

Introduction

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 the 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.

Although not a lettered academician, I followed an inner impulse so strong that it ended up taking nearly a dozen years of my life, and countless hours in the Library of Congress, to satisfy. After initially searching in vain for confirmation of this Muslim-Jewish fraternity, I finally discovered an author who had undertaken substantial research in this area: Professor Paul Fenton of the Sorbonne. I spent hour upon hour pouring over obscure academic texts, following leads described in Fenton's notes and bibliography, exploring other valuable sources, which then led to further, even lesser known sources for my research. Eventually, a hitherto unrecognized story emerged that I believe needs urgently to be fully explored.

Far from coming across evidence of but 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. 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.

Scholarly investigation on this subject dates back more than one hundred years, starting in the late 19th century in Germany, then moving to the seminal work of Shlomo D. Goitein (Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton) in the middle of the last century, who devoted his life to translating the medieval documents discovered in the Cairo Geniza (a repository for religious and other texts in the synagogue where Moses Maimonides prayed). This went on to include Alexander Altmann (Founder of the Institute of Jewish

Studies, University College, London), Israel Efros (Rabbi and Rector of Tel Aviv University) and more recently the work of such scholars as Moshe Idel (Hebrew University), Paul Fenton (Sorbonne) and Diana Lobel (Boston University), as well as a smattering of independent-minded professors who have provided invaluable insight into this story. Utilizing their research, I was able to piece together the various aspects of this centuries-long tale.

In virtually every case, the research of these scholars has been sequestered in obscure journals or 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. There has not been a scholar willing to make the claim that Sufism was a central influence in helping shape Jewish spirituality, refashioning the religion as it is currently practiced.

It must also be noted that Sufism was certainly not the only influence on medieval Jewish thinkers. They enjoyed a varied intellectual milieu the likes of which they had never before known. In addition to a wealth of Jewish and Muslim thinkers, the educated medieval thinker had access to works by Plato, Aristotle, Galen, as well as Neo-platonic works, Hindu stories, Persian musical treatises, scientific collections from various backgrounds, ancient mathematical treatises, medical essays and a host of other sources on philosophical and theological subjects. Additionally, many of the ideas taken on from Sufism came to the Islamic mystics via other, earlier influences. It was a spiritual blend – but one which often came to the medieval Jewish thinker via Sufi and Islamic intermediaries.

The Jewish-Sufi spiritual fraternity hardly developed in a vacuum. The relationship between Jews and Muslims had strong positive resonance almost from the time of the Prophet Muhammad's revelation. For instance, a preeminent historical figure in the body of the Koran is Moses — his name being cited more than 100 times.¹ According to Professor Shlomo Goitein, the Koran contains so many accounts and theological ideas found in Talmudic literature (c. 2nd-5th centuries) that a reading of the Muslim Holy Book offers a fairly comprehensive view of the fundamental beliefs held by the Jews.²

These initial positive interactions affected the relationship between the two People. When Muslim armies swept across the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 and began their conquest of Visigoth Spain, the invaders trusted the thankful Jews for their help as garrison forces to secure and guard conquered cities, as the Muslim armies pushed north.³ For Jews, these “marauding” warriors represented an army of liberation!

As part of the Islamic quest for knowledge, Muslim leaders encouraged Jewish scholars to play a major role in the life of Islam. Professor Norman Roth notes in *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain*: “Jews were prominent among the scientists, mathematicians and physicians encountered

in (Islamic) biographical and literary encyclopedias. In addition, Jewish scholars drew heavily upon their contemporary Muslim colleagues for their knowledge in such fields as astronomy, mathematics, physics and medicine. The greatest Muslim scientists and philosophers had Jewish students.”⁴

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the relationship, however, is that the often positive and respectful social interaction led to a direct connection between theologians and mystical thinkers of both religions, linking these two together in ways that few today would suspect. Mysticism lies at the heart of all religions, representing a manner in which an individual can develop proximity with God. That Jews and Muslims would come together at such a central focus of their faith – where humans most clearly endeavor to encounter the Divine – struck me as not only fascinating, but also vital to understanding the Jewish-Muslim relationship, especially in our era, when the appreciation of this historic affinity is clouded by political exigencies.

The story of the “Jewish-Sufi” begins with famous and intellectually powerful Jews such as Abraham Maimonides (d. 1237, Egypt) and Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. 1058, Spain) – both of whom continue to be influential within Judaism today, though their Sufi tendencies have remained shrouded. Abraham Maimonides, son of the pre-eminent Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides (d. 1204, Egypt), wrote one of the most important works on the interior life of medieval times, “A Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of God,” which was almost entirely influenced by Sufism. Although submerged in the sands of history, for nearly half a millennium it was a vital source for Jewish mystics yearning to better understand their own religion.

Abraham Maimonides founded a dynasty of Jewish-Sufis, descendants of his who, while decidedly and profoundly Jewish, believed that Sufism offered the pre-eminent spiritual model for the ancient religion of Israel. Five generations of Maimonidean descendants not only served as pre-eminent Jewish leaders, but also quoted Sufi sages, wrote Sufi treatises and included Sufi modes of worship in the medieval Egyptian synagogue. The reverberations of these contacts influence Judaism to this day.

Solomon ibn Gabirol, who predated Abraham Maimonides by nearly two centuries, was well known as a Jewish poet, philosopher and writer of liturgical hymns, many of which are still performed in synagogues around the world. He penned one of the basic songs of the Jewish *Sabbath* (day of rest) rite, *Adon Olam* (Lord of the World). What is often overlooked in the popular biographies about Ibn Gabirol, however, is that his pre-eminent spiritual mentor was a Sufi, Muhammad ibn Masarra (d. 931, Spain), and much of his thought and work are based on Ibn Masarra’s teachings.

It is important to recall how different were those times from today, for both Jews and Muslims. At the height of Islamic power, from the 8th-12th centuries, ninety percent of all Jews lived under Muslim rule.⁵ While Jew-

ish citizens certainly did not enjoy the same rights as the Muslim majority, it was for the Jews a Golden Age, an unprecedented period of legal acceptance and religious and scientific advancement.

By the time the Kabbalah, the most important Jewish spiritual system since Biblical times, was being formulated in the 13th century, Sufism was so important to Jewish thinkers that Islamic ideas permeated this spiritual practice. Sufi manners of worship, Sufi terminology, even stories first told of the Prophet Muhammad all found their way into Kabbalistic writings. Later, 15th and 16th century Kabbalists were drawn to fundamental aspects of the Kabbalah that stemmed from Sufism. They also continued to have direct contacts with Islamic thinkers in the Holy Land. At the time that the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) was developing Hasidic worship in Eastern Europe, Sufi antecedents were so prevalent in medieval Judaism and so compelling to the European Jewish leader that Islam, again, played a central role in the creation of a novel Jewish mystical response. I trace this lineage in the pages that follow.

Let me note that I have used the term “Jewish-Sufi” throughout the text to denote specific Jewish thinkers who were deeply influenced by their Islamic spiritual cousins. This is not to say they viewed themselves as “Jewish-Sufis;” they did not. Virtually all of the Jewish personages discussed herein considered themselves wholly Jewish, and their Islamic mystical innovations in keeping with historic Judaism. However, I use this term in order to pay homage to the deep influence of Sufism on Jewish mystics, and Jewish religious practice in general. It is my conclusion that the development of medieval Judaism and even contemporary Jewish practice cannot be fully understood without acknowledging and comprehending the influence of the one (Islamic mysticism) upon the other (Jewish mysticism). The term “Jewish-Sufi” honors this fraternity.

It is vital also to set this book within its proper social context: although is deeply sourced and academic, this effort is ultimately a Track II (citizen-diplomat) peacemaking document written by an independent writer and historical researcher, and fueled by a passion for both Truth and peace. This work is a proposal based on historical affinities, as well as specific interactions between Jewish thinkers and Sufi mystics and their ideas. On some points, academics might disagree with my thesis; in fact, I document many instances where my narrative runs contrary to some of the most recognized Jewish scholars over the past century, such as Gershom Scholem (first Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Paul Fenton (Sorbonne) and even Moshe Idel (Hebrew University). In other places, the conclusions are based on the scholarship of a single thinker, such as the work of Professor David Blumenthal (Emory University), and his work concerning the Sufi influence on the thought of Moses Maimonides.

What I offer is a mosaic of influences which, in my mind and I hope that of my readers, resolves itself into an image of a deep and lasting influence between Jewish mystics and Sufi thought. This is not a book based in wishful thinking. What I present has been deeply considered: a Sufi thread is shown to run through Jewish thought from the 9th century, into the 19th century and even today. However, for some academics, my thesis, or some parts of it, will appear to be outside what is generally accepted within the scholarly world. But I must share my findings.

A quote from Professor Harvey J. Hames of Ben Gurion University (Israel) offers wonderful insight into the difficult and delicate work it takes to attribute ideas to individual sources, especially when one group (medieval Jewish thinkers) often went out of their way to hide their foreign sources:

A lack of citation of chapter and verse [in most work written by medieval Jewish-Sufis] raises the issue of what constitutes proof or evidence of cross-cultural influences or borrowing. This is not an easily resolvable question, and standards of what constitutes proof differ among scholars within their own disciplines and among disciplines themselves. Sociologists and cultural anthropologists often talk about acculturation or the diffusion of cultural traits – concepts, which, while not necessarily conclusive, are more than suggestive. Historians of religion discuss criteria such as accommodation, cultural symbiosis and religious commonality. To these, it is possible to add geographical proximity and ... a long and well-documented history of cultural interaction among members of the three monotheistic faiths in the Iberian Peninsula. Since, in a discussion with important theological implications, direct quotation from a Muslim source by a Jew could be counterproductive, one would expect to find indirect evidence – the use of similar motifs in similar contexts – and this is precisely what one does find [so often in medieval Jewish spirituality].⁶

I hope that readers will consider my book as a whole, and understand that the thrust behind these years of research has been to point to a nourishing place of spiritual affinity between these two great faith traditions.

This book in no way claims to offer the final word on this story. *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity* simply hopes to help begin a conversation. My primary motivation in undertaking this study is to initiate a dialogue within popular culture concerning this story of spiritual comity. This tale of mystical fraternity is important not only for its historical significance, but also for the relevance it has to the contemporary situation between Jews and Muslims. Looking at today's news, it is easy to believe that Judaism and Islam *never* enjoyed a period of mutual enrichment, a time of peace and reciprocal respect. Hatred runs so deep and the relationship is so combustible, it is hard to imagine that these pervasive attitudes cannot be

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traced back to the founding of Islam (c. 630). In this climate, positive truths such as those outlined in this book are overlooked and even denied.

This book is offered as part of the dialogue of peace. *Shalom/Salaam* represents a reality of shared roots that we can no longer afford to ignore. Despite the tremendously challenging political and social situation between Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims and Jews, bridges of the living spirit can be built between the two communities. *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity* is one attempt to highlight and encourage such a profound and brotherly connection.

Endnotes

1. Goitein, S. D. *Jews and Arabs*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964, pg. 55
2. Ibid. pg. 50
3. Roth, Norman. *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain*. New York: E.J. Brill, 1994, pg. 73
4. Ibid. pg. 170
5. Ben-Sasson, Menachem. "Varieties of Inter-Communal Relations in the Geonic Period." *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity* (Daniel Frank, editor). (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1995: 17-32), pg. 17
6. Hames, Harvey J. "A Seal within a Seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings." (*Medieval Encounters* 12.2, 2006), pg. 171