

Washington Independent Book Review

[Shalom/Salaam: The Story of a Mystical Fraternity](#)

Q&A with author Thomas Block

How have the scholars of Jewish mysticism responded to your book? And how does their response compare to scholars of Islamic Sufi mysticism?

By and large, the response and reviews to the book have been very positive. However, some academics have viewed the book with a bit of skepticism due to the fact that I am not a lettered academic myself, yet have had the “audacity” to write an academic book which breaks new ground in the research of the history of Jewish-Muslim relations, as well as Judaism itself.

I might add that both a Muslim academic and Jewish academic — neither of whom were adverse to the book’s publication — stated that they would never have written this book, as they wouldn’t have wanted to jeopardize their academic positions! The thesis is not only too controversial, but the amount of information that it covers makes it nearly impossible for a strict academic to be an expert in all of the many facets of the story. This is the main concern of those that have it — that I do not speak Arabic, Hebrew or Aramaic, am not an expert in the practice of Kabbalah, nor am I an expert in the time periods covered. However, as I point out to them, if we waited for this scholar to come along, the book never would have been written.

It should be noted that I state quite clearly that I am writing this book to begin a conversation, not provide the last word, and I am writing as an informed “citizen- diplomat,” and not a lettered academic.

You mention that some Sufi ideas can be traced to Plotinus, but that Jewish medieval scholars did not have direct access to Plotinus and Aristotle, whereas Muslim scholars did? Why? For example, why would someone like Josephus not have access to Plotinus?

This is an important point — so thank you for the question. Prior to coming under Arab rule, Jews mostly spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, not the language of the surrounding Christian culture. Ergo, they had little access to earlier Greek and Roman thinking, let alone that of Eastern cultures. However, by the 10th century, 90% of Jewry not only lived under Islam, but also spoke Arabic. In the meantime, Arabs had translated the world’s learning (re-discovered as they expanded their empire to the East and West) into Arabic. In the Arab world, the 8th-15th centuries were a fertile, intellectual era on-par with the European Enlightenment.

Throughout this “Golden Age” of Islam, Sufis re-interpreted these earlier ideas, and wrapped many them (especially from Plotinus and the neo-Platonists) into their mystical system. Jews, who lived side-by-side with the Sufis and were deeply influenced by them, often came to earlier Greek and Roman ideas via the intermediary Islamic mystics, accepting their understanding of the earlier thinkers. And when they read the ideas from the original thinkers (translated into Arabic), their interpretations were still sometimes affected by what they had learned from their Islamic mystical brethren.

The Sufi idea of isolated prayer and direct union with the Divine are reminiscent of Gnostic practices. What do scholars say about the origins of these ideas as they developed among Sufi mystics?

Although my book treats only peripherally the influence of earlier Jewish thinkers on the development of Sufi ideas, there was clearly much effect of the former on the latter. The earliest Sufi thinkers in the 8th

century quoted copiously from Jewish sources, as Islam accepted all Jewish prophets as part of their own spiritual path. The Talmudic (2nd-5th century) Jewish practitioners came to represent for early Sufis the height of Islamic piety. The sense of veneration for the Hebrew prophets, the presence of Jewish converts in and around Baghdad and the desire to encourage further conversion led to an unusual openness to Jewish sources. The receptivity to Biblical and rabbinic legends of exemplary spirituality, conceived under the broad heading of Torah, made it possible for early Muslims to turn to Jewish models of piety without posing a challenge to the authority of the Koran.

The same could be said of the Gnostics, whose ideas were prevalent in the same regions wherein Islam was expanding, and Sufis were studying. In general, overlap and direct influence of mystics from all faiths has always been an uncomfortable fact (whether it is Jewish and Islamic influence on the thinking of Meister Eckhart, d. 1328, or the Buddhist and Eastern influence on Jesus) — uncomfortable, because the mainstream practitioners of all religions demand ritual and spiritual “purity” within their faith, a conception that just doesn’t exist.

How did Jewish Sufi practice differ from groups such as the Essenes and the tenets they espoused?

In many respects, the Essenes prefigured both the Sufis and the Jewish-Sufis. However, by the medieval era, most of these more extreme mystical practices had become dormant for Jews, and were rediscovered via the Sufis. Undoubtedly, like Gnosticism, Essene thinking helped influence both medieval Islamic and Jewish spiritual thinkers.

You referred to Judaism in the Middle ages as “calcified”. Why so, and did Jews in the middle ages view their religion in the same manner?

The more mystically inclined Jews of the Middle Ages absolutely viewed their co- religionists as “calcified,” and used Islamic mysticism to revivify their own practice. Abraham Maimonides (d. 1237), one of the most important Jewish-Sufis, and the most powerful Jewish leader of his era, stated this quite explicitly:

“Thou art aware the ways of the ancient saints of Israel, which are not or but little practiced among our contemporaries, have now become the practice of the Sufis of Islam, on account of the iniquities of Israel Observe then these wonderful traditions and sigh with regret over how they have been transferred from us and appeared amongst a nation other than ours My soul shall weep because the pride of Israel was taken from them and bestowed upon the nations of the world.”

What has happened to the practice of PROPHECY in mystic circles? Is it still a goal as expressed by Maimonides?

Jews, up until the 17th and 18th century, were avid believers in prophecy as a manner of seeding the ground for the return of the Messiah. Moses Maimonides had a date-certain for the return of the Messiah (sometime around 1240); throughout the Middle Ages, mystical practitioners pointed their work toward a prophetic understanding of Judaism (often deeply influenced by Sufism) that would lead not only to direct communication with God, but the final return of the Messiah.

However, two incredibly disturbing false Messiahs (Shabbetai Zevi, d. 1676 and Jacob Frank, d. 1791, both of whom captivated huge portions of the Jewish population with their messianic claims) in the pre-Modern period killed the conception of the Messiah for mystical Jews. Then, the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760), the founder of Hasidism, moved Jewish mystical practice away from Messianic imminence and toward the

concept of personal salvation. The Messiah would come, he averred, but “prophetic understanding” now had more to do with individual behavior and personal realization than the salvation of the Jews through the return of a single spiritual figure.

You comment on the often cordial nature of Jewish-Muslim relations, yet Maimonides was forced to leave Muslim ruled Spain, and the Almoravides forced Halevi out. Why did this not have an impact on their admiration of Sufi theories?

It is important to remember that Islam then, as now, was not a monolithic collective espousing and believing the exact same thing. The Almohads (who forced out Maimonides) and the Almoravides (who caused the dislocation of Judah Halevi) swept into Spain from Morocco, and both were Taliban-like sects that were as disgusted with the open-minded and worldly Muslims in Cordoba in the mid 12th century, as they were with Jews and Christians. They treated the Muslim community there not much better than the dhimmis.

This is no way prejudiced Maimonides (or Halevi, for that matter) against the religion in general, or against the Sufis. In fact, Joel Kraemer of the University of Chicago Divinity School recently suggested in his book “Maimonides” (2008) that Moses Maimonides actually converted to Islam for a period, before settling in Fustat, Egypt. It should also be noted that when Maimonides’ “Guide for the Perplexed” was first circulated, Jews sought out Muslim teachers to explain it to them, as so much of the thought represented in the book stemmed from Islamic sources that his contemporary Jews had a hard time fully understanding it.

Since Abulafia was deemed a heretic, why were so many scholars willing to overlook his banishment?

Judaism does not operate with a unitary head, such as the Pope in Catholicism, so one important scholar of a time period declaring an individual a “heretic” does not have the same import as it might in other religions. Medieval Islam, as well, had many Sufis who were declared heretical in their thought (such as al-Hallaj, killed by Muslim authorities in 922 or Bayazid Bistami, d. 874). Ultimately, it was much more difficult in both Judaism and Islam to successfully repress a “heretical” thinker due to the much looser leadership structure.

Abulafia, specifically, wrote in a very easy to understand manner, as his stated goal was to make prophecy, as represented by his Jewish-Sufi path, available to all Jews, and not just be the province of the spiritual elect. For this reason, his books were very important to 16th century Kabbalists, to the 18th century Hasids and his prayer techniques still form the basis for many Jewish meditation retreats to this day. Just google search the name to see!

You cite many Jewish scholars who have mentioned the link between the two traditions. Have these scholars ever received any direct pushback to their noting Sufi origins of some Jewish mystical practices?

Interesting question. First of all, most scholars who have treated this issue in depth have situated it within medieval Judaism, often explicitly stating (as in the case of Gershom Scholem and Paul Fenton, for instance) that there was no lasting impact of Sufism on Judaism in general, or Jewish mysticism as it is currently practiced. Other scholars that have drawn the linkages through to later Jewish mysticism (such as Moshe Idel) have written for a small and elite academic audience.

As a rabbi and scholar told me recently, within the academic community, these ideas are now widely accepted. However, as my book is for a more popular audience, and moves the ideas into the social and political realms, the pushback comes due to current geo-politics, and not necessarily from academic

quarters.

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