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An Interwoven Partnership: Judaism, Islam, and 1,400 Years of Shared Intellectual and Lived History

Over the past forty years, numerous studies investigating the ways in which Judaism and Islam have drawn from and contributed to each other's development have risen to the fore. While some have focused on Judaism's effect on Islam's development in the early years, others have concentrated on Islam's imprint on Jewish culture in the Middle Ages, and yet others have looked to the tug of war between the two cultures that appears to characterize the modern period. Alongside single-topic works, composed largely by single authors, we find also important works of collected essays, volumes that draw from a variety of different subjects, where each essay analyzes a different aspect of the ways in which Judaism and Islam have engaged one another through the ages.

Into this mix comes a new book on the topic, *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam*, edited by Michael M. Laskier and Yaacov Lev, both senior scholars in the Department of Middle East Studies at Bar Ilan University. *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* consists of sixteen essays by a variety of authors, ranging from senior scholars to graduate students, on topics that stretch from the beginning of Islam, through the Middle Ages, and up to the early twentieth century. The essays are loosely divided thematically, into two sections (âReligion, Law, and Mysticismâ and âScientific, Professional, and Cultural Pursuitsâ) of seven chapters each. These are preceded by an introductory essay by Norman Stillman, one of the foundational voices in the study of Jews and Jewish life in Muslim countries. Stillman provides a brief historical synopsis of what he terms the âcommensalityâ of the Muslim and Jewish experience over the past 1,400 years. According to Stillman, this commensality created an intertwining of Islamic and Jewish civilization, both in the

scholarly and the popular realm as early as the days of Muhammad, allowing each tradition to benefit from the interaction with the other. While modern times have weakened the intertwined nature of the two traditions, and peoples, Stillman insists that the fates of Judaism and Islam are in fact as linked and enmeshed as they ever were.

The entire project is preceded by a brief introduction by the editors, Laskier and Lev, in which they provide a short overview of the field of comparative Islamic-Jewish studies and explain the contribution of this book to it. According to them, in the medieval and early modern periods, an air of relative peace reigned over the Judeo-Muslim world in many arenas, including intellectual and professional cooperation. This, they note, contrasted with the situation in Christian lands, where we find policies of suppression against, even outright persecution of, Jews and Judaism during this same period. While the spirit of cooperation and sharing that existed in the lands of Islam needs to be recognized and valued, they caution their readers not to let themselves be led into a false understanding of the period's idyll; although the state of affairs was better for Jews and Judaism among the Muslims, the situation was not without its complications and negative aspects. The essays collected here, they explain, are intended to address this Muslim-Jewish experience in all its complexity and variety.

While Laskier and Lev's statement reflects the truth of the situation for Jews and Judaism under Islam, such a thesis is not groundbreaking. Indeed, scholars of Islam and of Jewish communities in the Islamic world have been well aware of this phenomenon for some time. This

thesis was published almost twenty years ago, to great acclaim, by Marc Cohen in his seminal and widely popular *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (1995). Cohen compared the Jewish experience in Christendom to that in Islamdom, through materials relevant to the religious, social, political, and economic realms. His investigation revealed that while life for Jews in Islamic countries was far from perfect, the Jewish experience under Islam was far more positive, with Jews victims of far less violence, than in Europe. Using a variety of historical documents, Cohen also explained the cultural, religious, and historical reasons for the difference.

Scholarly recognition of the diverse ways and diverse areas in which Jewish-Muslim commensality can be detected also has an established history in Islamic-Jewish studies. Whether known as commensality or *convivencia* or symbiosis or intertextuality, the scholarly attempt to transmit a sense of the variety of the interaction has resulted in many important volumes of collected essays penned by scholars across the fields. Many of these seem to bear some variation on the general title "Muslim-Jewish Studies," a catchall name that somewhat detracts from the colorful variety of the information that rests between the covers. For example, in *Studies in Islam and Judaic Traditions* (1985), editors William Brinner and Stephan Ricks organized a series of collected essays into three subject areas: narrative and exegesis, religion and law, and philosophy and the role of Maimonides. *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, edited by Ronald Nettler (1993) investigated issues ranging in topic from early medieval Jewish sectarianism, to the Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi on the prophet 'Uzayr (Ezra), to the ideology of Hamas on Jews, Israel, and Islam. In 2007, Jonathan Decter and Michael Rand edited a volume in honor of their teacher, the scholar of medieval Hebrew poetry, Raymond Scheindlin, *Studies in Arabic and Hebrew Letters* (2007), addressing medieval Hebrew poetry, topics in Bible criticism, medieval lexicography, medieval science, classical Arabic poetry, and even the history of Jewish studies in the United States. *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations* (1995), edited by Nettler and Suha Taki-Farouki, allowed readers to engage topics that stretched from the medieval to the more contemporary age, such as Sayyid Qutb's commentary on the Qur'anic story of Joseph. More recently we have seen the comprehensive *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction*, edited by Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes, and Fred. D. Astren (2000), in which we find essays divided into a number of sections, including the Jewish-Muslim interaction in medieval times and

in modern times, the Bible and Qur'ân, law, philosophy and ethics, sectarianism, and language and literature.

That *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* does not break new ground in either its central thesis or in its format should not, however, detract from the volume's value. Indeed, this volume of collected essays most assuredly adds new and important studies to the field of comparative Judaism-Islam. Three particularly interesting examples are the pieces by Juliette Hassine, Mark Wagner, and Jessica Marglin. Hassine's "The Martyrdom of Sol Hachuel: Ridda in Morocco in 1834" uses the story of the court-ordered beheading of a young Jewish girl from Tangier accused of apostasy from Islam in order to analyze the relationship between Jews and Muslims in nineteenth-century Morocco. Hassine investigates the Jewish sources, which claim Sol never converted but was martyred by anti-Jewish Muslim courts, as well as the Muslim legal framework under which Sol was punished. Her analysis and conclusions upend previous assumptions regarding the Muslim-Jewish relationship in Morocco, which tends to view this situation as one of relative closeness. Hassine shows that the case of Sol's martyrdom, and the ways in which the Muslim and Jewish texts speak of it, reveals that an abyss separated the two communities, religiously, socially, and culturally.

Like Hassine, Wagner focuses on a legal case that appeared in a Muslim court concerning Jews, and interestingly, Jewish law. In "Halakha through the lens of Shari'ah," Wagner investigates the 1934 court case concerning the Kuhlani synagogue in Yemen, in which an inner-Jewish dispute about the public or private ownership of the synagogue was brought before a Zaydi Muslim court for adjudication. As Wagner points out, in bringing a Jewish legal dispute before a Muslim court, the case raised important questions for the Muslim legal jurists: What relevance did non-Muslim law have for a Muslim jurist? Were the non-Muslim legal systems legitimate? Were non-Muslims bound by Muslim law? Wagner explains the Jewish and Islamic legal issues relevant to the case, how they resembled or differed from one another, and the ways in which the Jews and Muslims struggled to understand each other's legal terminology and legal systems, and for the Jews, use it to their advantage in the case. Wagner explains that the Kuhlani synagogue case reveals two very important elements in understanding the depth of the Muslim-Jewish commensality in Yemen at the time. In the first place, we see that Jews were willing to submit to a Muslim court for issues that should have remained within the purview of the Jewish community, and in which the Islamic court system

rarely intervened on its own. This involvement of the Islamic legal system affected not only Muslim legal theory (as indicated above) but also Muslim legal practice. After viewing the powerful and elaborate Jewish ceremony surrounding the swearing of an oath as legal testimony, the Zaydi imam involved in the Kuhlani case sent a Muslim whom he suspected of perjury to go before the synagogue to swear his innocence. Wagner suggests that the Muslim involvement in cases of Jewish law had even greater implications, for Islamic law as well as for the Islamic government in Yemen; he points to claims that it hastened the end of the Zaydi imamate in Yemen by giving legitimacy to the Jewish legal system and thus earning Muslim opposition to continued Zaydi rule.

Marglin's *Poverty and Charity in a Moroccan City: A Study of Jewish Communal Leadership in Meknes, 1750-1912* also deals with a topic of relevance to the more recent Judeo-Muslim past. In a well-argued and well-written piece, Marglin investigates the history of poverty and charity in Meknes, using the lens of poverty and poverty relief to examine the nature of Jewish leadership there. In her investigation, Marglin compares the Jewish and Muslim definitions of "poor," as understood in Meknes and beyond it, as well as the Muslim and Jewish attitudes toward both poverty and the responsibility to alleviate it. She notes that despite the Muslim government, the Jewish responsibility for poverty relief was more centralized than in the Muslim realm. She explains this phenomenon as resulting from a combination of the Jewish religious obligation to help the poor (an obligation present in Islamic law as well) and the use of poverty relief as a strategy by which Jewish leaders asserted and reaffirmed their authority in the community.

While these essays, and a few others, use the idea of Muslim-Jewish commensality as their operating principle, many of the pieces included in this collection do so only indirectly. Rather than presenting studies in which Judaism and Islam can be seen to have crossed paths and to have mutually influenced one another, as the book's title would suggest, these contributions more correctly concern Jewish communities or Jewish practices found in Islamic countries. The mutual aspect of commensality, as defined by Stillman, does not come into play in these essays in an obvious way.

Despite this, many of these authors raise questions that remain important for further research and discussion in commensality studies. For example, in his essay, "Encounters between Jewish and Muslim Musicians throughout the Ages," Amnon Shiloah writes of the hybrid

style and involvement of Jewish musicians with Arab music forms. In the course of this analysis, he mentions that there were times when Jewish musicians were called to play synagogue music before the shah. This raises an interesting question: Did Jewish synagogue music enter the Muslim musical canon? And if so, to what extent was Muslim religious and secular music influenced by Jewish liturgical sound? In the following piece, also on Jewish music, "Estos Makames Alegres" (These Cheerful Maccams)—External Cultural Influences on the Jewish Community of Izmir on the Eve of the Young Turk Revolution, Efrat Aviv analyzes the reaction of the rabbis to music in both Jewish theater and the synagogue. As part of this discussion, she notes that in Izmir, Jewish cantors would adapt Christian tunes for use in prayer, traveling to the churches to study their music. Such a statement calls out for further discussion: Was this Jewish acceptance of Christian liturgical music specific to Izmir or can it be found all over Turkey, and the Muslim world? Did Jewish cantors in the Christian world do the same? Or, was this a phenomenon that was allowed only in the Muslim environment, in which Christians too were considered *ahl al-dhimma* and *ahl al-kitab*? If so, what can this tell us about the Jewish integration of Islamic attitudes toward the "other"?

Perhaps the most subtle statement regarding the effect of Muslim-Jewish commensality on the Jewish communities under Islamic rule comes from Leigh Chipman's *Pharmacopoeias for the Hospital and the Shop*. Chipman presents two thirteenth-century pharmacological recipe books, one authored by a Karaite physician for hospital use and one by a Jewish pharmacist for shop use. The latter share of the essay investigates the ways in which the author's profession and intended readership of the text affected its composition. In the course of this, Chipman also asks if one's religious identity can be detected in one's nonreligious writings in the medieval period. Ultimately, Chipman concludes that the author's Jewish identity results in little beyond a general pull toward monotheism. But the thesis underlying Chipman's question is perhaps more telling than the answer she finds in the pharmacological texts. Namely, when studying the medieval period one needs to always ask oneself if there is any realm of study that can be said to be devoid of religious meaning.

As is evident from the titles and descriptions mentioned here, there is no one principle that unifies the collection. The essays do not center on one particular geographic area, one area of scholarship, one moment in time, or one subject of study. In addition to those al-

ready mentioned above, the topics of the essays stretch from Brannon Wheeler's study of the early Muslim exegetical insistence that the Bible knew of and used *Arabian* models of prophecy, to Michael Katz's demonstration of the twelfth-century Abraham ibn Ezra's use of al-Khwarizmi's principles of arithmetic in his exegetical texts, to Ron Kiener's insistence on a need to rewrite the history of Jewish mysticism which takes the Islamic influences more into account, to Libby Garshowitz and Merav Rosenfeld-Hadad's case studies of medieval Hebrew poetry.

It should be noted that in their introduction, Laskier and Lev speak of these diverse pieces as forming a "collection of interdisciplinary essays" on the Judeo-Muslim experience (p. 2). This label turns out not to be entirely accurate. Some of the contributions do engage in interdisciplinarity, as proclaimed. These include Wheeler's "Qur'an and Muslim Exegetes as a Source for the Bible and Ancient History," Yehoshua Frenkel's "The Use of Islamic Materials by Non-Muslim Writers," Shimon Shtober's "Present at the Dawn of Islam: Polemic and Reality in the Medieval Story of Muhammad's Jewish Companions," and Bat-Sheva Garsiel's "The Qur'an's Depiction of Abraham in Light of the Hebrew Bible and Midrash." However, most of the essays do not actually draw from different disciplines or cross the boundary lines of the areas of study. Rather, the majority of the studies tend to reflect the discipline of the author and the material being analyzed. It is *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* itself that draws from the different fields of study and engages the different sources. Yet the book cannot really be said to be interdisciplinary either. For interdisciplinarity would imply that a connection has been drawn between the different fields, linking them to one another. The book does not do this. Instead, what links together the different essays on different topics, from scholars in vastly different fields, is that they all concern Jews and Muslims. Thus, the collection should be understood more correctly not as interdisciplinary but multidisciplinary.

And indeed this multidisciplinary nature of the collection is one of its strongest points. Other works on Muslim-Jewish relations and cross-pollination tend to focus on interactions between Muslims and Jews in a particular time, place, or area of human experience, or approach the materials with the methodologies of a particular field. In purposely refraining from such boundaries of time, place, and field, *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* allows us, or forces us, to step back and look at the bigger picture. This wide-lens view causes readers to be more acutely aware of the persistence and consistency

of Muslim-Jewish interaction. After all, as the volume makes clear, the two religious traditions drew from and contributed to one another not only in the early years of the development of Islam, or in the golden Middle Ages, but also throughout the 1,400 years of their history. They cooperated with one another, and argued with each other, in the realms of scripture, law, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, science, moral teachings, music, literature, poetry, and indeed in all fields of human creativity. They did so in each country in which they met and in each age. Had the work been restricted to only one field, or one era, the extent of the convergence of Islam and Judaism would have been less clearly visible.

While the multidisciplinary nature of *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* provides the work with its power, it also hints at a weakness. Without a clearly stated unifying principle either of methodology or academic field, the book can also strike a reader as a somewhat haphazard collection of independent case studies, skipping from age to age, from country to country, and from topic to topic. One starts to question how much one can learn about the Muslim-Jewish convergence writ large from the smaller pieces presented here. Can one extrapolate from the Jewish experience regarding communal authority in Meknes in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries to that in Baghdad in that same era? Was the use of Muslim materials by non-Muslims restricted to a particular point in history, and to a particular genre, or do we find similar usage in varying realms? How particular to Yemen was the Zaydi willingness to engage in issues of relevance to Jewish law? The vast scope of the materials and the gaps left in terms of chronology and geography in *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* obscures the implications of each independent investigation for the larger field of study.

The internal organization of the collection results in a similar sense of ambiguity. As mentioned, the editors have divided the materials thematically, with "Religion, Law, and Mysticism" forming one unit and "Scientific, Professional and Cultural Pursuits" forming the second. While the editors explain these broad strokes as purposeful categorization, such categories are too broad, almost to the point of vagueness. Additionally, or perhaps as a consequence, the placement of particular essays in one category or another can seem artificial. For example, Rosenfeld-Hadad's piece on a book of Jewish para-liturgical poetry from Baghdad falls under "Cultural Pursuits" rather than "Religion," despite the fact that the poetry was intended for religious use and is characterized by religious themes. Similarly, Katz's study on Abra-

ham ibn Ezra's use of mathematics in his biblical exegesis falls under "Scientific Pursuits" when it could have joined Wheeler's study of Islamic exegesis as "Religion." Frenkel's "The Use of Islamic Materials by non-Muslim Writers" appears under "Religion, Law, and Mysticism," despite the fact that texts under discussion in his essay derive from historical chronicles. There appears to be little acknowledgement by the editors that the lines between the subjects are often exceedingly porous, especially in the premodern period. Thus, to distinguish between them in this manner, with little nuance, sits heavily on the mind of the reader. The editors would have done better to include a more detailed definition of the categories, or to break them down into smaller, more specific, units, as they do in the companion volume, *The Divergence of Judaism and Islam: Interdependence, Modernity and Political Turmoil* (2011), which focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

These criticisms, however, should not undermine

the value of the individual contributions included here. While not all of them may be of interest to the same reader, the reader who branches out of his or her intellectual comfort zone will find numerous essays that are strongly written and well researched. Many provide new and exciting insights into the materials, no matter what the reader's particular field, whether history, culture, literature, religion, or even science. Additionally, criticisms of the book's organization should not detract from the contribution the work as a whole makes in providing a broad picture of the variety and persistence of the interactions between Judaism and Islam over the past 1,400 years. *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam* serves as a solid investigation into the complex relationship between Islam and Judaism. The collection enlightens us with the topics it covers and encourages our continued investigation into the multifaceted bond that has linked and continues to link the two traditions, and their practitioners, through time and place.

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