

Jews & Muslims

A Forgotten History of Coexistence

An image caught my attention when I started preparing for this talk, one that is unexceptional if you happened to be leafing through a historical publication without a discerning eye. It was an image of two men enjoying a game of chess in a peaceful landscape, against a dark blue backdrop– a color evoking the sense of a tranquil early evening or maybe the choice of the color was selected without representational intention primarily to provide a contrast to the vividly colorful, and culturally distant, attire of these two bearded men. In other words, this was a perfectly mundane image of two individuals enjoying a little break in the trusted company of one another, *except* that one happened to be a Jew, the other a Muslim, the setting being 13th century al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain.

The image stands in contrast to a dominant worldview today that insists that this particular relationship was and can only be one of distrust, violence and conflict. It is a healthy reminder of a past that reveals destabilizing histories that challenge some prevailing assumptions; one that may even trigger constructive questions about our future as a human society.

Muslim-Jewish history is not a linear, simple relationship. It is not a relationship of persecution and oppression and it is not a relationship of a distant paradisiacal utopia that is dreamt up by those dislocated at a difficult historical juncture. Muslim-Jewish relationship is a human relationship that has a context, and those varying contexts constitute significant determinants of the nature and specificities of this relationship. However, in this historical interlacing, we confront the undeniable and often forgotten: the deep rootedness and intertwining of the lives of Jews and Muslims in the Middle East and former Islamic Empires of the Middle Ages at large– a relationship that existed for many centuries.

And so from the beginning we start...

The following verses come from the Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, understood by Muslims to be the literal word of God transmitted to Muhammed via the archangel Gabriel:

“And the Jews and Christians say, “we are the sons of God, and His beloved ones.” Say: “Why then does He chastise you for your sins? No; you are mortals, of His creating; He forgives whom He will, and He chastises whom He will.”” (5:20)

“And if only they upheld [the law of] the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to them from their Lord, they would have consumed [provision] from above them and from beneath their feet.” (5:66)

And still in this very chapter, we find the following:

“We have indeed revealed the Torah, wherein is guidance and light. By it, the Prophets who submitted themselves to God did judge among the Jews, as did the rabbis and the masters, according to what they were made to guard of God’s Book and were witness thereof. So fear not men, but fear Me and do not sell My revelations for a small price. Whoever does not judge according to what God has revealed, those are the unbelievers!” (5:44)

And in another chapter:

“Surely, the believers, the Jews, the Sabians and the Christians whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds shall have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.” (6:69)

In this Quranic worldview, we encounter a complex vision:

- A religion that, rather *unsurprisingly*, is making an argument about its superiority to former monotheists on the Middle Eastern block and is delineating its theological boundaries.
- A religion that in doing just that, rather *surprisingly*, also recognizes the legitimacy of other monotheistic traditions, namely the Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Sabian traditions, and requires the legal protection of their practitioners.

This is not a straightforward formula of one religion’s validity necessitating the negation or nullification of the messages of others, in this case, “Irano–Semitic” traditions to quote the towering historian, Marshall Hodgson. According to Qur’an, over and over, a creator– omnipotent, omniscient and just– has reached out to humanity to teach, remind and demand recognition and loyalty to the only one worthy of praise and gratitude, and to honor the way of the divine that

promises dignity, harmony and liberation; and thus the words of his messengers and prophets, among whom Muslims count Moses, Jesus and Muhammed. In other words, Islam sees itself as part of a genealogy of monotheistic ventures.

But of course according to the Qur'an, it is not yet another reiteration to a people who are simply prone to forgetfulness or indifference. Instead, this scripture challenges the biblical traditions on grounds of what it deems as their altered nature and offers itself as the untampered word of God, leaving the question of who is saved to remain ultimately ambiguous and stating directly that the Jews and Christians are serious contenders, at least some of them, just as some of the true Muslims may also be saved. So even if the Qur'an at times heaps verses of excoriating criticism against the older monotheistic siblings, the very gates of heaven are held open to those very "people of the book" or *ahl-u alkitab*, those who received the Scripture—understood in Islam ultimately as one and originating from the same source. Commitment to one God and to justice is right at the heart of what underpins the Islamic path of salvation. It is this spectrum, ranging from zealous criticism and yet acceptance, that theoretically at least, informs the place of non-Muslims in Muslim societies in the medieval era.

While the heavenly doors maybe open, the earthly doors proved more in flux depending on the context in which Jews and other minority groups found themselves while living under the control of Muslim authorities in the pre-modern times in the Middle East, broader Ottoman Empire or Muslim Spain; fluctuations that ranged from Jewish involvement at the highest levels of the political system to episodes of violence and subjugation. However, when we survey the places, opportunities and circumstances of Jews in Iraq, Egypt, the Levant, the Ottoman territory and Muslim Spain between the 9th and 18th century, we detect a pattern that leans toward availability of opportunities, autonomy and a rather reliable system of protection as opposed to a history of subjugation and oppression—even if these opportunities existed within a cultural hierarchy reflective of norms of an era in which the religion of the ruling regime was considered superior to any other and those who didn't prescribe to this religion were subjected to a number of restrictions that certainly would seem peculiar and discriminatory by our modern standards.

Given the monotheistic status of the Jews and other people of scripture, they were guaranteed protection and autonomy in exchange of a poll tax known as the *jizya*. This form of taxation was one in return for not participating in military service for, arguably, pre-citizenship Muslim causes,

while still providing for non-Muslims' protection by the imperial military in an age of competing empires. In other words, this *jizya* was required of men of fighting age only. As such, a greater segment of the non-Muslim community did not pay such taxation— these included women, younger males not of a fighting age, old men, men who are sick or handicapped, men who were religious leaders— those being priests and rabbis.

It is important to note that such taxation was being paid by the population of the Middle East to the Byzantine and Sasanian empires before the expansion of the Arabs, albeit under a different names, and were usually of higher rate than what was instituted by the Muslims. In exchange for the *jizya*, the non-Muslims were allowed freedom of religion, communal autonomy, security of body and possession, and the right to be governed by their own religious laws without state meddling.

Of course there were exceptions, and of course there were power dynamics integral to this conqueror/conquered relationship; the status of a *dhimmi*, or protected non-Muslims, came with restrictions. Certainly, our egalitarian ideals in this historical epoch would have been nothing but alien concepts to members of a medieval society. By the 10th century at least, there were legal formulations in place that *when* enforced would require non-Muslims to wear distinctive clothes, to not build new sites of worship, to not own Muslims slaves....etc. Given that such principles are not drawn from the Qur'an, it becomes critical to reflect on the motivating force for these laws and thus the very nature of power and its modes of deployment within the cultural specificities of this temporal context.

While limitations certainly did exist, we cannot understand the circumstances of the Jews specifically under Muslim rule in a vacuum but for real understanding, comparative work is needed and thus the need for comparison with Christian Europe at this same epoch.¹ The contrast illuminates specifics that make the judgment possible. Jews in the Muslim world during the medieval era:

1. Were not confined to ghettos or restricted to marginalized communities even when Jewish neighborhoods existed.
2. Were not limited to certain lowly occupations as was the case in Europe. Instead, the Jews could participate in all sectors of the economy and were not barred from even the most

¹ Mark R. Cohen, "The "Golden Age" of Jewish-Muslim Relations: Myth and Reality," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd and Michael B. Smith (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30.

profitable enterprises such as commerce involving furs, spices and slaves– which allowed for the economic flourishing of the Jews in the Muslim world during the medieval era.²

- It is important to note the two-way direction of influence that yielded something layered and culturally particular as opposed to a viewpoint of a fragmented social landscape in which a minority group only and subserviently serves a dominant group. Instead, the policies and decisions taken by Jews in positions of power influenced, if not directly contributed to, the shaping of the economic system through such activities, say as those pertaining to taxation or customs, as in Muslim Spain for instance.
3. On a different note, Jews were able to participate in the higher cultural pursuits of the era and thus cemented their position as members of an elite circle. Islamic history prides itself of its golden age in the medieval era during which the philosophies and sciences of the ancients were rediscovered, translated, studied, critiqued, and challenged and the outcome of this enterprise integrated into a system of Muslim epistemology, thus contributing in part to the development of an Islamic scientific, intellectual foundation upon which modern science will be erected.
- Members of this treasured history were often Jews and Christians whose involvement extended from Abbasid Baghdad, Fatimid Egypt, and Muslim Spain at large. In regards to the latter, Mercedes García-Arenal states that “any study of the Jews of al-Andalus runs the risks of becoming a catalog or lists of scientists, poets, and grammarians.”³ This speaks volumes of landscape that is not regulated primarily by denominational affiliation, but instead indicates that resources are rather diffused among a class of elites, of whom Jews were an integral part.
 - Running the risk of getting caught in such list, it is still worthy of mentioning in passing just few names: the celebrated Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the famous 10th century courtier, court physician and intellectual who is credited with catalyzing a Hebraic literary revolution in both Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic among his Jewish co-religionists.

² Marina Rustow, "Jews and Muslims in the Eastern Islamic World," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd and Michael B. Smith (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83.

³ Mercedes García-Arenal, "The Jews of al-Andalus," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd and Michael B. Smith (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2013), 122.

- Moshe ibn Ezra, Shlomo ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Helevi all of whom were towering Andalusian poets and courtiers who contributed to this Hebrew literary movement after adapting Arabo-Islamic literary styles and structures to express Jewish culture and in doing so became cultural participants and leaders in this milieu.
- 4. And this dynamic did not extend only to matters of intellectual and esthetical pursuit exclusively, but was also seen in the sphere of power where the Jews could and did rise to important positions and not in the form of an unusual anomaly, but in a fashion where we can detect a decisive pattern. For instance, besides their presence as dignitaries in the courts of Muslim rulers in the medieval era, Jews were able to climb the political ladder and occupy one of the most powerful offices in the empire- that of the vizir or chief minister, often second in command after the caliph or a sultan. This was seen in medieval Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Al-Andalus.
- In the Iberian Peninsula, we can especially see the access and integration of the Jews in the society at large. Even as late as the 11th century- that is after plenty of political unrest in the peninsula in which Muslim rule was challenged both from the Christian north and by the destabilizing competition of Muslim powers among themselves, and thus the shattering of the caliphate of Cordoba into small kingdoms- we see the continued participation of non-Muslims in the highest political offices in the kingdom of Seville, Saragossa, Granada and Almeria, all of which were headed by Jewish viziers.⁴

It is perhaps because of this level of involvement in the different social and economic realms that Mark Cohen notes that “such “loyalties of categories” that straddled the Muslim and non-Muslim divide, encouraged a certain tolerance and mitigated the discrimination inherent to the ever-present religious hierarchy.”⁵

And yet, to shed light on the complexity of these pre-modern societies, it is important to take into account the ways in which identity markers in hierarchical societies (say organized around a hierarchy of religions as was the case in these examples) constituted sites of vulnerabilities even to those who are powerful that could lead to tragedies even if on rare occasions in this part of the world as opposed to the case in Europe for instance. One particular example stands out, but illustrates this

⁴ Ibid, 118.

⁵ Mark R. Cohen, “Islamic Policy toward Jews from the Prophet Muhammad to the Pact of ‘Umar,” in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd and Michael B. Smith (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66.

point: the famous Naghrela family, who “both by the extent of their power and the duration of their ministry, represented the apogee of the Jewish aristocracy in al-Andalus.”⁶

This story starts with Sameul ibn Naghrela (Sameul Ha Nagid), a dignitary and administrator in the court of the Muslim king Habbus of the Zirid dynasty in the kingdom of Granada during the 11th century. He supported one of the this king’s two sons who eventually rose to power, the king Badis, and as a result, was promoted in his political position once Badis took the throne– eventually to occupy the very position of the vizir and naturally became the head of the Jewish community in this kingdom– one whose political capital and ample literary talents made him especially celebrated among the Jews of the al-Andalus and society at large.⁷ Interestingly enough, ibn Naghrela’s role was not confined to the advising and responsibilities of civil administration, but he often accompanied the troops of Granada on armed expedition against other Muslim-led kingdoms in Spain such as Seville and Almeria. When he died, he left behind significant wealth and prestige to his son, but the family’s sociopolitical place did not shrivel with the loss of the father, because king Badis transferred the father’s authority to his almost 21 year old son Joseph and further expanded the scope of his influence, placing him for example in control of the country’s tax system.⁸

Unlike a politically astute father, the young Joseph seems to have been viewed as arrogant and failed to build bridges with the larger ambitious political elites– creating a political opportunity for the kingdom’s political rivals to exploit. This opportunity appeared when king Badis tragically lost his son and heir; Buluggin was assassinated by political rivals, a point at which the old king retired from political life and Joseph became the true power holder in the kingdom. In this contentious political landscape, the vizier of rival kingdom Almeria, a man by the name Zuhayr, who strove to conquer Granada, fanned an anti-Naghrila’s campaign that culminated in a mob’s storming of the royal palace where Joseph was murdered followed by major attacks on Jews in the city. The specific numbers of casualties is uncertain; however, this constituted a tragic moment that is remembered as the 1066 Granada Massacre.

Students of medieval political history tend to be aware of how unstable and bloody the political landscape can be at certain points, and a brief review of this history quickly reveals that the

⁶ Mercedes García-Arenal, 123.

⁷ Raymond Scheindlin, "Samuel ibn Naghrela," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd and Michael B. Smith (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

⁸ Mercedes García-Arenal, 123.

Islam of some Muslim vizirs in Iberia or those serving other dynasties in the Middle East or Asia did not give them an advantage in similar circumstances when power was contested– for many saw the same bloody end. And yet “it is undeniable that a person’s Jewishness was arbitrarily pointed out whenever someone wanted to destroy a highly placed individual or rather, a sovereign surrounded by Jewish courtiers.”⁹ In other words, identity markers become strategic assets that can be exploited by some power–seekers to create fissures and destabilize what is often times already an unstable arena; there are always those whose interests are opposed to those of the sovereign or the existing order, or feel that they are not getting enough or are more worthy than those in power. So whether it is because a person is a Jew, not Muslim enough, too Muslim or non–Muslim...etc., (code for: not to be trusted, not patriotic enough), such frames were exploited as veneers to shield true motives because no power–seeker and his supporters are bound to state their political objectives directly. This was the case in the medieval era, and this continues to be an insidious approach deployed in our contemporary politics as well.

García–Arenal reminds us that there was no systematic violence that targeted the Jews in al–Andulus, instead, “isolated episodes of violence against Jews were the means by which the boundaries between the minority group and the majority could be abolished and redefined; and when crises occurred, they were also the vehicle for attacks against the royal power and tax system.”¹⁰ Despite this dark moment in this history, such a tragic event did not bring an end to Jewish social, economic or political participation in Iberia or the larger Middle East– and Ottoman history provides yet another chapter of fertile exchange and interdependence for centuries afterward.

It is maybe worth noting that certainly a political landscape where even the vestige of inequality based on denominational affiliation has historically opened the gates to confessional–based conflict, the motivating issues were rarely simply religious. I have a tendency to view history with a progressive lens–in reflecting on this history and where we are, it is clear that humanity, in its diverse societal units worldwide, continues to develop an evolving concept of public morality– to grapple with what constitutes the “good”. In other words, the different assumptions about the proper way of organizing society is very much work in progress, and probably always will be. Justice is not a fossilized conception, but evolves with time as we accumulate more experiences and confront our realities, and each era thus constitutes a stage that ought to be judged on its own terms. In this sense,

⁹ Ibid, 124.

¹⁰ Mercedes García–Arenal, 113.

one can argue that Islam, based on its textual sources, contributed a step toward expanding the opportunities available to non-Muslims in society by affirming the messages of a number of them and insisting that these communities did have a place among Muslims.

And do you remember this image with which I started my talk? It is a scene from *el libro de los juegos* depicting what was often understood as the golden age of interfaith relationships in al-Andulus. It is important to note that ironically it was commissioned by Alphonse X of castile in the 13th century, a man who has wrestled power out of the Muslim leadership in the Iberian Peninsula and yet, even as he was turning the page on a significant chapter in human history- the history of Europe, the history of the Middle East, the history of Muslims, the history of Jews, and the history of the Christians in this part of the world- in the name of Christianity, that he couldn't help but reflect how deeply interconnected these three Abrahamic faith traditions and how despite a tumultuous history in which they challenged, oppressed and marveled at one another, that they have pushed one another, slightly at least, to grow and develop.

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