because of this great longing for her, he removed his thoughts from everything sensual, but put them continually on the form of that woman and her beauty. Day and night he sat there in that graveyard, there he ate and drank, and there he slept, for he said to himself, "If she does not come today, she'll come tomorrow."

Thus he did for many days, and because of his separation from the objects of sensations, and the exclusive attachment of his thought to one object and his concentration and total longing, his soul was separated from the sensual things and attached itself only to the intelligibles, until it was separated from all sensual things, including that woman herself, and he communed with God. And after a short time he cast off all sensual things and he desired only the Divine Intellect, and he became a perfect servant and holy man of God, until his prayer was heard and his blessing was beneficial to all passers-by.[35]

The story is colored with the Sufi hue, as Professor Moshe Idel notes:

> The occurrences of philosophical terms [in Isaac's passage], the ideal of *devequt*, the issue of *hitbodedut* as mental concentration, as well as Sufi elements like the contemplation of beauty as a mystical technique, point to the synthesis between Sufism and other ecstatic types of [Jewish] mysticism. Although the name of Rabbi Isaac is

35 Idel, Moshe, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 61-62.

> only rarely mentioned in the Hasidic writings that were influenced by this parable, there can be no doubt to its influence. Its impact on Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoy [d. 1784] and other Hasidic masters has been well documented. Indeed, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoy explicitly mentions his source, "Rabbi Isaac of Acre," in a context that implies that the Baal Shem Tov himself concurred with the view of the ecstatic Kabbalist. However, beyond the direct quotations, Hasidic masters have adopted and developed the attitude of Rabbi Isaac as a directive for their own lives . . . Hasidic discussions emphasized precisely [Isaac's] practice of contemplating the beauty of a woman in order to reach out to the supernal source of beauty.[36]

This tale also was told about the great Sufi poet Hafiz (d. 1389). As the story about the Sufi saint went, Hafiz fell in love with a beautiful Persian girl, for whom he entered into a *zawiyya* for a 40-day seclusion rite, which ultimately opened up for him the way of *fana* (annihilation) and *baqa* (subsistence in God).[37]

The tale expresses a couple of important ideals that entered Jewish mysticism in the 13th century, and later became central to the development of Hasidism. First of all, the female image of the "Princess" squared perfectly with the Jewish idea of the *Sheckinah*, the feminine aspect of the Godhead that was accessible to man. Devotion to the "intelligibles" referred to the *Sheckinah* itself.[38] That the man in the story desired an erotic union with the "Princess" clearly influenced later Hasidic thought, as the union between man and God became highly eroticized for later Jewish mystics, due to Sufi influence such as this.

In the tale, Rabbi Isaac comments that, "He who does not desire a woman is like a donkey, or even less than one, the point being that from the object of sensation, one may apprehend the worship of God."[39] When I mentioned this phrase to Abdallah Schleifer, an American Sufi and prominent Middle East expert, he startled

36 Ibid., pp. 62-64 For further discussion of this passage, see Idel, Moshe, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 115-118.

37 Ernst, Carl, *Shambala Guide to Sufism*, p. 162.

38 Idel, Moshe, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 62.

39 Ibid., p. 63.

They found one of our servants, whom we blessed with mercy, and bestowed upon him from our own knowledge. Moses said to him, "Can I follow you, that you may teach me some of the knowledge and the guidance bestowed upon you?"

He said, "You cannot stand to be with me. How can you stand that which you do not comprehend?"

He said, "You will find me, God willing, patient. I will not disobey any command you give me."

He said, "If you follow me, then you shall not ask me about anything, unless I choose to tell you about it."

So they went. When they boarded a ship, he bore a hole in it. He said, "Did you bore a hole in it to drown its people? You have committed something terrible."

He said, "Did I not say that you cannot stand to be with me?"

He said, "I am sorry. Do not punish me for my forgetfulness; do not be too harsh with me."

So they went. When they met a young boy, he killed him. He said, "Why did you kill such an innocent person, who did not kill another person? You have committed something horrendous."

He said, "Did I not tell you that you cannot stand to be with me?"

He said, "If I ask you about anything else, then do not keep me with you. You have seen enough apologies from me."

So they went. When they reached a certain community, they asked the people for food, but they refused to host them. Soon, they found a wall about to collapse, and he fixed it. He said, "You could have demanded a wage for that!"

He said, "Now we have to part company. But I will explain

to you everything you could not stand. As for the ship, it belonged to poor fishermen, and I wanted to render it defective. There was a king coming after them, who was confiscating every ship, forcibly. As for the boy, his parents were good believers, and we saw that he was going to burden them with his transgression and disbelief. We willed that your Lord substitute in his place another son; one who is better in righteousness and kindness. As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city. Under it, there was a treasure that belonged to them. Because their father was a righteous man, your Lord wanted them to grow up and attain full strength, then extract their treasure. Such is mercy from your Lord. I did none of that of my own volition. This is the explanation of the things you could not stand."

This appreciation for the incomprehensibility of the hidden meaning of actions and reactions was institutionalized in Sufism, in part due to this Quranic tale, and in part due to the acceptance of the Divine as ultimately inexplicable. As Titus Burckhardt noted concerning Sufism: "It is those spiritual supports which are the least discursive and the most 'obscure' from the point of view of reasoning which, generally speaking, are the vehicles for the most powerful influences of grace."[41]

The Hasidic or Sufi leader sometimes used extreme methods to cure the ills of the world, methods that might appear unusual and even cruel by the standards of normal society and religion. However, these adepts were privy to truths that few could understand, and in exercising their powers utilized whatever means necessary. Like Moses' mysterious teacher in the Quran, the ones who had annihilated themselves in God and then returned saw the world with a wisdom that was both fully knowing and completely ignorant, or, as Muhyiddin ibn Arabi (d. 1240) said of the true spiritual leader: "He knows and at the same time he does not know; he perceives and at the same time he does not perceive; he contemplates and yet does not contemplate;" seemingly contradictory qualities can

41 Burckhardt, Titus, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 76.

be attributed to him.[42]

The intermingling of specific, spiritual ideas represented by these shared teaching tales shows how deeply intertwined the cores of these two religions have become. Though it is difficult to imagine in today's climate, with relations between the children of Abraham scarred and full of pain, the concurrences between the esoteric paths of the two religions are far stronger than the exoteric and political differences appearing to separate them.

One thousand years ago, Jewish thinkers sought out and studied with their Islamic compatriots, introducing the wisdom of Sufi teachings into the bosom of Jewish spirituality. In this way, later Jews, drawn to the unusual and beautiful ideas of these Islamic-inspired Jewish thinkers, sometimes unwittingly based their "fresh" ideas on the teachings of Sufi masters.

42 Quoted in Ibid., p. 70.