

THE CONDITION OF JEWISH MINORITY IN MEDIEVAL EGYPT:

A Study of Jewish *Ṣūfī*'s Tractate *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍīyya*

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Abstract

*During the reigns of Ayyūbids and Mamluks, a group of Jews developed a distinct Jewish spiritual system. The aim of this endeavor was to initiate spiritual renewal. The notable feature of the movement is the incorporation of substantial Ṣūfī elements into its spiritual system. By this unique feature the group might be tentatively called "Jewish Sufism." This article explores the posture of this group and its understanding of Jewish diaspora and exile, particularly with regards Jewish minority status under Muslim rulers. As a study case, it focuses on the analysis of a Jewish Ṣūfī's tractate entitled *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍīyya* (The Treatise of the Pool) written by 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn (1228-1263/65), the grandson of the prominent medieval Jewish philosopher and community leader (ra'īs al-yahūd), Mūsā ibn Maymūn (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204). The article further argues that the tractate reflected Jewish struggle as minority under Islamic rulers and the contemporary socio-political upheaval. Besides the spiritual renewal, the discipline it endorsed was a way to cope with this minority status as well. Furthermore, the absorption of Sufism into Jewish spirituality may indicate a more dynamic interaction between Jews and Muslims in this period.*

[Pada masa pemerintahan dinasti Ayubi dan Mamluk di Mesir, sekelompok anggota komunitas Yabudi mengembangkan wacana spiritualitas yang unik demi pembaharuan hidup rohani mereka. Keunikan kelompok ini adalah karena dalam wacananya menyerap unsur-unsur Sufisme Islam. Gejala ini

karena itu disebut Sufisme Yahudi. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi keberadaan kelompok tersebut dan pemahaman mereka akan diaspora Yahudi, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan kondisi minoritas mereka. Sebagai studi kasusnya adalah traktat spiritual bertajuk al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍiyya (Traktat tentang Kolam) yang ditulis oleh ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn (1128-1263/65), cucu dari filsuf dan pemimpin Yahudi Abad Pertengahan (raʾīs al-yahūd), Mūsā ibn Maymūn (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204). Artikel ini mengungkapkan bahwa karya tersebut mencerminkan pergumulan kaum Yahudi sebagai minoritas dan ketegangan sosio-politis yang mereka alami. Disiplin rohani yang disarankan juga dimaksudkan untuk mengatasi status minoritas tersebut. Lebih dari itu, penyerapan unsur Sufi ke dalam spiritualitas Yahudi ini mendorong ke arah hubungan Yahudi dan Muslim yang lebih dinamis pada masa itu.]

Keyword: Muslims-Jews interaction, Jewish mysticism, Jewish diaspora, minority status

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A. Introduction

The Jewish subject has caused more spilled ink in (the Indonesian context) debates. In Indonesia, the subject is often discussed in non-historical manner: the topic of conversation is more on the “Jew” as symbolic, abstraction, and reified object rather than historical realities. Since of the limited Jewish reality and its invisibility in the Indonesian history, this attitude limits the Jews to be seen merely a functional object, a “third voice” that mediates the domestic struggle. It often becomes “face” and “sign” for unresolved issues.¹ It overlooks the heterogeneity of

¹ Cf. Martin van Bruinessen, “Yahudi Sebagai Simbol dalam Wacana Pemikiran Islam Indonesia Masa Kini,” in Ahmad Suaedy (ed.), *Spiritualitas Baru: Agama dan Aspirasi Rakyat* (Yogyakarta: Dian Interfidei, 1994), 253–268; James T. Siegel, “Kiblat and the Mediatic Jew,” *Indonesia* 69, 2000, pp. 9–40; Jeffrey Hadler, “Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, No. 94, 2004, pp. 291–313; Fritz Schulze, “Antisemitismus in Indonesien – Die Idee der Jüdischen Weltverschwörung im Indonesischen Politischen und Religiösen Diskurs,” *Orientierungen* 18, No. 2, 2006, pp. 123–144; Ibnu Burdah, “Indonesian Muslims’ Perceptions of Jews and Israel,” in *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and*

Jewish identities and therefore prevents it from considering the possibility of different trajectories of identity articulation. Historical examination, on the other hand, suggests the plurality and heterogeneity of Jewish experiences and identity formations as demonstrated in the following elucidation on “Jewish Sufism” in medieval Egypt.

This article is an attempt to give an alternative discourse on understanding inter-religious interaction in history, in which it touches upon intersecting issues of identity formation, mysticism, and minority status. More than a descriptive assignment and intellectual exercise, it is aspired to deepen inter-religious conversation, notably within the Abrahamic traditions.

The expectations of this article are firstly to expose the intimacy among the Abrahamic traditions, particularly the Jewish-Muslim interaction in the medieval period. Secondly, it gives an alternative perspective in viewing the hybrid identity, such as displayed in the “Jewish Sufism.” The hybrid identity in this regard is associated with the tendency to evolve into different elements from within and outside existing traditions into a speciation, and in so doing a hybrid creating a new space of religious expression. Thirdly, it is to expose one of many Jewish responses as minority in the changing atmosphere under Egyptian Islamic rulers through spirituality and mystical discipline.

B. The Working Definitions of Jews and Sufism

Like any other identity formation, the identity of Jews is complex. “Who is a Jew?” (in Hebrew, *mihu yebudi?*) is a perpetual question that not easy to answer, even within Jewish community.² The question suggests a

Israel. The Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation (Eastborne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 230–246; Leonard C. Epafra, “Damn! Beckham Is a Jew”: The “Jew”, *The Indonesian Public Discourse* (Saarbrücken, Ger.: LAP, 2010).

² Arthur Hertzberg and Aron Hirt-Manheimer, *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 13–32; Nicholas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–24; Norman Solomon, *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 6–17; Shlomo Alon, “The Problem of Identity in Judaism,” in Th. Sumartana (ed.), *Commitment of Faiths: Identity, Plurality and Gender* (Yogyakarta: Dian Interfidei, 2002), pp. 3–10; Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–8; Eliezer Ben-Rafael, “One People? Contemporary Jewish Identity,” in *World Religions and Multiculturalism: A Dialectic Relation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 279–314.

more dynamic understanding of identity formation. Identity in question could not be merely an isolated construction. It has to be seen in its reciprocity with a larger context of interaction. In this regard, identity is both the product of self-construction and context-imposition.

As the context of discussion is medieval period, in this article the “Jewish” identity is first seen as an identity of people with their “stabilized” tradition in relation to Jewish history. It means that the Jews are the product of uninterrupted culturing identity, social and cultural memory, and their religious commitment to Judaism. Secondly, it is also considered as an ethnic category which includes the Jewish convert to Islam (or Christianity). Thirdly, the more constructivist view of the “Jew” that is considering the “Jew” as stereotypical category, social type and signifier. The example of this is the Islamic category of the Jew as part of *abl al-dhimma*, the people under protection of Islamic law, and *abl al-kitāb*, the people of the revealed books. More than theological, bureaucratic and political categories, *abl al-dhimma* and *abl al-kitāb* are a reflection of the Jewish-Muslim interaction in the level of religious abstraction and idealization.

From historical perspective, the Jews in question are the medieval Egyptian Jewish community and more precisely, the *Arab Jews*.³ The Arab Jews speak Arabic for daily conversation and live in Arabic culture. In term of religious commitment, at the time they belonged to the Rabbinical/Rabbanite and Karaite Judaisms. The “Jewish Sufism” in this study is mostly in circulation among the Rabbinical Jews.

Within the plurality of medieval Jewry in the Islamic lands the three largest Jewish communities were the Rabbinical (*ba-Rabbanim*, *al-Rabbāniyyūn*), Karaites (*ba-Qa’raim*, *al-Qarā’iyyūn*), and the Samaritans (*ba-Shomronim*, *al-Sāmiriyyūn*). There were numerous branches deriving from Rabbinical and Karaite Judaisms, while the Samaritans, considering their tiny population, had limited division among them. The relationship

³In regards to the designation of “Arab Jews,” some others are preferred the terms “Jewish Arabs” and “Mosaic Arabs” over “Arab Jews” (see Moritz Steinschneider, “An Introduction to the Arabic Literature of the Jews. I,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 9, No. 2, 1897, p. 231; Reuven Snir, “Anā Min Al-Yahūd’: The Demise of Arab-Jewish Culture in the Twentieth Century,” *Archiv Orientalni* 74, 2006, p. 396; “Arabs of the Mosaic Faith’: Chronicle of a Cultural Extinction Foretold,” *Die Welt des Islams* 46, No. 1, 2006, p. 48.

between the Jews and the Samaritans, on the other hand, was more complicated, hence it is beyond the concern of this article. It is important to note that some Muslim scholars also recognize this heterogeneity of Jewish communities, based on their place of origin and doctrinal inclination.⁴

In brief, the Rabbinical Judaism is Jewish tradition that centered around the authority of Jewish communal and religious leaders (the Rabbis) and their chain of traditions. The Jews within this group adhered to the teachings of Rabbis and to the oral tradition that was codified into *Mishna*. The Rabbinical authority substantiated in a huge compilation of the discussions and interpretations of Mishna (*Talmudim*, sing. *Talmud*), biblical interpretations (*Midrashim*, sing. *midrash*), and other Rabbinical religious productions. Karaite Judaism, on the other hand, challenged the rabbinical authority and put their sole religious priority on the *Tanakh* (Jewish Scripture).⁵ It is probably helpful to a lesser degree to compare this situation with the competition between Catholicism and Protestantism in Christianity, Shi'ism and Sunnism in Islam, and between Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in the Indonesian Islamic context.

In this article the Jewish history is observed as the history of the people constantly in frontier situations, particularly because the greater part of the history of diaspora (dispersion). The Jews dispersed among the nations for centuries from their homeland in Israel/Palestine since the first millennium. Many of them maintained the narrative of diaspora as “the exile” and thus longing for return to their homeland as divine redemptive action.

The Jews have confronted many frontiers in different contexts of their diaspora, in which Jewish identities and experiences have always been contested and transformed. This circumstance in no way is exclusively

⁴E.g. Tenth century Muslim historian, al-Maqdisī in his work, *Kitāb al-Bad' wa'l-Tarīkh* (“The Book of Creation and History”) enlisted thirteen Jewish groups (quoted in Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden, New York, Koln: E.J. Brill, 1996), 217). Al-Shahrastānī and al-Bīrūnī aware of some other Jewish groups (*Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihāl*, trans. Theodor Haarbrücker (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke, 1850), 247–259; *Kitāb al-Āthar al-Bāqqiya 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliya*, trans. Eduard Sachau (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879), 279).

⁵Tanakh is the Jewish Scripture, equivalent to the Christian's Old Testament. It is the abbreviation of T(ora), N(evi'im), and K(etuvim).

Jewish experience since it is attested to other diasporic people such as Hadrami, Chinese, Indian, and others. Frontiers are places of encounters among people of different identities. This was the crucible place through which the Jews have undergone different experiences.⁶

In regards to Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), for the purpose of this study I would like to emphasize it as *an array of Islamic traditions, practices, philosophies, politics of religiosity, and social and cultural markers that puts the primacy on and revolves around the esoteric (inwardness) dimension of Islam*. In the following elucidation, the esotericism is the religious space in which Jewish spiritual aspiration overlapped with the Sufism.

Before commencing the investigation about Jewish Sufism, this article briefly discusses the issue of minority, the status of *ahl al-dhimma* as minority within Islamic legal and religious discourse, and the interaction between Judaism and Sufism in history.

C. On Minority Status

It is commonly believed that in the relationship between minority and majority, the latter has more influence upon the former. The recent researches, however, demonstrated that minority in many ways is able to exercise influence on the majority. Moreover, there is a broad range of strategies minorities can deal with and respond to their limited power and status.⁷

In general there are four responses of the minority to the majority: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.⁸ This is by no way a complex issue since the response also depend on how society(-ies)

⁶Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. vi–31.

⁷Fabrizio Butera and John M. Levine, “Introduction,” in Fabrizio Butera and John M. Levine (eds.), *Coping with Minority Status: Responses to Exclusion and Inclusion* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–10; Michael Inzlicht, Joshua Aronson, and Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, “On Being the Target of Prejudice: Educational Implications,” in Fabrizio Butera and John M. Levine (eds.), *Coping with Minority Status: Responses to Exclusion and Inclusion* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13–37.

⁸Berry and Kim in Manuela Barreto and Naomi Ellemers, “Multiple Identities and the Paradox of Social Inclusion,” in Fabrizio Butera and John M. Levine (eds.), *Coping with Minority Status: Responses to Exclusion and Inclusion* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 269–270.

thinks what would be the “best” for the minority and for society as a whole. In many ways those mode of responses are also reflected in the Jewish communities in the medieval Islamic civilization.

The response of the Jews in the medieval Islamic civilization is a product of what Bernard Lewis calls “Judeo-Islamic tradition,” which is “not the adoption of the Islamic religion but assimilation to Islamic modes of thought and patterns of behavior.” He points out further that in the (early) Medieval Islamic era, “[t]he process of the acculturation of the Jews in the Arab Islamic world goes beyond the point of Arabization, a term that is perhaps too narrowly linguistic, and might better be designated as Islamization.”⁹

Similar observation is also put forward by Marshal Hodgson who calls this context as Islamicate civilization. He emphasizes on the *Islamic cultural frame* – rather than Islam as religious system that allows any subject within this sphere of influence, including non-Muslims to adopt and participate in it, but then at the same time to mobilize and pursue their own religious aspirations.¹⁰ This strategy includes the development of Judeo-Arabic culture and language as cultural container.

“Jewish Sūfism” in this discussion is the outcome of the above frontier condition, and the dynamic of Islamization and Islamicate cultural frame. The adoption of Sūfism into specific Jewish spiritual endeavor was the result of the intimate interaction between the Jews and the larger Muslim society.

D. *Abl al-Dhimma* as Minority Category

One decisive event during the Prophet Muḥammad’s mission of establishing Islam was his encounter with the Jews of Medina. Most Medinans welcomed him with great expectations and enthusiasm, which coincided with Arab and Jewish expectations of the coming of a new

⁹Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 78; cf. H.A.R. Gibb in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “Judeo-Arabic Literature: Judaeo-Arabic Culture,” in Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Second Edition (Detroit etc.: Macmillan Reference USA & Keter Publishing House, 2007), p. XI: 538.

¹⁰Marshall G. S Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. I: 59.

“prophet”; a messiah figure in the era of ignorance.¹¹ He consolidated competing tribes, including several Arab Jewish tribes, into a covenant traditionally called the Charter of Medina.¹² The Charter, the first constitution ever that embraced people of different religious persuasions,¹³ defined the relationship among tribes and the obligations of each to the other.¹⁴ Alas, despite its ideal ambition it was soon proven to be ephemeral. A tradition recorded that the Jews cheated the Prophet, thus in effect annulling the covenant.¹⁵ Instead of supporting the new prophet, the Jews demonstrated their disapproval and even obstructed the Muslim movement. To make the case worse, Muḥammad’s claim of prophetic mission was simply unacceptable for the Jews, for they could not imagine a non-biblical prophet emerging beyond the territory of Palestine.¹⁶

Like Meccan opponents, resistance from the Jews made the situation worse for the Muslims. After some failed political attempts to embrace Jews in the new society, the Prophet decided to subjugate them. He then defeated the three largest Jewish communities of Medina: Banu Qurayṣa, Qaynuqā’, and Banu al-Naḍīr. The first two communities were defeated – all of the men were killed – while the rest were expelled from the city. Banu al-Naḍīr, the expelled tribe, then joined with the Jews of Khaybar who apparently continued to be a threat to the Muslims. It did not take long for the Muslim army to defeat the Jews of Khaybar.

A new kind of relationship emerged after the surrender of the Jews and probably, it was in Khaybar that the institution of *dhimma* was begun. *Dhimma* regulates the relationship between Muslim rulers

¹¹ Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrāt Rasūl Allāh*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Lahore [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 91–93.

¹² Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse Under Islam* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 79–80.

¹³ Khalid Durán and Abdelwahab Hechiche, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Islam for Jews* (Hoboken, NJ.: American Jewish Committee and KTAV Publishing House, 2001), p. 92.

¹⁴ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrāt Rasūl Allāh*, pp. 231–233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 239ff.

¹⁶ Cf. Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, ed. Gerson D. Cohen (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1898), 8. According to him, at the contemporary to the event there was an Aramaic adage held by the Jewish Arabs: אין הנבואה שורה בחוצה לארץ (“no line of prophecy [will appear] beyond the land of [Israel]”).

and non-Muslim subjects, which called *ahl al-dhimma* (“people under contract [of protection]”) or *dhimmī*. The protected subject was obliged to acknowledge the domination of Islam. The sign of acknowledgment was the payment of poll-tax called *jizya* (“payment in return”).¹⁷ The meaning of *Jizya* is: in return for the protection and the exemption from military service, the non-Muslim, notably *ahl al-kitāb* (“people of the Book”) must pay compensation. It is theoretically only one dinar per year. The obligation to pay *jizya* for the non-Muslim in fact is equal with the obligation for Muslims to pay their tax, *zakā*.¹⁸ The operative measure for this mode of relationship was substantiated in a contract called the Pact of ‘Umar.

Basically, the Pact of ‘Umar was the constitution of *ahl al-dhimma*, traditionally attributed to the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Though its authority was lower than *sunna/hadīth*, its straightforward stipulation regarding the daily interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim was practical. It was a kind of ready-reference for Muslim rulers to deal with its non-Muslim subjects.¹⁹

Besides its strong discriminatory tone against *ahl al-dhimma*, its application throughout the history of medieval Islam was complicated. The interaction between *ahl al-dhimma* and Muslim authorities were

¹⁷ Quranic basis for the practice is Sūrat Al-Tawba 29: “Fight against those from among the People of the Book who [despite being People of the Book] do not believe in God and the Last Day [as they should be believed in], and do not hold as unlawful that which God and His Messenger have decreed to be unlawful, and do not adopt and follow the Religion of truth, until they pay the *jizya* [tax of protection and exemption from military service] with a willing hand in a state of submission.”

¹⁸ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Quran: A New Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118 note e; Ali Ünal, *The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (Somerset, N.J.: The Light, 2006), 374n7.

¹⁹ The history of its creation is complicated, but apparently the stipulation had a significant influence from, or was probably a recontextualized version of Byzantine Codes and other Near East legal systems. In comparison, the Jewish toleration within the early Christendom (fourth – fifth c. CE) was also relied on the Roman legal system that prolonged in the newly Christian polity, the Byzantine Empire (c. 330 – 1453 CE). Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 31–36, 55. The English translation of Pact of ‘Umar is available in Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), pp. 157–158. It is based on al-Ṭurṭūshī’s *Sirāj al-Mulūk*.

dynamic, in the sense that *ahl al-dhimma* constantly negotiated their status beyond the framework of *shari'a* and legal institutions. It is further argued that Jewish economic and political position could overcome the social restriction and inequality.²⁰

As a result, there was a gap between what is written and reality. There are many examples where *ahl al-dhimmas* were not only exempt from some of the Pact's stipulations, their position was almost equal to average Muslims.²¹ Generally, in medieval times, Islamic rulers did not interfere in the private matters of their subjects, whether they were *ahl al-dhimma* or Muslims. The internal affairs were managed by each individual and community. To this degree religious tolerance was maintained.

On the other hand, there are also examples about difficult life of *ahl al-dhimmas* to the point of persecutions that yielded Jewish martyrs.²² *Ahl al-dhimma*'s minority position seemingly declined during Almoravids (*Al-Murābitūn*, 1040-1147), Almohads (*Al-Muwahhidūn*, 1121-1269), the first years of Ayyūbids (1174-1250) and continued down to the Ottomans period.

E. Judaism and Sufism

During the formative period, Judaism influenced Sufism through the adoption of a collection of lore called *Isrā'īliyyāt* ("of Israelite origin") regarding "the pious men from among the Children of Israel (*banū Isra'īl*)."²³ This is a broad category on the collection of biblical stories and passages in *Tawrāt* ("Torah"), *Zabūr* ("Psalm"), *Injīl* ("Gospel"), Rabbinical

²⁰ Maryann Magdalen Shenoda, "Lamenting Islam, Imagining Persecution: Copto-Arabic Opposition to Islamization and Arabization in Fatimid Egypt (969-1171 CE)", *PhD Dissertation*, Harvard University, 2010, 15.

²¹ Cf. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, pp. 54–65; Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, pp. 25–26; Arthur Stanley Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar* (London, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 5–17; Marina Rustow, "The Legal Status of *Ḍimmī*-s in the Fatimid East: A View from the Palace in Cairo," in Maribel Fierro and John Tolan (eds.), *The Legal Status of *Ḍimmī*-s in the Islamic West* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), pp. 307–308; Elinoar Bareket, *Fustat on the Nile: The Jewish Elite in Medieval Egypt* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), p. 22.

²² Cf. testimonies of Abraham ibn Dāūd Sefer *ha-Qabbalah*, trans. Gerson D. Cohen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 66ff.

lore (*'aggadot*, sing. *'aggada*), and edifying legends.²³ Muslim account of the stories of Tawrāt and Injīl appear notably in *Qiṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'*.²⁴

In the subsequent era, however, it was Sufism that impressed the Jews. In the early Islamic period Muslim observers found that non-Muslims, including the Jews, were often present at the lectures of Ṣūfī masters.²⁵

On another track, it has been a long scholarly recognition that medieval Jewish poetry was influenced by Arabic literary tradition. Arabization, Judeo-Arabic culture, and Islamicate climate directly and indirectly stimulated the revival of Hebrew literature. Since the ceasing biblical Hebrew tradition, it was in the Islamic realm that once again Hebrew gained its glorious days beyond its liturgical and religious usage. Particularly in Islamic Spain, al-Andalus, Hebrew poetry marked the expansion of Jewish cultural and religious space.

From the tenth century onward, Arabic style influenced the secular Hebrew poetry, and it also led religious poetry to new innovative liturgical expressions. Acclimatization of Arabic literature structure has been beneficial to the development of Jewish spirituality. In this sphere we witness the penetration of Ṣūfī-motif into Jewish religious expression, primarily in the motifs of love of God and *zuhd* ("asceticism").²⁶ We found in this period Jews were fond to the works of the prominent Ṣūfīs such as al-Ḥallāj's, al-Ghazālī's, Suhrawardī's, al-Junayd's, al-Nūrī's, and so on --except for unknown reason there was no trace of Ibn 'Arabī's

²³ Shlomo Dov Goitein, "Isrā'īliyyāt," *Tarbiḥ* 6, No. 1 (1934): 89; Paul B. Fenton, "Introduction," in Paul Fenton, *The Treatise of the Pool of R. 'Obadyah Maimonides* (London: The Octagon Press, 1981), pp. 1–2; David S. Ariel, "The Eastern Dawn of Wisdom: The Problem of the Relation Between Islamic and Jewish Mysticism," in David R. Blumenthal (ed.), *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1985), II: 151.

²⁴ Georges Vajda, "Isrā'īliyyat," in Peri J. Bearman et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2005), IV: p. 211.

²⁵ Cf. Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-Tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007), p. 147; Shlomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1967–1993), V: 471–474; Fenton, "Introduction," pp. 2–4.

²⁶ Cf. Raymond P. Scheindlin, "Ibn Gabirol's Religious Poetry and Sufi Poetry," *Sefarad* 54, No. 1, 1994, p. 116.

work. Most of those works appeared in Judeo-Arabic or Hebrew.²⁷ Sūfī's influence is apparent in the work of several Jewish figures such as Baḥya ben Yosef ibn Paquda (eleventh c.),²⁸ Abraham ben Shmu'el Abū 'l-Afiyya (Abraham Abulafia, 1240-ca. 1291), Yitshaq ben Shemu'el of Acre,²⁹ and several others.

The most important Jewish and Sūfism interaction was Egyptian "Jewish Sufism" in the twelfth and thirteenth century. The affinity of Egyptian "Jewish Sufism" with Muslim Sufism is that both were concerned with pietistic construction of religious life as they identified themselves as pietists or *Ḥasidim* (comparable to *Ṣāliḥīn* in Islam).³⁰ Egyptian *Ḥasidim*'s way of spirituality is self-referential as *derekh ha-Ḥasidut* ("the path of piety") or *sulūk derekh ha-Ḥasidut* ("traversing the path of piety"); this immediately recalled the Sūfī's term *ṭarīqa al-Ṣūfīyya*.³¹

Egyptian *Ḥasidim* should be distinguished from almost a contemporary *Ḥasidim* movement in Germany that was called *Ḥasidey Ashkenaz* ("German pietism") in the twelfth and thirteenth century, and from the eighteenth century *Ḥasidim* in the Eastern Europe. It is also should be distinguished from another spiritual Jewish movement of *Kabbala* that emerged almost at the same time in the thirteenth century Christian Spain. However, later on Jewish mystical or spiritual tradition tend to be tied to the more popular Kabbalism.

²⁷ Shlomo Dov Goitein, "A Jewish Addict to Sufism: In the Time of the Nagid David II Maimonides," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 44, No. 1, 1953, p. 38; Paul B. Fenton, "Judeo-Arabic Mystical Writings of the XIIIth-XIVth Centuries," in Norman Golb (ed.), *Judeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judeo-Arabic Studies* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), pp. 92–93.

²⁸ Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paqūda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Baḥya ben Yosef Ibn Paquda, *Al-Hidayāt 'ilā Farā'id al-Qulūb*, ed. Abraham Shalom Yahuda (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1912).

²⁹ Gershom Scholem, "Sha'arey Tsedeq Me'amar be-kabbalah Me'askolet R. Abraham Abulafia," *Qiryat Sefer* 1, 1924, pp. 130–138; *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1941), pp. 144–152; Fenton, "Introduction," 22, 63n94, 69n33; Eitan P. Fishbane, *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 12–13.

³⁰ Fenton, "Introduction," pp. 5–6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 56n21.

F. Egyptian Ḥasidism

Since pre-Islamic era, Egypt has been a center of various religious currents: from ancient Egyptian religion, Greek and Hellenistic religion, Judaism and its sects. The Egyptians were among the first who embraced Christianity that formed the indigenous Christianity found in Orthodox Coptic Church. Christian monasticism, the earliest Christian mysticism, had its origin in Egypt. Saint Anthony (ca. 251-356), an Egyptian hermit, has been an inspiration for thousands of Christians in the subsequent centuries to follow his example. Egyptian Sufism was also among the most advanced and developed in the Islamic world.³² In term of demographical and religious context, “Jewish Sufism” was the continuation of these religious heritages.

The appearance of Ḥasidim movement in Egypt in the end of Ayyūbid and the first epoch of Mamlūk was advantageous. After the fall of ‘Abbāsīd and the destruction of Baghdād by the Mongols this period was marked with the outburst of Sufism and religious revival. After the “golden age” of Al-Andalus faded, Mamlūk Egypt was a fertile soil for Sufism- a trend found during the preceding period of Ayyūbid.

Some conceptual tools, technical terms, and practice of Sufism provided examples for the Ḥasidim to become a religious organized movement. It was a unique circumstance since at the same time the Islamic policy toward the non-Muslim was tighter than before. Pact of ‘Umār was upheld, so that the outcome resulted in numerous restrictions.

At the same time, the problems faced by the Jewish community were the shrinking of Egyptian Jewish population, the immediate effect of Crusades, and the raising of Jewish refugees from other places that need charity aid, employment, and assistance. These were the periods of high uncertainties and transitional.³³ It constrained the Jews to understand all of those challenges “within a broader theological context.”³⁴ The mood of

³² Cf. Nathan C. Hofer, “Sufism, State, and Society in Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Egypt, 1173-1309”, *PhD Dissertation*, Emory University, 2011.

³³ Elisha R. Russ-Fishbane, “Between Politics and Piety: Abraham Maimonides and His Times”, *PhD Dissertation*, Harvard University, 2009, pp. 1–66.

³⁴ Menahem Ben-Sasson, “Jews in Changing Empires of Medieval Islam: Not Only Eschatology and Messianism,” in ed. Benjamin Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai (eds.), *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 280, 284.

the Jews toward mysticism, in the beginning of the movement, coincided with the high expectation of messianic fulfillment. They lived at the eve of millennium, a transition from the end of the fifth millennium to the sixth of Jewish calendar.³⁵ Thus, the acceptance of Sufism for some groups of Jews coincided with those circumstances.³⁶ Mysticism and messianism were alternative solutions for certain groups within Jewish community to keep the Jewish spirit high during tribulation. More than that, those were the way to attune with the redemptive scheme to the final redemption which could free the Jews from the peril of exile and diaspora in the non-Jewish lands.

Among the main pioneers of Ḥasidim was Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn (Abū 'l-Munā Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā ibn Maymūn or Abraham Maimonides, 1186-1237), the son of prominent Jewish philosopher, Mūsā ibn Maymūn (Maimonides, 1135-1204). Ibrāhīm took over the position of his father as a *nagid* (*ra'is al-yahūd*), the leader of Jewish community. He was also a physician of Ayyūbid's court. The family of Maymunī was originally from al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula) and migrated to Egypt to escape from the persecution of the Almohads.

Ibrāhīm's synthetic way between Jewish heritage and Sufism was set for two goals: to restore religious practices assumed to be widespread among Jews in the past, and to take Ṣūfī teachings, as a model for mysticism of high spirituality. The adoption of the Ṣūfī's philosophy into this spiritual system was followed by his emulation of Muslim worship.

Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn, however, deliberately avoided direct quotation from Muslim sources, but taking them and reframing them within Jewish rabbinical tradition. Besides, he reimagined biblical prophets as the exemplary pietists (*Ḥasidim risbonim*, "the first pietists"). His religious reform project is considered to be the restoration of the biblical prophetic ideal rather than subscribing to the Muslim's spiritual ideal.³⁷ At this juncture, no matter the Ṣūfistic posture of his enterprise he aimed traditional Jewish texts were equipped with rich resources to fuel his spiritual proposal. This tendency was continued down to his son Rabbi 'Abd Allāh [ʿUbayd Allāh] ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn

³⁵ Paul B. Fenton, "Sufism and Judaism: Contacts through the Ages" (presented at the Spiritual Exercises, University of Chicago, Franke Center for the Humanities, 2011).

³⁶ Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, II: 277; V: pp. 470–471.

³⁷ Hofer, "Sufism, State, and Society," p. 215.

(ʿObadyah Maimonides, 1228-1265, hereinafter ʿAbd Allāh ibn Maymūn) and his grandson Rabbi Dawūd ibn Yehoshua ibn Maymūn (David II Maimonides, ca. 1335-1415).

Through his *Kitāb Kifāyat al-ʿĀbidīn* (Book of Guide for the Servants of God), Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn displayed his opinion about Ṣūfī with regard to Jewish spiritualism. Here I quote some words from him:

Thou knowest also (of the practice) that is (prevalent) among these Ṣūfīs of Islam [*al-mutṢūfīn al-Islām*], among them whom there is prevalent, “because of the iniquities of Israel,” of the ways of the early saints [*awliyāʾ*] of Israel what is not prevalent or (but) little prevalent among our moderns, namely that the master attire the novice in the ragged coat as the latter is about to enter his (mystical) course [*tāriq*] ...

And do not regard as unseemly our (comparison) of that to the behavior of the Ṣūfīs, because the Ṣūfīs imitate the prophets (of Israel) and walk in their footsteps, not the prophets in theirs.

We also see the Ṣūfīs of Islam proceed in (this) war (against the self) [*al-mujāhadah*] to the combatting of sleep, and perhaps that (practice) is derived from the statement of David: “I will not give sleep to mine eyes, nor slumber to mine eyelids.”³⁸

Observe then these wonderful traditions and sigh with regret over how they have been transferred from us and made their appearance among someone else than our nation and been hidden among us ... “My soul shall weep in secret for your pride”³⁹ ... “because of the pride of Israel that was taken away from them and given to the nations of the world.”⁴⁰

Also do the Ṣūfīs of Islam practice solitude in dark places and isolate themselves in them until the sensitive part of the soul becomes atrophied so that it is not even able to see the light. This, however, requires strong inner illumination [*nūr bāṭin*] wherewith the soul would be preoccupied so as not be pained over the external darkness. Now Rabbi Abraham

³⁸The reference is taken from Tanakh, Book of Psalms [Tehillim] 132:4.

³⁹Book of Jeremiah [Yirmiyahu] 13:17: “But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride” (NRSV); “For if you will not give heed, My inmost self must weep, because of your arrogance” (JPS Tanakh). The translations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and from Jewish Publication Society (JPS Tanakh). Prophet Jeremiah lived in the verge of Judah’s exile to Babylonia (ca. sixth c. BCE).

⁴⁰Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) Ḥaggiga 5b.

he-Ḥasid,⁴¹ the memory of the righteous be blessed, used to be of the opinion that that – I mean solitude in darkness – was the thing alluded to in the statement of Isaiah: “Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant, who walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.”⁴²

From the above portions it can be deduced that Ibrāhīm sensed a deep crisis of Jewish people and Judaism in exile/diaspora. In contrast with the Jewish condition, he witnessed the shine of Islamic spirituality of Sufism. It is obvious that he considered that the Ṣūfī traditions and practices were essentially the lost Jewish art of spirituality; spirituality that once belonged to the Jews. He then attempted to amend Jewish ritual by introducing some Islamic, especially Ṣūfī practices into it. Islamic practices he introduced such as: bending during prayer (*sujūd*; *hishtaḥawayā*), kneeling, and so on, belonged to ancient Jewish ritual but forgotten.⁴³ He, at this point is sure enough confronted with harsh resistance from his fellow Jews. Among his colleagues a question might be posed: how could the reform of synagogue service was inserted with mosque rituals?

To see the full affinity of Ḥasidim and Sufism and understand better the resistance against this group who was faced with other Jewish, the following are some Ṣūfī practices that the Ḥasidim practiced:⁴⁴ 1) ablution (*nudhū'*; *tebila*), 2) prostration (*sujūd*) and kneeling (*ruku'*), 3) the spreading of the hand, 4) weeping, 5) orientation (*qibla*), 6) vigils (nocturnal devotion),⁴⁵ and standing and fasting (*al-qiyām wal-ṣiyām*), 7)

⁴¹ Abraham he-Ḥasid was contemporary Jewish-Ṣūfī.

⁴² Book of Isaiah [Yeshayahu] 50:10. Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn, *Kifayāt al-'Ābidīn*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1938), II: 78a, 91b, 92a, 116a.

⁴³ Except in the private devotion (see Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann, “From Private Devotion to Communal Prayer: New Light on Abraham Synagogue Reforms,” *Ginzei Qedem* 1 [2005]: 44, 45n37). It is worth noting that the practice of *sujūd* were common among the adherents of Karaite Judaism and Coptic Christians at the time (Al-Qirqisani Center, *An Introduction to Karaite Judaism: History, Theology, Practice, and Custom* (Troy, NY: al-Qirqisani Center for the Promotion of Karaite Studies, 2003), 121–123; Emil Maher Ishaq, “Sunday,” Aziz Suryal Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopaedia* (New York, etc.: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1991), V: 2159; Michel van Esbroeck, “Saint Pidjimi,” Aziz Suryal Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopaedia* (New York, etc.: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1991), VI: 1967).

⁴⁴ Fenton, “Introduction,” pp. 13–18.

⁴⁵ It is also called *Ṣalā* (Russ-Fishbane 2009, 52).

solitary contemplation (*ḵhalwa*; hitbodedut), 8) incubation (*ḵhalwa*), and 9) *dhikr*.

The adoption of Ṣūfī practices and notions by Ibrāhīm and his fellows in Ḥasidim movement was not only the product of Jewish-Muslim interaction but also within the mysticism milieu. However, in a more practical life those Ṣūfī influences were unacceptable for other Jews. They accused the Ḥasidim followers of being *bid'a* (heretic) because of negligent in traditional ritual, using improper language (viz. Muslim terms) in religious matters, and introducing false religious doctrines to the community.⁴⁶

The latter accusation was so much disturbing for Ibrāhīm. While external criticism was so harsh, the internal division was fearful for many religious community, even more for Jewish minority. Throughout Jewish history, the community has many times undergone tribulation because of internal division. The conflict apparently drew attention of the Ayyubīd's Sultan, Al-Malik al-'Ādil, for Ibrāhīm was a high official in the Sultanate court. Ibrāhīm received a letter of warning.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this conflict became the burden of the later generation of Ḥasidim.

To conclude this part, a trace of the interaction between Judaism and Sufism in peculiar way appeared in an unexpected place and time. A sixteenth century Polish master of Jewish spirituality, Rabbi Jacob Joseph ha-Kohen of Polonnoy (Ukraine) once told an anecdote:

... a pious man [*hakham/Ḥasid*] met some people returning from a great battle with an enemy. He said to them, "You are returning, praised be God, from a smaller battle [*milhama qetana*], carrying your booty. Now prepare yourself for the greater battle [*milhama gedola*]." They asked, "What is that greater battle?" and he answered, "The battle against the instinct and its armies [*yetser ha-ra*, "evil instinct"]."⁴⁸

The anecdote was written in Hebrew by the Rabbi in order to

⁴⁶Shlomo Dov Goitein, "A Treatise in Defence of the Pietists by Abraham Maimonides," *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 16, No. 3–4, 1965, p. 109.

⁴⁷Shlomo Dov Goitein, "New Documents from the Cairo Genizah," in Roberto Almagià (ed.), *Homenaje a Millás-Vallcrosa*, vol. I (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1954), pp. 707–712.

⁴⁸Ya'acov Yosef of Polonnoy, *Sefer Toledot Ya'acov Yosef* (Monroe, N.Y.: Simon Weiss, 1998), Parsha Beshallah, II: 123. Cf. Fenton Deux Traités de Mystique Juive (Rieux-en-Val: Verdier, 1987), 20n13; and Lobel A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue, ix, 245n2.

provide a context to the emergence of spiritual movement among East European Jewish group, what was also called *Ḥasidim* (different from the above Egyptian one). The trace of the anecdote goes back to a prominent Medieval Jewish philosopher and spiritualist, Baḥya ibn Paquda.⁴⁹ However, it is obvious that Ibn Paquda employed the complete narrative from the Ṣūfī tradition. Average Muslim and students of Islamic studies might be easily recognized that the pious man mentioned is none other than Prophet Muḥammad himself.

The Muslim original version goes as following: “upon returning from a battle, Prophet Muḥammad remarked: ‘We have returned from the lesser war (*al-jihād al-aṣḡbar*) to the greater war (*al-jihād al-akbar*).’ When asked what he meant by that, he is said to have replied, ‘The greater war is the struggle against the self (*mujāhadat al-nafs*).’⁵⁰ The theme of *jihād al-akbar* became the major discourse among the Ṣūfīs that expanded it into the theme of *jihād al-nafs*, the fighting against the ego.⁵¹ This example might expand our understanding that the outcome of cultural interaction in the past might be extended and transformed beyond the limit of time

⁴⁹ Baḥya ben Yosef Ibn Paquda, *Torot Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, ed. and trans. Yosef ben David Qāfaḥ (Yerusalem: Hava’ad ha-K’lali lihudei Teiman, 1973), V: 5. Within the Jewish tradition there was a similar idea expounded by an ancient Rabbi. Rabbi Shim’on ben Zoma’ (second c. CE) who is recorded to say: “Who is mighty? The one who overcomes his (or her) inclination to do wrong, as it is said, “The one that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and the one that rules over his (or her) temper than the one that conquers a city” (Pirqe Avot 4:1). It is based on Tanakh, Book of Proverbs [Mishle] 16:32: “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.”

⁵⁰ Alī bin ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf Al-Maḥjūb*, trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1976), 200; cf. Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn, *Kifayāt al-‘Ābidīn*, II: 92b. The oft-quoted story is part of a ḥadīth from a weak tradition (*da’īf*) and nowhere in the canonical collections Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 16–17, 139n19. Yehuda ibn Tibbon (1120 – ca. 1190), medieval translator who translated Ibn Paquda’s *Hidaya* from Arabic to Hebrew, translated *jihād* inaccurately to the generic term *milḥama* (מלחמה) the Hebrew for “war/battle,” which in turn followed by R. Ya’acov Yosef of Polonnoy. Yosef Qafih [Qāfaḥ] (1917-2000) corrected it into the modern Hebrew *ma’avaq* (מאבק), “struggle” (Ibn Paquda, *Torot Ḥovot*, 248., also Haberman’s English translation *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, trans. Daniel Haberman (Naunet, NY.: Feldheim Publishers, 1996), II: 485).

⁵¹ Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm Al-Dīn*, trans. Fazl-ul Karim (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat, 1993), III, pp. 8–9.

and place, in the unexpected context, in other tradition.

G. Pool and Water: Reflection on Minority Status and Exilic Experience

This part will demonstrate how a mystical work would be a reflection of the contemporary condition of certain people. The focus of the analysis is a Jewish-Šūfī's tractate entitled *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍiyya* ("The Treatise of the Pool," heretofore *al-Maqāla*), written by 'Abd Allāh ibn Maymūn.

Space does not allow me to go into detail the themes and ideas displayed in *al-Maqāla*, a spiritual guide that is written in Judeo-Arabic. Judeo-Arabic is a Jewish language based on Arabic but written in Hebrew script. The English translation of this work based entirely on Paul Fenton's work.⁵² 'Abd Allāh was the youngest son of Ibrāhīm ibn Maymūn, but he only lived until the age of thirty five. However, we know that he was a highly esteemed personality and known as the master of mysticism.⁵³

In this tractate 'Abd Allāh continued many ideas taken from his father in the *Kitāb Kifāyat al-'Ābidīn* and also owed significantly to the work of his grandfather, the famous philosopher Mūsā ibn Maymūn. *Al-Maqāla* consists of an introduction (*muqadimma*), eighteen chapters (*faṣḥ*; comparable to Hebrew *pasuq*), four exhortations/wills (*waṣīya*), and one observation/warning (*tanbīh*).

The unique aspect of *al-Maqāla* is in the method of scriptural interpretation and his similarity to the Šūfī sense. 'Abd Allāh employed "allegorical-philosophical" approach in dealing with biblical sources. This allowed him to establish a complicated symbolism and mystical interpretation. The Judeo-Arabic, at this point became the perfect vehicle to extend the metaphors into the Šūfī-specific terms without betraying the Jewish core meaning and intention. Here, the article only endorses one theme in *al-Maqāla*, i.e. the idea of "pool" (as the title of the tractate suggested) in connection with the term "water" referring to the Jews in dealing with their minority status and in aligning with the narrative of

⁵² 'Abd Allāh ibn Maymūn, *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍiyya*, trans. Paul B. Fenton (London: The Octagon Press, 1981).

⁵³ Leon Nemoy, "Obadiah Maymūnī's Treatise of the Pool," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 73, No. 1, 1982, p. 90.

Jewish redemption from the exile (keep in mind the diaspora condition).

To begin with, ‘Abd Allāh once remarked in al-Maqāla that: “Moreover, He [i.e. God] instructed them how to improve their moral qualities and how to utilize *theriac*⁵⁴ upon being bitten by the serpent, for this was a land of many serpents [*hanwām*, “vermin”] but little water” (f^o 7b).⁵⁵ Wilderness/desert as the site of exile is common symbolism in mystical traditions. Here surely ‘Abd Allāh wanted to show it as the medium of spiritual discipline. The mystic survives in the spiritual journey like a person survives in the wilderness/desert, not withstanding the assault of “serpents” and the water shortage. Therefore the “serpent” symbolizes the hindrances, dangers, and human evil instinct, symbolizing the capacity to cure the soul, while “water” as spiritual knowledge is the medium of sustaining life.⁵⁶ The Jewish mystic hence considers wilderness as the place of retreat from society, but also as the place of spiritual struggle to defeat human instinct.⁵⁷

Further lines are presented as follows (f^o 7b-8a):

Likewise, when Israel was thirsty and craved for water, Moses beseeched the Lord (on their behalf) and He answered, “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”⁵⁸ It came to pass that *when the water sprang forth, the serpents perished*. Similarly we were promised in future times that “a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the Wadi Shittim.”⁵⁹ O thou who meditates these verses, comprehend their profoundness; “On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem”⁶⁰ “because the water for them flows from the sanctuary.”⁶¹ (my emphasis)

⁵⁴Theriac was the medieval cure against the snakebite Fenton in ‘Abd Allāh ibn Maymūn, *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍiyya*, pp. 120n30.

⁵⁵This number is the folio (indicated by “fo”) reference to *al-Maqālat al-Ḥawḍiyya*’s portions. The letters “a” and “b” refer to the leaves of the manuscript, verso (first leaf, “a”) and recto (second leaf, “b”).

⁵⁶This kind of reading in traditional Jewish interpretation of the Scripture is called *sod* (“secret”) and *remez* (“hint, allusion”). More or less these terms are corresponding to the *ta’wil* (“allegory”) mode of interpretation in Islamic tradition.

⁵⁷Fenton, “Introduction,” 41.

⁵⁸Book of Exodus [Sh’mot] 17:6.

⁵⁹Book of Joel [Yo’el] 4:18 [3:18].

⁶⁰Book of Zechariah [Zekharyah]14:8.

⁶¹Book of Ezekiel [Yehezqel] 47:12.

The exilic motif is obvious in this part, suggesting that of the Jews were now in the state of exile, in the danger and shortage of spiritual support to continue their journey to the ultimate redemption in the messianic era.

The mystical text that relates the unique human experience with God is the representation of the intersection between human body and the world representing the sensuous aspect of mystical experience. Moreover, the Jewish body represented in the text is the diasporic/exilic body, inhabiting the location that is not his own. Thus, the spiritual achievement, including bodily discipline was the coming redemption. "He likewise promised us that the Exile would come to an end, for with the end of the Exile, (spiritual) union [*ittiṣāl*] and perfection will be possible" (f^o 25a).

'Abd Allāh, like many mystics elsewhere, especially those who took the path of ethical mysticism like Ḥasidim mystics, shows the imagination of the transformation of human body. His portrayal of his fellow Jews who have undergone the exile as "dumb animal," (f^o 5b), "the beast in man," (f^o 9a) "animal-like pursuits," (f^o 10b) "beastlike matter," (f^o 20b) "venomized body," (f^o 5b) "dead man" (f^o 4b) is symbolic. The body bitten by snakes during the exile was the body that potentially could recreate itself to become spiritually perfect. Through emphasizing the Jewish body in its vulnerability, 'Abd Allāh envisions the possible new and elevated Jewish life, which survived in the peril of the exile. This situation, as the Boyarins powerfully argues, is "a perfect representation of the *dangers* and the *powers* of diaspora."⁶²

The wilderness situation with its dangers and the requirement of "water" as the means of survival leads to the central issue of 'Abd Allāh in his use of the "pool" (*Ḥawḍ*) in relationship with "water," as symbols of human condition. It further leads us to imagine the interaction between Ḥasidim and Sufism.

In the chapter Ten of *al-Maqāla*, 'Abd Allāh explains the title of his tractate.

Imagine a certain person who, possessing a very old pool, desireth to cleanse the latter of dirt and mire and to restore it. Certainly a Divine

⁶²Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 38.

favour hath been bestowed upon him. He must therefore ensure that the pool cease to be polluted, occupying himself with its gradual cleansing until it is completely purified. Only after having ascertained that there remaineth herein no impurity, can the living waters that go forth from the House of God flow therein, concerning which it is said, "And a spring shall issue from the House of the Lord."⁶³ The foregoing is an allegory alluding to the purification, cleansing and purging of the heart, the correction of its defects and failings and its being emptied of all but the Most High. He who accomplisheth this will comprehend invaluable notions which were hitherto hidden from him, deriving there from that which none else can acquire (even) after much time and with plenteous knowledge, as Solomon hath said, 'above all that thou guardest keep your heart; for from it flow the springs of life' (P̄ 12b-13a).⁶⁴

The metaphor of "pool/cistern" as the seat of human heart, which requires cleansing from the dirt and sin, is a common motif of mystical traditions.⁶⁵ Purification process is by implication related to the metaphor of "water," especially the flowing water.

The Torah in Jewish tradition is often symbolized as the "water" that sustained the Jews in exile.⁶⁶ There is also a ritual immersion (*mikve* and *tevila*) tradition in Judaism. This Judaic practice is shared by Christian traditions, which also put the symbol of water, such as "living water" and "baptism" .

However, despite the above background, apparently the notion 'Abd Allāh is shared by and is indebted to the Muslim philosopher, theologian and Ṣūfī, Al-Ghazzālī (1058-1111). Al-Ghazzālī devotes one chapter of his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ("The revival of the religious sciences") to the discussion of the Prophet Muḥammad's pool (*Ḥawḍ al-rasūl*).

Take for instance that a well (*Ḥawḍ*) has been dug underneath the ground. There are two ways of pouring waters in it, one way through pipe or canal and another way is to dig the well very deep, so that water may gush forth from its bottom. The second mode is better as water obtained in this way is more pure and lasting. Similarly soul is like a well, knowledge (*'ilm*) is like water and the five senses are like pipes or canals. Knowledge like water comes to the soul through the help of five organs like pipes

⁶³Book of Joel [Yo'e] 4:18 [3:18].

⁶⁴Book of Proverbs [Mishle] 4:23.

⁶⁵Fenton, "Introduction," p. 42.

⁶⁶Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 7a.

or canals. If you wish to get pure knowledge, you shall have to shut up the five senses as you shut up the pipes or canals to get pure water into the well and dig it very deep so that pure water may gush forth from the bottom. The filth in the bottom of well must be cleared to allow pure water to gush forth from the bottom. So also in order to get pure and unadulterated knowledge, you shall have to shut up knowledge gained by the five senses because such knowledge is full of harasses, superstitions and errors.⁶⁷

The process of purification of the heart compared to cleansing the “pool” requires mental perseverance and continuity. In this vein, ‘Abd Allāh and Al-Ghazālī share that this purification is rewarded by inscribing the name of the mystic on the heavenly tablet. ‘Abd Allāh writes that, “Reason’s will shall strengthen and reveal that which *inscribed* on the Tablet (*al-lawḥ*)” or “our faculty will be purified and all that is *graven* on the ‘well-guarded Tablet’ (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūẓ*)” (my emphasis, f^o 7a and 13a).⁶⁸ It can be related to the Quranic term, *lawḥ mahfūẓ* (“preserved Tablet,” *Sūrat Al-Burūj* 22).⁶⁹

Ṣūfī traditions employed the term *lawḥ mahfūẓ* extensively.⁷⁰ Al-Qāshānī (d. 1330), a Ṣūfī from Samarkhand, for example referred it to The Record Sheet, that is “Universal Soul (*al-naḥs al-kulīyya*), which is the heart of the world.”⁷¹ A famous Ṣūfī, Al-Hujwīrī (990-1077) says that a person that has been doomed to perdition in *lawḥ mahfūẓ* could attain a spiritual perfection no matter how well or poorly he excelled in his intellectual understanding.⁷² Abū Yazīd al-Buṣṭāmī (804-874/877), on the other hand, says that *lawḥ mahfūẓ* is the sign of the highest communion

⁶⁷ Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, III, p. 25; cf. Fenton, “Introduction,” pp. 42–43.

⁶⁸ Cf. Ibn Paquda 1973, VII, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Fenton, “Introduction,” pp. 71n43; Robert Wisnovsky, “Heavenly Book,” in Jane Dame McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2001-2006), II, p. 412.

⁷⁰ Arent Jan Wensinck and Clifford Edmund Bosworth, “Lawḥ,” in P. J. Bearman et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-2005), V, p. 698.

⁷¹ ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *Kitāb Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, trans. Nabil Safwat (London: Octagon, 1991), entry No. 92, cf. Nos 24 and 145.

⁷² al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf Al-Mahjūb*, p. 273.

(*wuṣla*) with God.⁷³

‘Abd Allāh does not employ the more Jewish common notion of the “Book of Living” (*Sefer Hayyim*) as the heavenly book in which the righteous names are inscribed.⁷⁴ His subscription to al-Ghazzali’s term and moreover the choice of “Tablet” over “Book” is interesting. It is both a reflection of the prime example of Islamicate culture in which Jewish experience was embodied in Muslim specific cultural marker, and the strategy of minority to push forward its own agenda within the majority cultural framework.

The discourse of purity and purification, on the other hand, was the leitmotif of Jews under the foreign rulers, as was reflected in the Jewish literatures in the Second Temple period (fourth c. BCE to the first century CE) and in some early Christian and Christian Jewish works. The racial purity and demand for the Jews to repent (to purify) from sin, through a ritual purification system, functioned to equip the Jews to withstand the invasion of foreign culture and to maintain the integrity of the people. This motif also appears among the Jews who lived under Islamic rulers.

However, in his discourse in *al-Maqāla*, ‘Abd Allāh writes that water is not always beneficial for spiritual attainment. There are “pure living water” and also “fake water” that spring forth from human misunderstanding and corruption. ‘Abd Allāh does not hold an illusion that the spiritual discipline must lead to the perfection of faith. In many instances, he warns that the difficulties encountered during the journey could bring someone to the state of devastation. As we shall see below, the issue was not merely the failure of spiritual discipline but also the larger consequence of self-evaluation of Jewish condition and the perception toward the Other.

Below are the two accounts of *al-Maqāla* in which ‘Abd Allāh

⁷³ Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Attār, *Tadhkirat al-Anwiyā*, trans. Arthur John Arberry (Ames: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), 153; Hellmut Ritter, “Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) Ṭayfūr b. ‘Īsā b. Surūshān al-Biṣṭāmī,” in Peri J. Bearman et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-2005), I: 162; Abū Sa‘īd Aḥmad ibn ‘Īsā al-Kharrāz, *Kitāb al-Ṣiḍq*, trans. Arthur John Arberry (London, etc.: Islamic Research Association, 1937), f. 18a.

⁷⁴ On “Book of Living” see Shalom M. Paul and Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Book of Life,” in Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Second Edition (Detroit etc.: Macmillan Reference USA & Keter Publishing House, 2007), IV, pp. 69–70.

broadens the symbolic meaning of “water” beyond spiritually:

The Rabbis have warned us against this (error) in the account of the four who entered Paradise: “Rabbi ‘Aqiva said unto them, “Upon reaching the marble stoned floor, do not utter ‘Water, water’, for it is written, ‘He that speaketh falsehood shall not endure before mine eyes’”.”⁷⁵

Ever strive toward the bountiful and salutary waters which quench man’s (thirst) and withhold thyself from all others which only increase man’s thirst, lest “the disciples who come after you drink thereof and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned,”⁷⁶ or lest it be said of thee “they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”⁷⁷ Reflect upon this. (f^o 13a-13b).

The passage is referring to the famous Talmudic story of “four Rabbis enter the Pardes” (*‘arba‘a nikenaso be-pardes*).⁷⁸ It tells about four prominent Rabbis who exercised mystical practice. In the figurative term, “enter the Paradise/Pardes” means entering spiritual realm, ascending to heaven. Out of four only one completed the journey successfully. One died, one suffered dementia, and one went astray, i.e. became an apostate.

The four Rabbis were the famous second century Jewish sages, i.e. Shim‘on ben Zoma, Shim‘on ben ‘Azz’ay, ‘Elisha‘ ben ‘Avuya, and ‘Aqiva ben Yosef. According to the tradition, all of them exercised mysticism. When each of them entered the mystical realm, “entered the Paradise” all of them encountered a vision that shook their heart, viz. the massive surface of “marble,” like the sea of glasses.

Only Rabbi ‘Aqiva, “entered safely and departed safely” (*Rabbi ‘Aqiva nikenas be-shalom ve-yatsa’ be-shalom*).⁷⁹ The remaining Sages, on contrary, were overtaken by the mystical vision they encountered, mistakenly understood “marble” as “water,” and thus fell into a tragic fate. More than a simple misunderstanding, the vision of marble disturbed the orientation of the beholders.⁸⁰ When one of them thought that “marble”

⁷⁵The story is from Babylonian Talmud Ḥagiga 14b, while the biblical reference is from Book of Psalms [Tehilim] 101:17.

⁷⁶Pirke Avot 1:11.

⁷⁷Book of Jeremiah [Yirmeyahu] 2:13.

⁷⁸Babylonian Talmud Ḥagiga 14b.

⁷⁹Palestinian/Jerusalem Talmud Ḥagiga 2:1 (77b).

⁸⁰Cf. Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion: A Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), pp. 34–53.

was “water” then his soundness was in great danger.⁸¹ It is classified, as ‘Abd Allāh contended, the “broken cistern” that could not contain the true and pure water.⁸² Indeed in *al-Maqāla’s* way of reprocessing the account, the “marble” apparently refers to the “fake water,” the heterodoxy, or heretic teaching. “Broken cisterns,” as quoted from the biblical passage of Book of Jeremiah, represents idolatry.⁸³ The account of the “four entered *pardes*” is a symbol of many failures of mystical attainment and is a problem to the larger Jewish community.

The third figure in the story, Rabbi ‘Elisha’ ben ‘Avuya is important in this discussion. According to the account, the “marble” is “water,” and is the description of his spiritual journey faced with serious problems. In his another spiritual journey to heaven, he saw the angel Metatron sit on the throne of God and out of his amazement he concluded that there were “two powers in heaven” (*shetey reshuyot*).⁸⁴ By admitting that there are “two powers in heaven” he challenged the foundation of Jewish belief, viz. the Unity of God (*ahdut*, comparable to Islamic *tawhīd*).

The understanding of the second God (*deutero theos*) in this account leads to philosophical idea of Christianity belief in Trinity. Hence, the story is a representation of ‘Elisha’ being influenced by Christianity or non-Jewish philosophical understanding. He became an apostate. In the later period, he turned out to be the arch-heretic. Talmudic Rabbis made a contemptuous name for him *‘Aber* (“the other”) to avoid mentioning his name directly.

One persistent problem of diaspora/exile for the Jews was that of external attack on Judaism, particularly through forced conversion and polemical literatures. But even more suppressing was that the internal dissension leading to communal division. Talmudic sages employed the complex system of interpreting the enemy from within. It falls into the categories of *‘avoda zāra* (“foreign worship, idolatry”), *apikoros* (“heretic”), *minim*, and so forth.

Like any other established religious tradition, heterodoxy is always problem. Still, for the Jews, this was worse because of their minority status

⁸¹ Cf. compares the imagery of “sea of glass” in the New Testament, Book of Revelation 4:6 and 15:2.

⁸² Cf. Pirqa Avot 1:11.

⁸³ Cf. Pesiqta Rabbati 21 (101).

⁸⁴ Babylonian Talmud Ḥagiga 15a.

and the interconnectivity between Judaism and two other major religious traditions, Islam and Christianity, which in many respects shared common narratives. In Islamic medieval period, a number of Jewish converts to Islam oftentimes hit the core of Judaism. Figure like 'Elisha' ben 'Avuya was haunted the Jews all the time.

It is however intriguing that besides his warning against the apostasy among the Jews, apparently through the above elaboration 'Abd Allāh attempts to secure his spiritual group, from the charge of *bid'a* ("heresy") by other Jewish fellows. In *al-Maqāla*, 'Abd Allāh brought all Jewish references from Tanakh and Rabbinical sources from Ṣūfī references. The incorporation and accommodation of the Ṣūfī terms and expressions were part of cultural translatability, as to decode the realm of spirituality in specific Jewish experience. This gesture at the same time was also a cultural checkpoint to which the limit and borderline drawn, in order to prevent the intrusion of the presumed "alien". The claim of biblical prophetic tradition by the Jewish Ṣūfī gained a new meaning, reimaged and activated through Jewish encounters with Muslim Ṣūfī traditions.

H. Conclusion

From the above analysis it can be concluded that Jewish diaspora/exilic narrative remains the main theme within this text. It thematizes the entire discussion of Jewish spiritual awakening and the agenda of equipping the Jews with certain tactics to live as minority group. The Jewish Sufism in this respect was not only an effect of the Jews who lived in the Islamicate context, but also a cultural strategy to live in the brink of inter-faith boundary. Minority condition of the Jews not only challenged the dominant culture, but also marked the internal dissension that complicated their status. It furthermore demonstrated a unique engagement among different religious traditions that allows us to think about the prospect and opportunity of non-conflicting religious interaction, without the imagination of the absence of contestation. Despite different religious traditions, the engagement demonstrated some structural similarities and shared values between Jewish mysticism and Islamic Sufism. More than a meeting point among assumingly fixed identities, this interaction was a frontier to each other that became the force that devised adaptation, formation, and transformation of identity.

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