

The Rabbi and the Sheikh

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Are there sources within Jewish tradition, between the Golden Age of Spain and the Haskala that express a Jewish attitude towards non-Jewish religiosity that extends beyond tolerance and reflects positive intellectual and religious respect and admiration? In the following article, I would like to present one such text, and discuss its content and its context.¹ It tells the story of a remarkable relationship that took place in the city of Damascus in the latter part of the 18th century. The tale is brought to us by Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi in his volume *Matoq mi-Devash* (Sweeter than Honey), first published in Jerusalem in 1842 under the title “An Awesome Tale that Took Place in the City of Damascus in the Time of Rabbi Moshe Galante of Blessed Memory”.² Before discussing the text itself, I will provide some necessary background information. First, about Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi and his writing, particularly the book in which the text was published; and second, about Rabbi Moshe Galante, one of the two heroes of the tale. Finally, I will briefly describe the relevant historical and religious contexts of the time and place in which the tale occurred.

¹ I am indebted to Israel Sykes who translated this article from the original Hebrew, except for the sections quoted from Rabbi Farhi’s book, which were done by me [Z. Z.]. An earlier version of this article appeared in Hebrew in Shlomo Fischer and Adam B. Seligman (eds.), *‘Ol ha-Sovlanut* (The Burden of Tolerance), Tel Aviv: Van Leer and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007, p. 302–329.

² A younger relative, Joseph Shabbetai Farhi, included this story in vol. 2 of his book *Oseh Peleh* Livorno 1864, pp. 66b–68b. This volume reached Eastern Europe, and in 1901 the story was included in a slim pamphlet of wonder-stories involving holy men, edited by Benjamin Ze’ev Libskind and published in Pietrkov under the title *Mif’alot Tsadiqqim he-Hadash*. Michah Joseph Berdichevsky/Ben-Gurion read Libskind’s collection, reworked the story extensively, and published it under the title *harav ve-hasheikh* in vol. 2 of his anthology of rabbinic and Jewish folk-tales *Me-Otsar ha-Aggada*, Berlin 1914 (reprinted in Michah Joseph Ben-Gurion (Berdichevsky), *Tsefunot ve-Aggadot*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved press, 1956). Asher Barash also included a revised version of the story in a collection of stories for children titled *haNa’al haQetana*, Tel Aviv: Masada Press, 1949.

Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi was born in Safed in 1782,³ and soon after that moved to Jerusalem with his father Shlomo. He was known for being an extremely talented preacher, a vocation he inherited from his father:⁴

All who know me know that from my youth I have had a burning desire to bring merit to the public in houses of prayer and houses of learning. And this was an inheritance from my teacher, my crown, my father – may the memory of a righteous, holy person be blessed – for whom this was his holy vocation: Every day he went from strength to strength,⁵ leaving the house of study and going to the house of prayer, and flocks of people – wise and smart, homeowners and craftsmen – gathered there to hear him speak, because his words were pleasant as honey and nectar. His mouth produced pearls,⁶ he expounded upon the crowns over the letters,⁷ his words were as apples of gold in ornaments.⁸ And with the breath of his lips he slew the wickedness of the wicked,⁹ and an entire wise and intelligent nation¹⁰ listened to him, and he turned many away from iniquity.¹¹

After his father died, Yitzhak was adopted by the *Rishon LeZion* (chief rabbi of Jerusalem), Rabbi Yom-Tov Algazi,¹² who declared: “You shall fill your father’s place, you will walk in his path; you should hold onto

³ In his introduction to the second edition of his book *Matoq LaNefesh* (Livorno 1848), Farhi relates that his father died in the year 1798, when he was sixteen years old. It is therefore difficult to accept M. D. Gaon’s determination that Farhi was born in 1779. See Moshe David Gaon, *Yehudei haMizrah be-Eretz Israel* (The Jews of the Orient in the Land of Israel), vol. 2, Jerusalem, 1938, p. 574.

⁴ The following is cited from Yitzhak Farhi’s introduction to the second edition of his *Matoq LaNefesh* (Livorno, 1848).

⁵ Cf. Psalms 84:8. And Bavli, *Mo’ed Qatan* 29a: “Rabbi Levi said: He who exits from the house of prayer and enters the house of study, and exits the house of study to enter the house of prayer – has the merit of greeting the countenance of the Shekhina, as it is written: ‘They shall go from strength to strength, and appear before God in Zion.’” In the Talmud, the text refers to a person who spends all his time either in prayer or in study. Farhi employs the metaphor creatively, using it to refer to his father’s decision to leave his studies in order to address the public who gathered in the synagogues, thus assigning value not only to his personal spiritual growth but also to serving the spiritual needs of the community’s members.

⁶ Cf. Bavli *Kiddushin* 39b.

⁷ A reference to the great Tannaitic sage, Rabbi Akiva. Cf. Bavli *Menahot* 29b.

⁸ Cf. Proverbs 25:11 – A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in ornaments of silver.

⁹ A play on Isaiah 11:4. Isaiah has the Messiah slaying the wicked with the breath of his lips; Farhi has his father do one better: slay the wickedness of the wicked, i. e., keep them alive by convincing them to cease to be wicked – to repent.

¹⁰ I. e., Israel. Cf. Deuteronomy 4:6.

¹¹ Cf. Malachi’s characterization of the ideal religious leader (Mal. 2:6). And *Sifra* (Sh’mini 1:38) explains: “He returned sinners to Torah”.

¹² Jerusalem, 1727–1802. Cf. Gaon (above, note 1), p. 42; Giora Pozailov, *Hakhmei-hen shel Arb’a ‘Arei haQodesh* (The Scholars of the Four Holy Cities), vol. 2, Jerusalem 2001, p. 152–183.

your father's deeds and copy his attributes. And you shall do as he did, preaching and educating the people."¹³ In addition to his activity as a preacher, Rabbi Farhi was appointed as a judge in the court of *Rishon LeZion* Rabbi Abraham Hayyim Gaguin,¹⁴ was active in the public spheres of charity and welfare, and was one of the heads of the Tiferet Israel Yeshiva, the main institution through which funds from the diaspora were channeled to Jerusalem's scholars and poor. Being a central figure in Jerusalem's rabbinical elite, he was sent several times on fundraising missions to Jewish communities in Turkey, in the Balkans, and in Italy. He utilized these missions to publish his writings, most of which were published thanks to the financing of benefactors whom he met during his travels.¹⁵

Rabbi Farhi wrote many books. Some of them are organized by topic, and belong to the literary genre of religious-ethical literature (*musar*). Others are collections of sermons, and still others are formulated as commentary on traditional texts. What they all share is that intellectual discourse for its own sake is minimized, and most bear a hortative/moralistic character. In other words, Rabbi Farhi's books express in written form his primary social/cultural activity within the Sephardic community in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Farhi's work *Matoq mi-Devash* ("Sweeter than Honey") was first published in Jerusalem in 1842.¹⁶ The book is written in a clear and flowing Hebrew with a rhetorical style characteristic of a speech made before a live audience.¹⁷ The content of the book is hortative:

¹³ *Matoq LaNefesh*, *ibid*.

¹⁴ Istanbul 1787 – Jerusalem 1848. Served as *Rishon LeZion* and first Hakham Bashi of Jerusalem, from 1841. Cf. Gaon (op.cit.) p. 179–187; Pozailov (op.cit.), p. 314–365.

¹⁵ For more on Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi's travels on behalf of Jerusalem's Jewish community and on his books that were published during his stay with the different communities, see Avraham Ya'ari, *Sh'luhei Eretz Israel* (Emissaries of the Land of Israel), Jerusalem, Mosad Harav Kook, 1977 (first edition 1951), pp. 716–718, and according to the index.

¹⁶ All of the quotes in the current article refer to the 1969 edition: Yitzhak Farhi, *Matoq mi-Devash*, Jerusalem, 1969. Additions in parentheses are mine as are most of the punctuation marks and paragraph divisions.

¹⁷ E. g., direct address to an audience in language such as: "Know my son ... look and see ..." (p. 18); expressions of amazement and emotion: "Vai Vai, for this all mourners will grieve" (pp. 21, 35); "Woe to them for their souls" (p. 26), "Oy Vavoy" (p. 52); as well as a considerable use of stories, fables, and examples from "real life". Some of these stories are identified with a specific source such as the book *Mishnat Hahamim* by Rabbi Moshe Hagiz of blessed memory: "A tale: In the kingdom of Fez lived a king who was handsome beyond belief" (p. 30). Others, surprisingly enough, are from Chasidic sources that draw on the Baal Shem Tov: "By the way, I will write here what I heard in the name of the commentators, I think it was in the name of the famous

The author attempts to motivate his listeners or readers to internalize attributes and forms of consciousness that are of central value from a religious perspective. Following an introduction devoted to the importance of adopting an appropriate internal awareness when worshipping God, the author explains the structure of the book:

From now on, we will search our way and inquire into the commandments “I am” and “You shall not have”, which we heard directly from above.¹⁸ “How do we manifest them in our actions? And then we will take a look at all the commandments that follow them.”¹⁹

The book is structured accordingly, and most of its chapters are organized around the Ten Commandments: The first chapter brings a sermon relating to the first commandment, the second chapter is devoted to the prohibition of polytheism, and so on.

The fifth chapter of the book focuses on the third commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain”.²⁰ Some of it is of a rather routine hortative nature, but most of it differs from the usual form, instead telling a story. The story begins with the words: “And let me tell you something that I heard”.²¹ In other words, Rabbi Farhi says that he came to know the story not from a written source, but from hearing it told to him by a person whose identity he does not report. At the same time, the story is not presented as a tale or a fable, but rather as anchored historically in a quite specific manner; its title is: “An Awesome Tale that Took Place in the City of Damascus in the Time of Rabbi Moshe Galante of Blessed Memory”.

scholar Rabbi Shimshon from Ostropoli of blessed memory” (p. 58). But sometimes he tells a story or fable without mentioning its source: “I will tell you a fable: There was a man who had a handsome and pleasant son” (p. 54); “By way of a fable: In the big countries where there are many merchants, each merchant has an agent who sells all of his merchandise. ... Shimon goes to the merchant and speaks ill of Reuven that he is a thief and a robber” (p. 55). The real-life examples are usually taken from the life experiences characteristic of those of a Jewish middle-class audience, such as “merchants and traders”: “How many times does it happen that the poor man stands at the door of the wealthy man, his soul yearning for a loaf of bread. And the wealthy man, if at that particular time not well inclined, opens his mouth without restraint and abuses and insults him.” (p. 55); “And with our own eyes we saw one woman who cursed regularly. One day...” (pp. 53–54); “With my own eyes I saw people engaging in these evil studies with great desire” (pp. 58); “I, a young man, have seen in several countries...” (p. 74).

¹⁸ According to a widely accepted Rabbinic tradition, the first two commandments of the Decalogue were jointly heard by all the Israelites at the Sinaitic Theophany; the latter eight were heard only by Moses, who then transmitted them to the people. Cf. Bavli *Horayyot* 8a.

¹⁹ *Matoq mi-devash*, p. 22.

²⁰ Exodus 20:7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

The Galante family was an aristocratic line of Sephardic Rabbis. The first of the line, Mordecai, was expelled from Spain in 1492 and settled in Rome; his children emigrated to the Land of Israel, and from that point on the family history was intertwined with the history of the land and its environs. Some of the family's scholarly descendants served as rabbis in Damascus, and some of the family's descendants bore the name Moshe. But only one Galante, both bore the name Moshe and served as rabbi of Damascus: Moshe ben Mordecai Galante, who was chief rabbi of Damascus from 1781 until his decease in 1806. Thus, Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi was very specific about the place and time within which he located the "awesome tale": it took place in the city of Damascus, within a 25-year time period towards the end of the eighteenth century. From his own personal perspective, and from the perspective of many of his listeners or readers, this was not a distant historical past but rather a time period included in their childhood memories: Rabbi Galante died when our author was 24 years old.

Nor was the city of Damascus a far-away and exotic city for his listeners: It was the capital of a province of the Ottoman empire, a province whose borders at that time included all of the territory identified by tradition as The Land of Israel. Thus, Damascus was a political and bureaucratic center with which the Jews of Jerusalem were in frequent contact. Its Jewish community in those years included a plutocracy made of a number of wealthy, powerful, and well-known families, including Angel, Lisabona, Harari, Picciotto and Stambuli, and above them all – the famous Farhi family.²²

Thus it is clear that our author is not presenting this story as something that took place many years ago in a far away wondrous place, and in a different reality, such as in the Golden Age of the Jews in Muslim Spain. Rather, he is telling it as an event that took place during his own lifetime, in a nearby and familiar community, whose reality is known to his listeners, either directly or through their peers. This fact is important for our analysis, because from it we can derive that the implications that can be drawn from the story about an exemplary member of the Muslim religious elite are meant to relate to real-life contemporary Muslims of his audience's own time and place.

²² More can be found about the Farhi family during these years in Philip Thomas, "The House of Farhi and the Changes in the Status of the Jews of Syria and the Land of Israel, 1750–1860", (Hebrew), *Cathedra* 34 (1985), pp. 97–114. It is possible that our author belonged to one of the branches of this family and heard this story from one of his relatives in Damascus.

Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi begins the tale by describing its two central characters:

Rabbi Galante was a righteous and completely pious man, wise in all the Seven Wisdoms, and there was in his generation no one comparable to him — except for one Muslim gentile who was perfect in all of the Seven Wisdoms. This gentile also had one advantage over Rabbi Moshe, of blessed memory: namely, that whoever had a sick relative would go to that gentile Sheikh, and plead with him to pray for the sick person. And the sheikh would pray in solitude for half an hour, and would then say: this one shall live, or, this one shall die, *bar minan* (far be it from us!) – as did (*le-havdil*) Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa.

Rabbi Galante is described as having three virtues: he is righteous, completely pious, and wise in all the Seven Wisdoms. The first two describe religious behavior and spiritual character. The third is intellectual and relates to mastery of fields of knowledge. The Seven Wisdoms – i. e., the Seven Liberal Arts – were the basis of an enlightened education in the Middle Ages and the early Modern period, and included grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.²³ Jewish sources from the Middle Ages and early Modern times reflect differences of opinion as to the status and importance of these fields of study for Jews.²⁴ From Rabbi Farhi's description it is apparent that in his opinion, study of these matters was extremely desirable, from a Jewish perspective; their mastery is the realization of an important aspect of what it means to be fully human, in accordance with Torah.²⁵ The combination in one person of religious and intellectual/universal mastery is a rare accomplishment, to such an extent that Rabbi Galante is defined as a person unmatched in his own generation. But it immediately becomes

²³ For a "classic" article about the Seven Wisdoms see Otto Willmann, "The Seven Liberal Arts", *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1, Copyright by Robert Appleton Company; Online Edition Copyright by Kevin Knight, 1999 [1907], online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01760a.htm>; For a concise presentation see "The Liberal Arts Curriculum in Medieval Universities", online at http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/ls201/medieval_curriculum.html, or the internet page "The Seven Liberal Arts" at <http://cosmopolis.com/villa/liberal-arts.html>. For a collection of articles on the topic see David L. Wagner (ed.), *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

²⁴ For a description and summary of the range of Jewish attitudes toward the Seven Wisdoms see Dov Rappel, *The Seven Wisdoms: The Debate about Secular Studies in Judaism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1990.

²⁵ While such a conception of human perfection was not accepted by all Jewish scholars throughout the generations, it was a core aspect of the cultural-religious tradition of Sephardic Jewry. Cf. the last chapter of Zvi Zohar, *Heiru Pnei haMizrah* (The Luminous Face of the East), Tel Aviv: The Hillel ben Chaim Library of Jewish Sciences, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001.

clear that this refers only to the Jews of his generation; by virtue of their universal nature, the Seven Wisdoms are accessible to all humankind. And thus it happened that in Rabbi Moshe Galante's generation there was no living Jew who could match him – but there was a non-Jew who was his equal. Who was this gentile of great virtue? A Muslim Sheikh, a resident of Damascus, whose name is not provided. He was, similar to the city's chief rabbi, "perfect in all of the Seven Wisdoms". The term sheikh refers to a scholar and/or one who holds a position of leadership. From his description in the rest of this paragraph and in the continuation of the story it seems clear that Farhi is referring to a distinguished Sufi master.²⁶

By this point in the story it is apparent to the reader that human perfection – religious and intellectual – is not reserved only for Jews. But Rabbi Farhi presents his readers with what is for them an even more surprising fact: Not only is the sheikh equal to Rabbi Galante in his being "fully perfect", he exceeds the rabbi in religious spiritual virtues. This is expressed in the fact that following the sheikh's solitary prayer for the sick, knowledge is revealed to him about their future: Who will live and who will die. Our author notes that in this, the sheikh is similar to Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa.²⁷ And indeed, the expression: "He would then say: this one shall live, or, this one shall die" is an obvious allusion to the words of the Mishna:

They said of Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa that he would pray for the sick and say: "This one shall live and this one shall die". They said to him: "From where do you know?". He said to them: "If my prayer is fluent in my mouth²⁸ I know that he (the sick person) is accepted, and if not I know that he is ravaged (*metoraf*)".²⁹

²⁶ My considerations for identifying the figure as a Sufi sheikh are (according to what we will see as the story unfolds): His involvement in mystical practice, his tendency to spending time in isolation (which would be impossible were he a functionary in the official religious hierarchy of the 'ulama), and the desire of the leaders of the government to be received by him and to receive his blessing.

²⁷ The expression *le-havdil* ('to be distinguished from') is a rhetorical convention, similar in this sense to the expression *bar minan* that is used several words previously, and to the phrases *ba'avonoteinu harabim* (in our great iniquity) and *likhora* (ostensibly) in Rabbinic literature. In our case it makes a necessary formal cultural-religious distinction between the level of a scholar from among the ancient Rabbinic *tanaim* and one who lives in a time near the present: It is inconceivable that a person of 'our time' is actually at the level of Hanina ben Dosa. But all the same, it is clear that our author is indeed making this equation, for if not, why is he mentioning the comparison?

²⁸ In an extremely interesting article Shlomo Naeh proves that the original and precise formulation of this expression is: *Im shagra tefilatî befi*, which means that the prayer is experienced as a flow or as a welling up that happens of its own accord,

Hanina Ben Dosa, of the Yavne generation, was considered already in his own lifetime to be one of the foremost tana'im, and he was especially known for his righteousness and piety.³⁰ He was considered an epitome of the perfect tzaddik for whom the world was created.³¹ About him it was said that "Every single day a divine voice goes forth from Mount Horev and says: The entire world receives sustenance for the sake of Hanina my son".³² In the rabbinic tradition he is known as a person whose prayer is accepted and who is accustomed to miracles.³³ The comparison of a Jewish spiritual leader to Hanina Ben Dosa is extraordinary;³⁴ comparison of a non-Jewish religious figure to Hanina is a radical statement.

indicating that it comes from an "external" higher source. See Shlomo Naeh, *Bore Niv Sefataim: Perek ba-Phenomenologia shel hatefila al pi mishnatt brachot 4:3; 5:5, Tarbitz* 63,2 (Tevet-Adar 1994), pp. 185–218.

²⁹ Mishna *Berakhot*, 5:5.

³⁰ At the conclusion of an exemplary story about him, cited in *Avot De-Rabbi Nathan* chapter 8, it is written: "To teach you. ... That the early *tzadikim* (righteous men) were *Hasidim* (men of piety)".

³¹ "Raba said: The world would not have been created were it not for the completely evil person and the completely righteous person ... Rav said: The world would not have been created were it not for Ahab ben 'Omri and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: This world for Ahab ben 'Omri, and the next world for Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa" (Bavli *Brakhot* 61b).

³² Cf. Bavli *Berakhot* 17b. And also in Bavli *Ta'anit* 24b without the word "Horev".

³³ Collections of stories about him can be found in Bavli *Ta'anit* 24b–25a; *Kohelet Raba* 1:1; *Tanhuma Vayigash*, chapter 3. In the research literature Hanina ben Dosa is considered the paradigmatic figure of the charismatic personality in the Rabbinic world. See Freyre Sen, "The Charismatic", in John J. Collins and George W. E. Nickelsburg (eds.), *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980, pp. 223–258; reprinted: idem, *Galilee and Gospel: Collected Essays*, Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000. See also Baruch M. Bokser, "Wonder-Working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina Ben Dosa", *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 16 (1) (1985), pp. 42–92; Geza Vermes, "Hanina Ben Dosa", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 (1973), pp. 28–50; 24 (1973), pp. 51–64.

³⁴ Till now I have found one such comparison. In his work *Shem Hagedolim*, Rabbi Haim Joseph David Azulai writes that Joseph Shlomo Rofe (=Delmedigo) of Candia compared Rabbi Isaac son of the Raabad to Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa: "And they wrote regarding Rabbi Isaac son of the Raabad, that although he was blind, he could know a person's various incarnations, and could sense by the air to say 'this one will live and this one will die', and he was as great in his prayer as was Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa. This is related in his (=Delmedigo's) book *Matzref laHokhma* p. 15b" (*Shem Hagedolim, Heleq Gedolim*, section 1, letter *yod*). It should be noted that Rabbi Isaac the Blind ("Sagi Nahor") was a central figure among the earliest Kabbalists to whom Elijah was considered to have revealed himself. The source of the tradition attributing the above capabilities to Isaac the Blind seems to be Rabbi Menahem Recanati's commentary on the Torah, *Parshat Ki Tetze*, where this information concerning Isaac the Blind is attributed to Rabbi Shem-Tov ben Abraham Ibn Gaon (1287–1330).

Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi presents us with a literary-historic situation, according to which in Damascus in the previous generation lived two individuals of immense intellectual and spiritual stature – and the greater of the two was not the Jewish rabbi of the city, who in a literary allusion is compared to Moses,³⁵ but an outstanding Sufi sheikh.³⁶ Word of the greatness of the sheikh reached Rabbi Galante. He made no attempt to deny the fact that a Muslim man of religion had attained a higher level than he, but he was very disturbed by it:

When news of this came to the ears of Rabbi Galante, he was very amazed by this, and he said to himself: This gentile is more holy and pure than I am, for the Books of Life and of Death are revealed to him.³⁷ Yet I serve God, and engage throughout the day in the Torah of God and in His commandments; so why am I not like this gentile sheikh – “should a daughter of priests not be equal to a chambermaid?”³⁸ And the rabbi’s sorrow was very deep. And he sought for some way to enter the home of that gentile sheikh and to frequent his company, so that by and by the sheikh might possibly reveal to him the reason whereby he attained that great honor.

So the rabbi summoned to him the head of the community and commanded him: “Go to the sheikh, and say to him: ‘The rabbi of the Israelites has heard highly of you, and would like to come and greet your visage, if you permit him to do so’ ” (for that sheikh was greater than all the [Ottoman Imperial] officials, and all the great officials were wont to offer many pre-

³⁵ The allusion to Moshe is in Farhi’s reference to Rabbi Galante as “*Ha-Ish Moshe*”, employing the phrase used in Exodus 11:3 “And the man Moshe was also very great in the land of Egypt”; and in Numbers 12:3 “The man Moshe was very humble”.

³⁶ The notion that a gentile figure might be greater than the most prominent Jewish figure is found in a Midrash that relates to the verse “And no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moshe” (Deuteronomy 34:10). See *Sifri ad.loc.*, *Vezot Haberakha*, section 357, and compare *Bamidbar Raba* 14, 19; and *Tanna Devei Elyahu*, chapter 28. However, the greatness of Balaam became a stumbling block when he advised Balak king of Moab how to lead Israel to sin at Shittim, and his figure became extremely negatively colored in traditional texts. This is not the case in our story: The sheikh’s greatness and preeminence are maintained throughout.

³⁷ According to the Talmud, the Books of Life and the Books of Death are heavenly books, in which God’s decisions as to who will live and who will die are written on the Days of Awe: “Rabbi Abahu said. ... On Rosh Hashana and on Yom Hakippurim. ... The King sits on the chair of judgment and the Books of Life and the Books of Death are open before him” (Bavli, *Rosh Hashana* 32b).

³⁸ “Should a daughter of priests not be equal to a chambermaid?” – A turn of phrase whose origin is in Mishna *Yevamot*, at the end of chapter 16. In the original context the issue is, how could it be possible that the testimony of a simple gentile woman (“chambermaid”) weigh more heavily than the testimony of a Jewish woman of a notable family (“daughter of priests”)? Use of this phrase here reflects the conception that the “original” status of a Jew is *prima facie* higher than that of a gentile, and therefore it is inconceivable that a gentile would reach a level that is inaccessible to a Jew.

sents so as to attain the privilege of an audience, and they would come and bow down before him to obtain his blessing, but he never set foot outside of his palace and never revealed himself to the multitude). So the head of the community went to the sheikh and told him all the words of the rabbi. And the sheikh said to him: "I, too, have heard tell of your Rabbi, that he is a wise man. And I wish to meet him. Therefore, go to your Rabbi and say to him, that he should indeed come and tarry not". And the head of the community returned to the rabbi and told him all the words of the sheikh. So the rabbi arose and went there.

According to Rabbi Galante's world view, it is inconceivable that a non-Jew would reach a higher spiritual level than that of a Jew who carries out the Torah in its entirety. He concludes therefore that the sheikh's advantage over him is technical rather than substantive: The sheikh knows some technique through which is revealed to him the relevant information about the Books of Life and Death. The rabbi therefore decides to try and make contact with the sheikh, in the hope of revealing this technique. But the sheikh is not easily approached: The multitudes never have a chance to see him, and even the high ministers attain the privilege of an audience only sparingly. Here enters the "head of the community", that is, the secular leader of the Jewish community. The head of the community has dealings with the elite of the Muslim community in Damascus, and among them the sheikh, and he mediates between the rabbi and the sheikh, transmitting messages back and forth. From the exchange of messages it becomes clear that not only had the rabbi heard about the sheikh (a natural state of affairs in a society in which Muslims enjoy primacy), but (much more surprising), the sheikh had also heard about the rabbi. But while the rabbi took interest in the sheikh because of his mystical level at which "the Books of Life and of Death are revealed to him", the sheikh's knowledge regarding the rabbi relates to his being "a wise man". While the rabbi wants to meet the sheikh in order to obtain for himself a certain technique for knowing the future, the sheikh is interested in the rabbi because the sheikh loves wisdom. As we will see, this asymmetry, which is not exactly to Rabbi Galante's credit, will continue throughout the story.³⁹ In any case, henceforth the head of the community disappears from the narrative, and the two main characters meet face to face.

Now, when the sheikh saw the face of the rabbi, he found favor in his eyes,⁴⁰ and he received him with honor and with good countenance, and sat

³⁹ The reader will note that throughout the story there is a dissonance between the perceptions, motives and thoughts of the figure of Rabbi Galante, and the perspective of the narrator. In my commentary on the story I try to distinguish between these two perspectives.

⁴⁰ This is a literary allusion to Esther 5:2.

him down before him and inquired as to his well-being. In the course of their conversation the sheikh asked the rabbi, saying: "I have heard tell of you, that you are a man of wisdom. Have you perchance knowledge of the wisdom of [such-and-such]?" And the rabbi answered: "Sir, God has granted me a little of that wisdom". The sheikh began to test the rabbi, and the rabbi opened his mouth in that wisdom, and the sheikh realized that he was chock full of that wisdom. Now, the sheikh had thought that no-one was like him; when he recognized the wisdom of the rabbi, he was bound to him by a great love, and said to him: "My brother, my friend: know, that today you have caused me great joy by your wisdom. I therefore entreat you not to refrain from visiting me at least once a week, so that I may enjoy conversing with you about matters of wisdom". And he parted from him with great honor.

After two days had passed, the sheikh could not resist his great desire, and he sent to the rabbi two servants and a horse to ride upon, so that the rabbi might come to him in great honor. The rabbi arose and went to the sheikh, who received him with great honor, and embraced and kissed him, and said to him: "Know, my friend, that since we parted, my soul became linked to your soul, and I could no longer wait and restrain myself, until I sent for you to come to me to quiet the flame of passion". And immediately the sheikh asked him: "Have you knowledge of [such and such] wisdom?" And the rabbi answered: "God has been kind to me and given me also that". And they began to discuss that wisdom, and the sheikh saw that he was chock full of that, too. And he was filled with a great joy, and said to him: "If I have found favor in your eyes, come to me two times each week". And the rabbi did so, for he wished to achieve his purpose, and he came to him two times each week, and the sheikh realized that he was completely proficient in all of the seven wisdoms.

This section presents to us the interaction between the sheikh and the rabbi. Their relationship begins in a state of distinct asymmetry: The sheikh is the person of status and power, most probably the highest ranking Muslim religious figure in Damascus. The continuation of the relationship depends upon the rabbi's ability to impress the sheikh. This fact is alluded to by the author in his use of language reminiscent of Esther's apprehensive appearance before Ahashverosh.⁴¹ As then, so too in Damascus of the late 18th century, the weaker Jewish side found favor in the eyes of the powerful gentile, who is unaware that this weak figure has a utilitarian purpose in seeking him out. As then, so too in Damascus of the late 18th century, an erotic attraction of the strong for the weak is formed, with the difference that while in the book of Esther the attraction is sexual, here the attraction is intellectual. The author (Rabbi Farhi) illustrates clearly this asymmetry of attraction, also reminiscent of the book of Esther: The sheikh's passion was so strong as to be irresistible, while Rabbi Galante responded to the sheikh's desire for

⁴¹ See the previous note.

philosophic dialog for an extraneous reason: “He wished to achieve his purpose”, in other words to reveal the technique for reading from the Books of Life and of Death.

The sheikh is portrayed as a person who loves wisdom, a true philosopher. Unlike Rabbi Galante, who is surprised that a person from another religion could exceed him in spiritual accomplishments – the sheikh is glad to discover a colleague, even if from another religion, who exceeds him in wisdom. Unlike Rabbi Galante, who is upset by what he perceives as a disturbance of the proper hierarchy (“should a daughter of priests not be equal to a chambermaid?”) – the sheikh, after getting to know the rabbi’s qualities as a person, wishes to do away with the existing hierarchy that distinguishes between him and the rabbi, and therefore sends two servants and a horse to ride upon, “so that the rabbi might come to him in great honor” – even though according the conditions of ‘Umar, riding a horse was permissible to Muslims only, and forbidden to all those of lower status (*Ahl el-dhima*). By the end of this section, the original symmetry has been turned on its head: Not only does the sheikh do away with the symbols of status that distinguish between him and the rabbi, he also becomes emotionally dependent upon the object of his love, and in the language of a request of the weak from the powerful,⁴² he pleads that the rabbi agree to come to him not once but twice a week. The rabbi is soon going to take advantage of this dependence, as now becomes clear in a long dialogue of a somewhat haggling nature, between the two heroes of the story. In the course of the dialogue the sheikh becomes aware that the rabbi’s intentions extend beyond the realm that he (the sheikh) had assumed they shared.

Now, the sheikh was missing an element of one of the wisdoms, without which he could not be perfect in that wisdom. With regard to this, the sheikh asked the rabbi: “Do you have knowledge of that wisdom?” and the rabbi replied: “Thank God, I am expert in that wisdom”. Then the sheikh fell at the rabbi’s feet and said to him: “If I have found favor in your eyes, please instruct me in this wisdom, for it is unknown to me”. Whereupon the rabbi said to him: “Sir, when I learned all these wisdoms, it came very dearly to me, for they were not taught to me without fee; so too, I will not teach you without recompense”. And the sheikh said to the rabbi: “Cite whatever sum you wish, and I will pay whatever you ask, for [except for this] I am perfect in all seven wisdoms, and if I give much silver and gold so as to be lacking in nothing, it is insignificant to me”. So the rabbi said to him: “Far be it from

⁴² Analysis of the use of the phrase *Im na matsati hen b’einekha* in the Bible shows that it is always used as a request made by one who is weak (at least in the specific context) to another who is stronger or more important.

me to ask silver or gold for this wisdom; rather, I ask from you to teach me another wisdom in return". The sheikh said to him: "Is there anything unknown to you? Why, in all that I know, you are more proficient than I. What wisdom do I know, that you do not?". The rabbi said to him: "You have a wonderful wisdom, that is beyond me". He said to him: "What wisdom is that?" He said to him: "That you pray about the sick, and the Books of Life etc. are open to you. That wisdom is beyond me. If you reveal to me the secret of that wisdom, I too will tell you the wisdom which is hidden from you".⁴³

The sheikh said to him: "What you ask is exceedingly difficult, and it is impossible that I reveal this thing to any creature in the world". The rabbi said to him: "So too, I cannot reveal this wisdom which is hidden from you, except by barter: Wisdom for Wisdom". The sheikh said: "Know, my friend, that my fathers bound me by oath not to reveal this thing to any person". And the rabbi said: "I too am bound by oath not to teach this wisdom to any person. But I say, that since it is for my benefit, so as to acquire a different knowledge in which I am lacking, surely it is permitted to me, and the oath does not relate to suchlike; so too your oath is permitted, since you are not selling that wisdom for money but only to acquire a wisdom in which you are of need and by virtue of which you will become perfect in all wisdom".

Thereupon the sheikh said to him: "Even be it as you say – the matter is too hard for you, and I fear that you will not be able to do that which is necessary in order to know this great secret; for the matter is too heavy for you, and you will not be able to do it". Then the rabbi said to him: "I am willing to take upon myself all this difficult thing, and I will do all that you require of me".

The sheikh had assumed that what he and Rabbi Galante share is the world of intellectual-universal knowledge, the Seven Wisdoms. But in the course of the conversation he becomes aware that his Jewish colleague seeks to be granted access to the realm of religious-mystical knowledge, a sphere that the sheikh had regarded as outside the boundaries of interfaith discourse. He refuses, on the grounds of the esoteric particularity of this knowledge that came to him from his "fathers" – who are not the "fathers" of his Jewish colleague – who swore him never to reveal it. The rabbi says that his fathers too swore him never to reveal to another what he knows about the seventh wisdom. But his words sound at best like a "white lie", a rhetorical ploy, as the Seven Wisdoms were not inherited from any particular person's father, but were instead exoteric universal knowledge available to all of mankind. In any case, Rabbi Galante tries to convince the sheikh that the source of the knowl-

⁴³ "A wisdom that is beyond me ... a wisdom that is hidden" – alludes to a sublime, Godly wisdom, in accordance with "But whence does wisdom come? ... It is hidden from the eyes of all living, concealed from the fowl of heaven." (Job 28:20–21).

edge is irrelevant: it was nothing more than another type of wisdom, even if it does not belong to the Seven Wisdoms; certainly his fathers would have conceded this and released him from the oath with which they had bound him. Did the rabbi himself believe that this was the case? This is improbable, since from the story's outset we know that he distinguished clearly between knowledge of the Seven Wisdoms and the level attained by Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa. What is clear is that the sheikh consistently refrains from accepting the rabbi's argument, refuses to label this knowledge as "Wisdom", and insists upon calling it "this thing" or "this great secret". Nonetheless, he agrees to reveal the secret to his Jewish colleague. Why?

The "simple" answer is that his intellectual desire overcame him: His striving for complete perfection in all of the Seven Wisdoms – a perfection dependent upon completing his knowledge of the seventh wisdom, for which he needed Rabbi Galante's help – caused him to lose caution. Thus he agreed to make the rabbi partner to the realm of religious-mystical knowledge/experience – a realm that by its very essence is particularistic. This explanation makes sense, but based on the continuation of the story a different reading seems possible. Let us then return to the words of Rabbi Farhi, who tells us what happened after the sheikh agreed to include the rabbi in the deep secret:

Then the sheikh said to him: "If so, hearken to my voice and do what I command you: go now to your home and prepare yourself today to accept upon you, beginning this evening, a fast⁴⁴ of two successive days. And take care at your meal neither to eat meat nor to drink wine.⁴⁵ And after eating, prepare yourself for the House of Immersion,⁴⁶ and clothe thee in festive garments⁴⁷. And on each of the two days of your fast you must immerse

⁴⁴ The Jewish halakhic tradition determines: "Any fast that the individual does not take upon himself during the previous day is not a fast" (*Shulhan 'Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, section 562, following the view of Shmuel in Bavli *Ta'anit* 12a).

⁴⁵ This alludes to the words of the *Beraïta* in Bavli *Yoma* 18a that relate to the High Priest preparing for the Temple rites of the Day of Atonement: "Elazar ben Pinhas said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira: They do not feed him ... anything that would cause impurity", including *inter alia* wine and meat.

⁴⁶ The House of Immersion (Heb: *Beit ha-Tevila*) refers to any place in which there is a *mikve*, a pool for ritual purificatory immersion. However, for a person versed in Talmudic literature, the term is specifically reminiscent of the *mikve* on the Temple Mount, and especially in the context of the purification ritual of the High Priest in that very same *mikve*, in preparation for his holy rites on Yom Kippur. See for example Mishna *Tamid* 1:1 and *Yoma* 3:2; and cf. Bavli *Yoma* 29a.

⁴⁷ The phrase "clothe thee in festive garments" (*ve-halbash otekh mahalatsot*) appears only once in the Bible, in Zechariah 3:4. There the prophet describes Joshua the High Priest as dressing himself in these clothes, in preparation to his assumption of office in the Second Temple, newly erected after the destruction of the first temple and

morning and evening, and search your soul with regard to your past actions,⁴⁸ for ‘there is no man on earth so righteous [that does only good and does not sin]’⁴⁹.

When the rabbi heard the words of the sheikh, his heart was very moved, and he said to him: “So will I do, as you have said”.⁵⁰ And he replied: “Go in peace;⁵¹ and on the third day⁵² come to me, and I will tell you the secret of this great thing”⁵³. And he went to his home with a broken and humble

the exile. For a mystical interpretation of this Biblical text see Rabbi Elazar’s statement in the Zohar, part 3, 214a: “Rabbi Elazar opened and said ‘And he showed me Joshua the High Priest standing before the angel of the Lord’ Come and see: Woe unto those people who do not look at the glory of their Master, and every day a herald calls out to them but they do not pay attention ... ‘And he said to him: behold I have caused thy iniquity to pass from thee, and clothe thee in festive garments.’ – They dressed him with different proper clothes, by which a person can gaze upon the radiance of his Master’s glory.”

⁴⁸ “Search your soul with regard to your past actions” Heb. *Pashpesh b’Ma’asekha*. This action is a discrete stage in the process of repentance. In the words of rabbi Moshe Isserles in the *Shulhan ’Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, section 603, 1: “And every person should search and examine his actions and repent from them during the ten days of repentance”.

⁴⁹ “For there is not a just man on earth that does good and sins not” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). In other words, there exists no one who does not sin, so every person must assume that he has done some action for which he should be repentant.

⁵⁰ This is a paraphrase of the response of the angels to Abraham, who invited them to be his guests: “So do, as thou hast said” (Genesis 18:5).

⁵¹ Heb. *Lekh leShalom*, as in Jethro’s blessing to Moses (Exodus 4:18). Here too the sheikh proves to be in accord with the best of Jewish tradition, as his words are in consonance with the guidance provided in Bavli *Brakhot* 64a: “Rabbi Avin Halevy said: When taking leave of one’s friend do not say to him *Lekh b’Shalom*, but rather say *Lekh leShalom*. For Jethro said to Moses *Lekh leShalom*, and he went on to succeed; but David told Absalom *Lekh b’Shalom*, and he went on to be hanged”.

⁵² “The third day” is a phrase that in the Bible indicates the ripening and fulfillment of a preparatory stage. This has already been noted in *Bereshit Raba* (56, 1) s. v. ‘On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes’.

⁵³ “This great thing”: Heb. *haDavar haGadol haZe* – a Biblical expression for an extremely extraordinary phenomenon. See for example Deuteronomy 4:32; 1 Samuel 14:16. In light of the final section of our text, it seems very likely that our author alludes here to an important paragraph in the book *Sha’arei Ora (Gates of Light)*, by Joseph Gikatilla) chapter 5: “And after I have told you of all these great principles, contemplate and know that the great, honorable and awesome name, i. e. YHWH (may He be blessed), is the name that includes all of the other holy names mentioned in the Torah, and there is no name of all the holy names that is not included in the blessed name YHWH. And once you know *this great thing*, you must understand how much you must be aware and careful when you mention it, that you should know that when you mention it you are bearing on your lips all of His holy names, and it is as though you are carrying on your mouth and on your tongue the blessed Name and all of His holy names and the entire world and all that it contains. *And when you know this, you will understand a secret: thou shalt not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God [Exodus 20, 7]. For how can a lowly and contemptible creature bear on its tongue the great and blessed God?”* (bold not in original, Z. Z.)

heart,⁵⁴ and he did all that he commanded him. He went down and immersed himself, and put on white clothes,⁵⁵ and so too on the following two days he did as he commanded. And he added to this, by not breaking his fast on the eve of the third day. In the morning after completing his prayers, he went to the sheikh. And the sheikh raised up his eyes and saw the rabbi arriving without strength, and he hurried towards him and said: “Come, blessed of the Lord;⁵⁶ your countenance reveals that you have done all that I told you”. The rabbi said to him: “And I am still in fast”. The sheikh replied: “You have done well, and may you increase in strength. Now, come with me and I will show you this secret”.

This section of the story takes us to a different linguistic-metaphorical world. Until now the language has been predominantly biblical, including biblical turns of phrase and literary allusions. In this section a number of biblical expressions indeed appear, but there is a distinct increase in the use of concepts and images from the Talmudic literature. The sheikh instructs the rabbi to prepare “to accept upon himself a fast”, and for this purpose not to eat meat nor drink wine. Then he instructs him to think repentant thoughts, to immerse himself, and to put on special clothes – and the rabbi does so. The images conjured up clearly in this section are those of the high priest preparing himself for the Yom Kippur rite in the Temple – the one day that the high priest enters the innermost recess, the Holy of Holies, the place of the Divine Presence. By employing these effects Rabbi Farhi enables his audience to anticipate a further stage, in which the sheikh and Rabbi Galante will undergo a spiritual-religious experience of a quasi-revelatory quality. An even

⁵⁴ A person whose heart is “broken and humble” is regarded by God as desirable and his prayer is accepted. See for example Bavli *Sota* 5b: “Rabbi Joshua Ben Levy said: ‘Come and see how great the lowly of spirit are before the Holy One Blessed Be He, for in the time of the Temple a person who gave an *Olah* sacrifice earned the merit of the *Olah*; if he gave a *Minha* sacrifice he earned the merit of the *Minha*. But a person whose spirit is low is referred to in scriptures as one who made all of the sacrifices, as it is said ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit’ (Psalms 51:19). And what is more, God never tires of his prayer, as it is said (in the continuation of the same verse): ‘a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou will not despise.’” And similarly in *Tana Devei Eliyahu Raba*, chapter 18: “A person should not say in his heart: ‘since I have no transgression and I have no offence and sin I will take pride over other people and place myself above them’... the person should know that a lowly spirit is more desirable before the Holy One Blessed Be He than all of the sacrifices in the Torah, as it is written (Psalms 51) ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou will not despise’”.

⁵⁵ This expression too alludes to the Temple rites of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, as described in the Mishna (*Yoma* 3:6): “He went down and immersed himself and came up and was dried off. They brought him white clothes, he put them on and he sanctified his hands and feet”.

⁵⁶ The expression is in accordance with Genesis 24:31.

more focused hint was the phrase alluding to the paragraph in Gikatilla with regard to the name YHVH,⁵⁷ indicating to the astute that the great secret that the sheikh is about to reveal to Rabbi Galante is connected to the name YHVH.

Indeed, two additional issues are worthy of attention in this section. The first is that if until now the relationship between the sheikh and the rabbi was based upon a partnership in matters of rational and universal wisdom, here there is a turning point, and they begin to be partners in mystical-religious knowledge and experience as well. The sheikh, who was first doubtful of the rabbi's abilities in this area, now acknowledges the rabbi's high spiritual level by calling him "blessed of the Lord". And the second is that, in contrast to the rational-intellectual realms of the Seven Wisdoms, where the rabbi had an advantage over the sheikh and the sheikh became his disciple with regard to the seventh wisdom, in the realm of mystical-religious wisdom and experience, the expert and master is the sheikh, and the rabbi is the disciple. Let's continue with the story and see how the sheikh reveals to his peer/disciple the great secret that had until then been beyond Rabbi Galante's grasp:

And he went with him to a certain room, the key of which was not given to any person but was always only in his hand. And the sheikh opened the door, and they both entered,⁵⁸ and locked the door so that no stranger might enter there with them.⁵⁹ And they went out of the room into an orchard pleasing to the sight,⁶⁰ and in the middle of the garden there was a pool of living water channeled from the waters of Amana and Parpar. And by the side of the pool there was a bench, and upon it were ready two outfits of white garments,⁶¹ one for the rabbi and one for himself. And the sheikh said to the rabbi: "Let us now go down and immerse before we come to the

⁵⁷ Cf. note 53, above.

⁵⁸ The shared spiritual journey of the Rabbi and the Sheikh begins here with them 'both entering' (*va-yikansu shneihem yahdav*), continues with them 'both walking' (*va-yelkhu shneihem yahdav*), and concludes with them 'both exiting' (*va-yetz'u shneihem yahdav*) – all expressions that connect this journey with the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22: 6, 8, 19). It deserves mention that the story of the Binding of Isaac also includes, at its climax, heavenly revelation (Genesis 22:11–12); and this is further indicated in the name Abraham gives to the site (*ibid.*, 22:14).

⁵⁹ "So that no stranger might enter there with them" alludes to the limiting of Temple rituals to the priests alone: "That no stranger, who is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before the Lord" (Numbers 17:5).

⁶⁰ An allusion to the Garden of Eden: "The Lord planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:8–9).

⁶¹ Heb. *Halifot semalot levanot*. Rabenu Menahem Hameiri notes that the phrase *Halifot semalot* is linked to the rite of the High Priest on Yom Kippur (Menahem Hameiri, *Sefer Beit Habehira* on Yoma, 31a).

holy place”. And they both went down into the pool and immersed and changed their garments. And the two of them went together to the heart of the orchard. And the rabbi was silently wondering,⁶² to know what would be the end of the matter. And the rabbi raised up his eyes and saw⁶³ a structure built in perfect beauty,⁶⁴ with doors of pure silver, covered with all manner of lovely designs the like of which could not be found in the palace of any king.

And when the sheikh drew near to open the door of the building he said to the rabbi: “Take care to enter this house in fear and trembling; see how I act, and do likewise”. And he opened the door, and beheld an utterly glorious interior. And on the side opposite the door there was a small sanctuary of perfect beauty, covered by a curtain amazingly embroidered with pearls and gems. And the sheikh entered the building with great awe, and bowed down seven times before the sanctuary. And the rabbi was exceedingly distressed,⁶⁵ and thought in his heart, that perhaps in the sanctuary there was a foreign god or a figure, and how can I do so? For the sheikh had warned him that he must bow down. And so the rabbi rolled up his eyes and said to himself: “I envision God before me”, and he prostrated himself to the earth as the sheikh had done. And a great dread fell upon him.⁶⁶ And the sheikh said to him: “Draw near to the sanctuary and open it, and there you will find your wish”; and he said this to him in a whisper and with humble heart. Immediately the rabbi drew near and opened the doors of the sanctuary, and they were of pure gold inlaid with gems. And he saw in the sanctuary a most beautiful tablet engraved with a most fine design of the Menorah, above which were written the words “I envision YHWH before me always” – with the Tetragrammaton in very large letters. And when the rabbi saw this he was filled with great joy, that he had not bowed down in vain; and he stepped back, and bowed down, and went out – and they both went out together.

There are at least two ways to understand the section we just read. One, as a description of the joint entry of the two eminent men into a well-tended physical precinct, containing trees, a pool, and a decorated building; in the building there was a sanctuary that housed a golden tablet engraved with a Menorah and God’s name. The components of this picture definitely fit in with the Damascus landscape: Pools of living water channeled from the waters of Amana and Parpar were a familiar phenomena in the urban landscape of Damascus from at least Roman

⁶² This is an allusion to the verse “The man, meanwhile, stood gazing at her, silently wondering whether the Lord had made his errand successful or not” (Genesis 24:21).

⁶³ This expression too is reminiscent of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:4).

⁶⁴ Compare to Rashi on *Ketubot* 112a: “Built (*mevune*) – Built with all that is good”.

⁶⁵ Heb. *Vayeherad ... harada gedola 'ad meod*. An allusion to Genesis 27:33, where these words refer to Isaac, who fears that he has been deceived.

⁶⁶ An allusion to the verse “A great dread descended upon him” (Genesis 15:13). There, too, the context is one of incipient revelation.

times, up to and including more recent centuries; and memoirs and travelogues refer to many houses that have courtyards with fountains of living water at their center, surrounded by fruit trees. Grand buildings paneled and decorated, gems of Islamic architecture, were also not lacking in Damascus. Tablets with “*Shiviti*” (the formula “I envision YHWH before me always”), upon which were engraved a menorah and YHVH in large letters, were an integral part of synagogue decoration in oriental Jewish communities. In accordance with this understanding of the text, the author describes for us the journey of two colleagues to the interior of a holy precinct. Accordingly, the white garments are reminiscent of the clothes worn by the high priest when he entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple on the Day of Atonement – just as the garments are simultaneously reminiscent of the holy garments (*malabis al-ihram*), the white clothes that a Muslim making a pilgrimage must don before entering the holy precinct of Mecca, prior to performing the pilgrimage rites.⁶⁷

A second way to read this section is to see it as a description of a shared spiritual-mystical journey. The garden that the two enter is the Garden of Eden, as is implied by the language used to describe the garden. The pool that the two reach and immerse themselves in is the pool of Divine plenitude that springs from the Source of all life. Such pools appear in Jewish-mystical tradition that was influenced by Sufi traditions. And indeed, beyond the fact that the garden and the pool are important symbols in Jewish sources, it is no less important to note an additional associative context, i. e., that the garden and the pool are important symbols in Islam as well, with eschatological associations: Islamic believers are destined to gather in the presence of their prophet Muhammad by a *Hawd* – a pool (or pond) in Paradise. This important theme is extensively discussed in Hadith literature.⁶⁸

Accordingly, the house within the garden is a kind of Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Temple, and inside it is a sanctuary that houses the

⁶⁷ See for example Hava Lazerus Yafe (ed.), *Chapters in the History of the Arabs and Islam*, Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1981, 99. (in Hebrew).

⁶⁸ I am indebted to Prof. Meir Bar-Asher of the Hebrew University, who read an earlier draft of this article, made important and helpful comments, and brought my attention to the importance of these symbols in Islamic tradition. For more on this see the entry “*Hawd*” in A. J. Wensinck *al-Muʿjam al-mufahras li-alfaz al-Hadith al-Nabawi* (Concordance of the Hadith), Leiden: Brill 1992; Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism*, Leiden and Jerusalem: Brill, 1999, p. 96. For a fundamental treatment of the *Hawd* and the mystical context of these topics in Jewish Sufi religious thought see Obadyah b. Abraham b. Moses Maimonides, *The Treatise of the Pool [al-Maqala al-Hawdiyya]*, translation and notes by Paul Fenton, London: Octagon Press, 1981, esp. pp. 42–44.

Divine Presence, as symbolized by the name YHVH and the seven-canded menorah.⁶⁹

And it is possible that these are two sides of the same coin. In any case, while the sheikh seems to have had a full mystic experience of God's presence, the rabbi seems to have only a partial grasp of the shared experience. This becomes apparent in their following discussion:

And the rabbi said to him: "You said to me that I would find there what I asked for, but nothing was revealed to me except what I saw". The sheikh said to him: "Know, my brother, that those large letters which you beheld are the name of He Who Spoke and the universe was created;⁷⁰ He is the Creator, He is the Maker".⁷¹ And the sheikh thought that this was not re-

⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that there exists a Jewish tradition that identifies the symbol of the Menorah as an expression of the deep connection between the Seven Wisdoms and the Torah. Rabbi 'Azariah Figo (1579–1647), active in Venice during the first half of the 17th century, writes: "The Menorah hints to the fact that all of the wisdoms are developed in (or: extruded from) the Torah itself, without need of anything extraneous, for it is all one block of gold out of which come the seven candles which are the Seven Wisdoms. And the way that its candles give light indicates clearly, that it is Torah that gives its light to the rest of the Wisdoms" ('Azariah Figo, *Bina Le'ittim*, part 2, sermon 2 for Shavuot). And see also below, note 98.

⁷⁰ "He Who Spoke and the universe was created" is a reference to God, who created the world with the spoken word, as described in Genesis. This term for God is found in the Jewish prayer book in the opening blessing of the preliminary morning service: "Blessed is He who spoke and the universe was created, blessed is He." The term is frequent in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature as well as in Rabbinic literature from the medieval and modern periods. Thus, for example, the *Sifri* relates in the name of Rabbi Judah the Prince: "As it says (Deut. 6:5) 'And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart', I don't know: How does one love the Lord? Therefore it says (*Ibid.* 6:6): 'And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart' – put these things on your heart, for by doing so you come to know *He who spoke and the universe was created* and you cling to his ways" [emphasis mine – Z. Z.]. (*Sifri Devarim*, Eliezer Aryeh Finkelstein edition, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York 1969, section 33, s. v. *ve-hayu*).

⁷¹ "He is the Creator, He is the Maker" – phrased according to Rabbi Eleazar Ha-Kappar in Mishna *Avot* 4:22: "He used to say, those who were born – to die; and the dead – to be brought alive; and the living – to judgment. To know and to make known that He is the Lord, *He is the Maker, He is the Creator*, He is the One who understands, He is the judge, He is the witness, He is the litigant, and it is He who will judge. Blessed is He before Whom there is no injustice, and no forgetting, and no favoritism and no bribery, for all is His. ... King of Kings of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He". Characterization of God in these terms emphasizes the all-inclusive, rather than the particularistic aspects of relating to Him. See for example the words of 17th century Rabbi Hayyim ben 'Atar in his commentary *Or haHayyim* on Deuteronomy 32:6–7 " 'Is not He the Father who created you, Fashioned you and made you endure]. Remember the days of old [Consider the years of ages past; Ask your father, he will inform you, your elders they will tell you]: Moses here made a four-fold division, consonant with the four things that he said in the previous verse. With regard to his saying 'Is not He the father' that alludes to the fact that He is the *Creator*, Moses says 'Remember the days of old' i. e. the six days of creation where one can find that *He is the Maker, He is*

vealed to any person. And the sheikh added: “Know, my brother, that when a person comes to me to pray for his sick one, I go down and immerse and enter this building which you saw, in fear and trembling. And I pray there before the sanctuary. And when the prayer is done, I open the gate of the sanctuary. And if I see the letters of the Holy Name shining brilliantly, I know that he lives; but if I see cloud and fog around it, I know that he dies. And see how greatly you are loved,⁷² my brother, that I revealed to you that which I revealed to no creature”.

The two heroes of our story, the sheikh and the rabbi, were in “the same place”. But even after he was taken there by the sheikh, the rabbi still did not “get it”, he did not experience fully an encounter with the Divine Presence; as he describes it: “You said to me that I would find there what I asked for, but nothing was revealed to me”. After the sheikh’s explanation he understands what he has been told, but only on a cognitive level. What began for him as a quest to uncover a technique for revealing the

the Creator. With regard to his saying ‘who created you’ that alludes to the exodus from Egypt and the other good things with which He made us His, Moses says ‘Consider the years of ages past’, i. e., that one should look at God’s actions during the years of the two generations – the generation that left Egypt and the fourth generation that entered the Land of Israel, and through them he will know the Holy One’s deeds for the people of Israel though which He created them. And with regard to his saying ‘He fashioned you’ which is the highest perfection (*tikkun*) that we interpreted as His having placed His Presence among us and granted us prophecy, Moses said ‘Ask your father he will inform you’, your father means: the prophets, and so also did our rabbis explain this (*Sifri*). And with regard to ‘made you endure’, which we interpreted as referring to the preparations for the world to come, Moses said ‘Your elders they will tell you’, i. e. the wise men of Israel who are familiar with preparations for and with the concept of the world to come, they will tell you”. (Emphases mine – Z.Z.) It is thus clear that to characterize of God as the Maker and the Creator is to stress the universal (as opposed to the specifically Jewish) relation to God.

⁷² “See how greatly you are loved” – an allusion to the words of the priests in the Temple to pilgrims who came to be seen in the face of the Lord: “See how greatly you are loved by the Lord” (Bavli *Hagiga* 26b, and see also *Yoma* 54a). For a connection between this expression and the experience of encounter with the Holy Presence (*Shekhina*) and “*Shiviti*”, see 16th century Maharal of Prague (*Sefer Netivot Olam*, part 1, *Netiv ha’Avoda*, chapter 6): “Rabbi Shim’on Hassida said (Bavli *Sanhedrin* 22a): A person who prays *should see himself as though the Shekhina is before him, as it says ‘I envision YHWH before me always’*. And this is because prayer is the joining of the caused with the Cause, and therefore he should see himself as though the *Shekhina* were before him. And this same thing is hinted with the cherubs who faced each other, as in Bavli *Yoma* 54a: ‘When they [=the pilgrims] would go up to Jerusalem, they [=the priests] would lift the curtain and say *See how greatly you are loved by the Lord* like the love of a male for a female’ – and this is the greatest love. And it is known that the male turns to the female to bestow upon her and the female turns to the male to receive from him, *and therefore the matter of prayer is as though the Holy One is opposite him* and man is asking Him to bestow what he prays for. Because prayer is nothing but the joining of man who is the caused, to his Cause, may He be blessed. And therefore prayer should also be in this manner”. Emphases are mine.

content of the Books of Life and Death, led him to understand that something beyond technique was required in order to succeed in such an endeavor:

And the rabbi went back to his home, and shed copious tears,⁷³ and said thus: “Woe to us on the Day of Judgment! For see this gentile, who knew the Name of The Holy One, blessed be He – how great was the honor that he accorded Him, and how much fear and awe were upon him when he entered therein; and for this reason he was worthy of all that honor! While as for us [=Israelites] – what can we answer, and what can we say – for it is becoming upon us to do even more than that, and especially when enunciating God’s Name to be filled with trepidation!”.

This is the end of the awesome tale.

Overview

At the outset of this article asked, if there exist sources within Jewish tradition, between the Golden Age of Spain and the Haskala, that express a Jewish attitude towards non-Jewish religiosity that extends beyond tolerance and reflects positive intellectual and religious respect and admiration? It seems to me that the story that we have just presented and analyzed is indeed such a source. One of the two heroes of our tale, a Sufi sheikh from Damascus, attained great mastery of the Seven Wisdoms, the body of universal human knowledge. Since a person’s perfection is contingent upon mastery of these wisdoms, it is apparent that the sheikh was more perfect than all the Jews of his generation, with the exception of the rabbi of Damascus, who was his equal and even slightly his superior in the realm of universal wisdom. But the Seven Wisdoms are of course only one aspect of religious perfection: The highest form of religious accomplishment is the encounter with God and closeness to Him. In this realm, the realm of religious-mystical experience, it emerges quite clearly from our text that the sheikh is on a higher level than the rabbi. It is the sheikh who guides the rabbi along the paths of mystical experience, by way of the garden and the pool, until the entry into the Holy of Holies and the encounter with the Divine Presence reflected in the name YHVH. The words on the golden tablet: “I envision YHWH before me always” – are in the holy tongue, Hebrew. They are written in every synagogue, available to all Jews. Yet the one who actualizes the promise born by this verse, the person who is indeed able to envision

⁷³ The source of the expression is in Lamentations 2:18.

in his consciousness “He Who Spoke and the universe was created”, is not the Jewish rabbi but the Muslim sheikh. At the end of their joint journey, the rabbi could do naught but shed copious tears, acknowledge the sheikh’s advantage in this crucial realm, and conclude: “it is becoming upon us to do even more than that”.

Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi, addressing his audience in Jerusalem and the Ottoman Empire in the fourth decade of the 19th century, presents the spiritual figure of the Sufi sheikh as an ideal type in the realm of the awe of God. Incidentally, it becomes apparent that the Sufi sage exceeded his Jewish counterpart also in his personal qualities: He loves the truth for its own sake; he develops a relationship with his Jewish colleague out of an intellectual attraction and without a utilitarian agenda; he is not jealous of another whose intellectual accomplishments are greater than his own; he shows genuine admiration for a man of wisdom, regardless of the lower religious-communal status of the group to which he belongs.

From the content of the story it is clear that at the highest levels of individual religious spirituality, there is a great deal of overlap and similarity between Judaism and Islam. This overlap is clearly expressed already in the first section of the story, when the reader discovers that there is a realm of universal intellectual discourse – the Seven Wisdoms – that is a highly regarded field of knowledge shared by the sheikh and the rabbi. Further on it becomes clear that the overlap of worlds is not limited to the “neutral” intellectual dimension, but extends to the practices of preparation for mystical experience: Fasting, repentant thoughts, immersion and change of garments. And above all else, there is an overlap and partnership in the mystical experience itself – and in the joint object of this experience: “He Who Spoke and the universe was created”, reflected in the name YHWH.

Afterword

A colleague of mine who read an earlier draft of this article disagreed with my conclusion, noting that he did not believe that the story reflects an appreciation for non-Jewish religiosity. In his opinion, the point of the story is that the sheikh reached the level that he attained only because of his use of the Jewish symbol: the seven-pronged Menorah with the “Shiviti” and the Tetragrammaton. The story therefore reflects the absolute and categorical superiority of Judaism over Islam, and nothing more. I find it difficult to agree with this reading for the following reasons.

First of all, it assumes that the icon of the Menorah and the Tetragrammaton have quasi-magical power: ostensibly, they possess independent spiritual power, such that anyone who operates them properly will arrive at the desired result, irregardless of that person's own personal and religious qualities. If this is indeed so, why does this not happen for Rabbi Galante – certainly he was familiar with the “*Shiviti*” tablets from his earliest youth, and was (according to the story) the greatest rabbi of his time?! And if one were to reply that the reason was Rabbi Galante's unfamiliarity with the preparations required for operating the magical power object – why does the story not end with him obtaining the technique through his acquaintance with the sheikh, and from then on being able to reveal who would live and who would die? To the contrary, it is clear from the story that even during the very event itself, when the rabbi and the sheikh stood in the presence of the name YHVH on the golden tablet, the rabbi did not “see” what the sheikh “saw”, just as afterwards he continued to lack this ability. In other words: The “*Shiviti*” tablet is considered by our author as no more than a means that can make it possible for a person with the appropriate qualities to stand in God's presence, but those qualities themselves are *sine qua non* for such an encounter.

Secondly, the reading suggested by my colleague ignores the issue of the religious personality of the sheikh, as it is presented in the story. How did the sheikh attain his love of wisdom, his integrity, his love of truth, his mystical inclinations and abilities? Certainly not from time spent on the benches of the Beit Midrash or in the company of Jewish Kabbalists, but rather on the benches of the Madrasa and in the company of the Sufi *Tariqa*. Obviously, not everyone who went through such training reached the levels attributed to the sheikh; but it is no less the case that not everyone who went through the same training as Rabbi Galante reached his level. The story conveys clearly that each one of them represents the finest outcome of religious-cultural training, be it Jewish or Muslim. There is thus no escaping the recognition that, according to the story, Islamic training is capable of producing a religious figure who not only does not fall short of the abilities and power of the best product of Jewish training, but even exceeds him, at least in one respect (one that is hardly trivial!).

Third, it seems to me that the reading proposed by my colleague fails to distinguish between two layers of perspective embodied in the tale: That of Rabbi Galante and that of the anonymous narrator.⁷⁴ Rabbi

⁷⁴ Note, that Rabbi Farhi incorporated the story into *Matoq mi-Devash* but does not claim to have authored it.

Galante is convinced at first that the sheikh's advantage is only the result of a technique that he wishes to reveal and acquire; and even at the end of the story it seems that he attributes the sheikh's accomplishments to the fact that he "knew the Name of The Holy One, blessed be He" (as though this were some esoteric knowledge that only the sheikh knew and that was not known, intellectually at least, by every Jew). However, in my opinion it is clear upon reading the story that this is not the perspective of the narrator. The narrator is aware that the sheikh's advantage is not in his access to the golden tablet, but to what he brings to this encounter; what he brings to the encounter is the sum product of all his training and his religious (totally non-Jewish) sources.

Fourth, we should not ignore the didactic purpose of the story, the context in which it is set, i. e., a hortatory work that deals with the ten commandments and seeks to convince Jews to relate with appropriate reverence to Jewish symbols that represent the Divine. Given that the story's intended audience and context is internal-Jewish, it would be strange if it turned out that the golden tablet bore a purely Muslim symbol (such as "*La Ilaha illa [A]llah*"). And here we arrive at a penetrating question, about which my colleague and I perhaps disagree: When a Jewish icon directs one's consciousness to the Divine, represented by the name YHWH, is this Divinity "Jewish" or "universal"? No doubt many Jews are convinced that God is Jewish. But in my opinion this is not the belief reflected in the story we have read: For the sheikh explains to the rabbi that YHWH represents: "He Who Spoke and the universe was created; He is the Creator, He is the Maker". Not a Muslim God, and not a Jewish God, but the God of all existence, the Creator of all. By implication, Rabbi Galante recognizes this as well. And if such is indeed the case, the decisive question to ask is whether a person who was born, raised and educated as a Muslim, who is a product of elite religious Muslim training, can as a result be no less able (and perhaps even more so) to "connect" to the universal Divine than a person who is a product of a parallel Jewish path? To the best of my understanding, after reading the story before us the answer to this question cannot be anything other than positive. I therefore hold, as I indicated at the beginning of this article, that the story brought to us by rabbi Yitzhak Farhi expresses a Jewish attitude towards non-Jewish religiosity that extends beyond tolerance and reflects positive intellectual and religious respect and admiration.

Appendix: On the [possible] “Historicity” of the Story

Can the story told by Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi teach us anything about any historical reality? As I wrote at the outset of the article, the time period in which the story takes place is quite clear: the quarter century between 1781 and 1806. Do any other sources support the existence of senior religious leaders in Damascus in those years with the characteristics and inclinations attributed to the heroes of our story?

Let us begin with the Seven Wisdoms. Dov Rappel, in his book “The Seven Wisdoms” (1990),⁷⁵ notes that the interest of Jewish scholars in the liberal arts indeed diminished after the expulsion from Spain, but did not altogether cease. During the 16th century there were conspicuous figures who studied them, among other places in Turkey and in the land of Israel. This phenomenon continued in the 17th century, especially in Italy. Rappel cites a number of scholars in the late 17th and early 18th century in Northern and Western Europe who relate to the liberal arts, including Rabbi Tuvia Hacoheh and Rabbi David Nieto. In the later 18th century Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz and his rival Rabbi Jacob Emden accord significant status to universal knowledge. But in these years the *Haskala* had already begun to take hold in Europe, and the degree of continuity between Jewish study of the classic Seven Wisdoms and Jewish study of modern science and culture is obscured by the influence of European enlightenment upon local Jews. Rappel cites no source relating to the study of the Seven Wisdoms or general science and culture among Jews in the Middle East from the 17th century onward.

Did the ideal of combining general wisdom with Torah wisdom – characteristic of Sephardic scholars of the Iberian Peninsula and of the generation following the expulsion – disappear altogether? The appearance of a figure such as Rabbi Israel Moshe Hazan, born in Izmir (1806) and raised in Jerusalem – who already there (before moving to fill the post of Chief Rabbi of Rome) took an interest in philosophy – casts doubt upon such an assertion.⁷⁶ So does Abraham Elmaleh’s report that upon arriving in Damascus in 1910 he met an elderly Jew who was studying *The Guide for the Perplexed* in the spirit of medieval learning.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See above note 23.

⁷⁶ For more on Rabbi Israel Moshe Hazan, his cultural-Jewish activity and his rabbinic and philosophic writings see Avi Sagi, “Rabbi Israel Hazan: Between Particularism and Universalism”, in idem, *Judaism: Between Religion and Morality*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998, 317–334 (Hebrew); Joseph Faur, *Israel Moshe Hazan, the Man and his Teaching*, Jerusalem, published by the author, 1977 (Hebrew).

⁷⁷ Avraham Elmaleh, *The Jews in Damascus and their Economic and Cultural Situation*, Jaffa: Hapoel Hatzair, 1912 (Hebrew).

It is also clear that our own author, Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi, writing in the 30's of the 19th century, has high regard for study of the Seven Wisdoms, and assumes that his listeners/readers know what he is talking about. It is therefore possible that among Jews in the Muslim Middle East there were remnants of the Sephardic classic approach favoring integration of both general and Jewish knowledge, even in recent centuries.⁷⁸ But to the best of my knowledge there is no positive evidence of Jewish scholars in the 18th century Ottoman Empire who studied texts beyond those of included in canonical rabbinic sources.⁷⁹

And what of the Muslim world: Is there evidence that Muslim scholars in the Middle East during this period took an interest in general studies beyond religious texts? Itzhak Weismann surveys and analyzes the world of religious Islamic thought in Damascus in the 19th century.⁸⁰ His overview indicates that in the first half of the century local scholars took little interest in knowledge drawn from outside of religious sources. This situation changed significantly after the arrival in Damascus of the Amir 'Abd el-Qader el-Jazairi, who developed an original approach that combined Sufism and rationalism; that recognized the value of western rationalism and its accomplishments in the realm of science; and that granted a respected status to members of the other monotheistic religions.⁸¹ Al-Jaza'iri could have conceivably been the model for the sheikh in our story, had he not arrived in Damascus only in 1855 – twenty years after Yitzhak Farhi published the “Awesome Tale” in *Matoq mi-Devash*.⁸²

⁷⁸ In this context the figure of Rafael Mordecai Malki, a doctor and a Rabbi, should be mentioned. He was born in Italy where he received his medical and torah education, and emigrated to Jerusalem in 1677. His grandson David di Silva described him in the following way: “He was fluent in all of the Torah, that which is hidden and that which is revealed, *and in philosophy and in wisdom*” (from his introduction to Hizkiah de Silva’s book *Pri Hadash* on the *Shulhan 'Arukh Orah Hayyim*. Emphasis mine). See also Meir Benayahu, *Articles in Medicine by Rabbi Rafael Mordecai Malki*, Jerusalem: Yad Harav Nisim, 1985.

⁷⁹ However, this matter deserves a deep and comprehensive examination, and it is possible that such research will disprove my statement.

⁸⁰ Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden: Brill, 2001.

⁸¹ See especially: “‘Abd al-Qadir repeatedly claims that the truth possessed by the monotheistic religions is basically one ... Likewise, ‘Abd al-Qadir emphasizes the suitability of modern science and of the progress it generates, to all the religions. The prophets ... had no intention to argue with the philosophers or to reject sciences such as medicine, astronomy, and geometry” (Weissman, *Taste of Modernity*, pp. 160–161)

⁸² Moreover, at the time that Farhi’s book was published, ‘Abd al-Qadir was leading the struggle against French occupation in his homeland Algeria, and had not yet expressed the views we described.

In the 18th century, the period during which our story “took place”, it is hard to find Muslim scholars with approaches similar to that of Al-Jaza’iri. While it is true that during this century a number of renewal movements were founded in the Islamic world, this renewal was expressed in the return to scrupulous observance, orthodoxy and segregation. As summarized by the late Nehemia Levtzion and John Wall:

In past eras, Muslims were able to create effective civilizational syntheses [with non-Muslim cultures –Z. Z.] ... However ...the movements of renewal and reform of the eighteenth century tended to be movements which stressed the authenticity of the Islamic tradition in more exclusivist rather than inclusivist terms. Frequently the mood in these movements was in opposition to compromises and adjustments to other traditions.⁸³

It is important to note that alternate viewpoints have been raised. Khaled El-Rouayheb has suggested that the standard picture of an Arab-Islamic intellectual ‘stagnation’ between the 15th and 19th centuries is a paradigm in need of radical revision.⁸⁴ Of special relevance to our

⁸³ Nehemia Levtzion and John O. Voll (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Renewal and Reform in Islam*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p. 19. In a conversation I had several years ago on this matter with the late Prof. Nehemia Levtzion, and in e-mail exchanges with Prof. Voll, both authors told me that to the best of their knowledge this statement still held true, with no contradictory research findings known to them. Prof. Levtzion also referred me to two additional researchers in the field: Mr. Kopti ‘Atallah of Haifa University, and Prof. Bernd Radtke, both of whose writing confirms this statement. And compare also the words of Francis Robinson, who writes: “When in the eighteenth century Muslim power began to decline ... Scholars and mystics responded by reassessing the knowledge appropriate to their societies. There was a return to first principles, the Quran and the hadiths, and increasing skepticism of the value of the rational sciences” [emphasis mine]. Francis Robinson, “Knowledge, Its Transmission, and the Making of Muslim Societies”, in idem (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 239. In 1996 a special issue of the journal *Die Welt Des Islams* was devoted to the issue of the “enlightenment movement in Islam in the 18th century”. The prevalent view was, that in contrast to Reinhard Schultz’s principled theoretical stance, according to which it was inevitable that such a movement existed, it is difficult if not impossible to point to such a phenomenon, in the usual sense of “enlightenment”, i. e., an openness to rationalism and to a universally oriented education. With regard to the Sufi religious world in the 18th century, Bernd Radtke writes in this issue that during this century there were indeed certain internal developments in the Sufi worldview, but “Is one justified in interpreting these phenomena as elements of an indigenous Islamic enlightenment? ... I was unable to confirm the existence of enlightened tendencies in the worldview of the Islamic 18th century.... What is conspicuously absent in this approach is recourse to reason.” See Bernd Radtke, “Sufism in the 18th Century”, *Die Welt Des Islams* 36, 3 (1996), pp. 326–364. The quoted sentences are from his concluding paragraph on p. 364.

⁸⁴ Khaled El-Rouayheb, “Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence of the 17th Century”, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006), pp. 263–281.

topic is his discussion of the revival of interest in, and agreement with, the worldview of Ibn al-ʿArabi, in 17th century Sufi circles. This is significant because Ibn al-ʿArabi himself and some of his Sufi followers had positive regard for wisdom attained through rational endeavor.⁸⁵ El-Rouayheb also specifies ‘the polymath Muhammad ibn Sulayman al Rudani (died 1683)’ who spent the last years of his life in Damascus. He excelled in traditional Islamic and Arabic fields of study but was lauded by a younger contemporary as expert in philosophy and also in “Euclid, astronomy, geometry, *Almagest*, calculus, algebra, arithmetic, cartography, harmony and geodesy. His knowledge of these fields was unique, other scholars knowing only the preliminaries of these sciences, rather than the advanced issues”.⁸⁶

The one person in 18th century Damascus who somewhat approximates the qualities of the sheikh in our story, although he was not alive at the time in which the story is set, was ʿAbd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (1641–1731), to whom Samer Akkach has recently devoted a well-written monograph.⁸⁷ Inter alia, al-Nabulusi supported a Sufi viewpoint holding all major religions to be legitimate forms of worship ultimately grounded in divine unity, and regarding mystical experience as transcending the specifics of the different religions.⁸⁸ Akkach mentions that in 1712 al-Nabulusi “responded to a series of theological questions ... sent to him by some Christians whom he described as ‘brothers in abstract thought’”.⁸⁹ Bruce Masters provides more details of this *fatwa*: it was devoted to the nature of God, and is clearly informed by the works of Ibn al-ʿArabi. Masters continues: “What is perhaps unanticipated about the *fatwa* is that it was issued in response to three questions posed to the shaykh by the Patriarch of Antioch, Athanasios Dabbas. That these two men could engage in a philosophical discussion of the nature of God from a mysticism rooted in their respective faiths as intellectual equals suggests that not all Muslim intellectuals shared ... disdain for non-Muslims”.⁹⁰ Thus, in al-Nabulusi we have a Sufi sheikh and intellectual of Damascus who was open to intellectual discourse with men of other faith traditions on matters of theologic-mystical import. However, al-

⁸⁵ See below note 88.

⁸⁶ Muhammad Amin al-Muhibbi (d. 1699) quoted in El-Rouayheb, *ibid.*, p. 270.

⁸⁷ Samer Akkach, *ʿAbd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment*, One-world: Oxford, 2007.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111–118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁹⁰ Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2001, p. 31. I am grateful to my good friend and colleague Yaron Harel for pointing out this source to me.

Nabulusi was not involved in studies that were not of direct religious import, such as the Seven Wisdoms. Also, as noted above, he was not a contemporary of Rabbi Moshe Galante. It is however possible that he – or a popular memory of him – may have contributed to the creation of the sheikh in our story as an imagined, literary persona. Nevertheless, it remains the case that as far as we know from available research, in the relevant time frame – the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century – no known Jewish or Muslim figures existed in the area of *a[sh]–Sham* who embodied the major characteristics of the heroes of our story – passionate advocates of the universal liberal arts,⁹¹ religiously learned and pious, mystics who held a belief in the availability of mystical access to persons of other faith communities.

The only way one might find such figures is to go back hundreds of years, to the peak years of Islamic culture and to the golden years of Jewish culture in Islamic countries. But even during these periods it would be difficult to find what we are looking for. In the Islamic world it is not easy to find people who combine a deep appreciation for general education with a tendency for mystical knowledge of the Divine.⁹² And even if we were to find such figures, it would be even more difficult to

⁹¹ I am indebted to Itzhak Weismann, who in an e-mail wrote to me the following: “I have not come across the idea of the Seven Wisdoms in Islam. Indeed, the doctrines of grammar were among the supplementary sciences required for understanding holy scripture; mathematics and the like and astronomy were hardly learned, the primary scholar who dealt with them during that period [in Damascus] was Muhammad el-‘Attar, who was a Wahabi and not a Sufi; the general attitude toward music was disdain”.

⁹² See Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 1, London: Routledge, 1996. Among all those mentioned there, it is possible that the figure who best meets the criteria set here was al-Ghazzali – but that is only if we are to accept the interpretive stance according to which the Sufi change of heart that he underwent in his later years did not cause him to completely reject the value of the humanist universal wisdoms. However, this interpretive stance is not at all necessary, in the opinion of Massimo Campanini, who writes: “A final judgment on al-Ghazzali’s towards knowledge and science must be very tenuous”. See Massimo Campanini, “Al-Ghazzali”, in: Nasr and Leaman, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 269–270. Another Sufi tradition that related positively (though with reservation!) to the universal human wisdoms was that of Ibn al-‘Arabi. His disciple Sadr al-*al*-din al-Qunawi (13th century) wrote, that there was no disagreement between him and the philosophers with regard to all wisdom that could be attained through the rational mind. See William C. Chittick, “The School of Ibn Arabi”, in: Nasr and Leaman, *ibid.*, p. 514. According to Chittick (*ibid.*, 519), later Sufis in the same school also thought that the achievement of the highest level of revelation of the Divine truth depended upon first reaching perfection in the lower levels of both religious and traditional knowledge (Naql) and the rational wisdoms (‘Aql). In a final comment in his article Chittick identifies Al-Jaza’iri, who as noted arrived in Damascus in 1855, as someone who absorbed a great deal from the Ibn-‘Arabi tradition (*ibid.*, 523, footnote 38).

find among them someone who recognized the possibility of partnership between Muslims and others in achieving such mystical consciousness.⁹³

In the Jewish world it is possible to point to schools of thought among Jewish scholars who recognized Sufi tradition as a source of inspiration and even guidance with regard to paths leading toward the experience of meeting with the Divine. Paul (Yoseph) Fenton, a leading expert on this topic, writes about conversations that Ibn-ʿArabi held with a Jewish scholar about the mystical nature of the letters in the holy scriptures.⁹⁴ He notes significant and conscious Sufi influences on the 11th century Bahya Ibn Paquda and on other authors in Spain. But only in Egypt did the adoption of Sufi teachings into Rabbinic Jewry reach its peak, most particularly in the person of Rabbi Abraham son of Maimonides and his descendents. Abraham identified the prophets of Israel and the Biblical Patriarchs as persons whose way of life was lost to their descendents and found its way to the Sufis. For this reason it was fitting for Jews in the present to readopt these modes of behavior.⁹⁵ In the 16th century, the Muslim-Egyptian Sufi a[li]-Shaʿarani testifies that Jews were among his followers.⁹⁶ Fenton hypothesizes that Sufi influences might have contributed to the development of certain techniques among Kabbalists in Safed in the 16th century.⁹⁷ But what was the attitude of these diverse Jewish groups towards sources of universal knowledge such as the Seven Wisdoms? I have not yet been able to find indication that they regarded them as having value or importance that comes anywhere near the description of Rabbi Moshe Galante in our story.⁹⁸

In conclusion, it is hard to find a concrete cultural-historical basis for the unique blend of characteristics and intellectual-religious values embodied in the two figures in our story – the Muslim-Sufi Sheikh and

⁹³ This is my conclusion after reading the various chapters of Jacques Waardenburg (ed.), *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁹⁴ See Paul Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism", in Nasr and Leaman (eds.) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 755–768.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 758 and onward. On Abraham son of Maimonides and his world view and praxes see also: Dov Maimon, "Tolerance Despite Non-Agreement in Medieval Egypt", in: Fischer and Seligman (above note 1) pp. 355–363.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 765–766.

⁹⁸ As of now I have found a positive statement regarding the Seven Wisdoms in the writings of only one Jewish rabbi with mystical leanings, and that is the 13th century Rabbi Bahya Ben Asher, who writes in his commentary on the Torah (Exodus 25, 31): "The Menorah with its seven candles alludes to the Torah called light, as it is written (Proverbs 6) 'For the commandment is a lamp, and Torah is light', and this includes the Seven Wisdoms. And that is why there are seven candles".

Rabbi Moshe Galante. This is true not only for the time in which the story was written, but also for the time in which the story was said to have taken place, and even for earlier generations. That having been said, it is nevertheless apparent from the tone of Rabbi Yitzhak Farhi who cites the story prominently, that he himself relates to the figures in the story as being exemplary, and that he expects his listeners and readers to share this attitude. This raises a fascinating question about the religious and cultural reality of the Sephardic community in Jerusalem and in the Ottoman Empire, in the first third of the 19th century: What were the cultural and religious foundations in this community that made it possible for such a story to be considered exemplary, what are the sources of these foundations and how did they evolve? For now the best I can do is to note that the matter requires further study.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ In this context I will note that two important scholars in the field shared with me in letters sent by e-mail that in their opinion it is not completely impossible that the relationship described in our story actually took place. Itzhak Weismann wrote: "Study of the 'non-religious' sciences was uncommon in pre-modern Damascus, and it is not likely that close relations with non-Muslims would be documented in the city's biographical dictionaries. Nonetheless, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of their having existed." And Meir Ben-Asher wrote: "I wondered like you about the question of whether this is a true story or perhaps stereotypical writing whose historicity is difficult to prove, but the longer I contemplated ... the more I tend to see them as authentic and as reflecting a unique relationship that indeed existed... in the end of the 18th century." I gratefully thank these two scholars who shared their thoughts on this matter with me.