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# Jewish pietism of the Sufi type

## A particular trend of mysticisme in Medieval Egypt

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# JEWISH PIETISM OF THE SUFI TYPE A PARTICULIAR TREND OF MYSTICISM : IN MEDIEVAL EGYPT[1]

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to a poorly known trend in Judaism that developed in the medieval Jewish community of Cairo, and forms the background for the manuscript that I am in the process of translating.

A brief description to the features of this manuscript will serve as an introduction to my approach, which aims at shedding light on a successful encounter between Islam and Judaism. This religious symbiosis, as exemplary as it is surprising, constitutes the framework of the " pietist " movement and pervades the essence of the manuscript itself; it also demonstrates the profound relevance of the former and the value of the latter. For these reasons it should not be disregarded at a time when inter-religious dialogue has been initiated but when instances of meaningful contact are still rare.

The manuscript (coll.II, Firk. Heb-Ar. I, Ms 3094) was discovered in the Cairo *genizah*[2] - a place or room next to a synagogue where ritual objects or books, containing the name of God and no longer in use, are buried . It belongs to the Firkovitch collection of the National Library in Leningrad, where the only copy that has been found thus far is kept. It is composed of one hundred and twenty leaves, out of order, which are, apart from the central fifteen ones, in poor or very poor condition, (see the two excerpts in the French text). The title page and cover are missing. The name of the author of this work, transcribed by a single scribe, does not appear. The title, quoted in the text itself, " *Futuhat az-zaman* " (The Spiritual Conquests of Time) immediately sets the mystical tone of the content and appears as a debt or a tribute paid to the master of Sufism, Ibn Arabi, whose " *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* " (The Mecca Illuminations) are known world-wide for their influence and richness. Written in Judeo-Arabic[3] - Arabic transcribed with Hebrew characters - with scattered Hebrew

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[1]My gratitude and thanks to Jeffrey A. Barash, who revised the English version of this text.

[2] Cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (*E.J.*), Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1972; vol.17 " genizah ", pp. 404-407.

[3] Cf. *E.J.* vol. 10 " Judeo-Arabic " and " Judeo-Arabic literature ", pp. 409-425.

(religious quotations), this treatise of mysticism is the work of a Jew following the " Jewish pietist movement of the Sufi type " so named by scholars[4] who have studied this trend. The term, reminiscent of the title of " *hassid* ", as these " pious " used to call themselves, eliminates any confusion with hassidism of Western Europe or with the mystical tradition of kabbalah from Spain or Provence.

What can be said about the beginnings of this religious phenomenon which lasted for two centuries in Egypt (13th-15th), under the influence of Moses Maimonides' (1138-1204) descendants, and notably his only son Abraham (1186-1237)[5] who encouraged it, until David II (1335-1415), the last of the Maimonides line to have taken part in it and left behind works in Judeo-Arabic ? A brief presentation of the religious Egyptian context at the time when the Rambam's family settled in Fostat, ancient Cairo (around 1165), and the development of Sufism in Islamic surroundings will help clarify these issues.

After several centuries of suspicion and persecution (8th-11th) by the defenders of orthodox Islam, the mystical expression of Islam (Sufism), which had been rehabilitated by the famous theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111)[6], was spreading throughout Egypt, giving rise to religious orders which rapidly turned into powerful and self-perpetuating brotherhoods, known as *tariqat*. This all-pervading spiritual atmosphere fulfilled the yearnings of some Egyptian Jews eager to revive the mystical trend of Judaism which had already appeared in Bagdad, the cradle of Sufism, just after the Arab conquest. At that time, some Jews of the Bagdad diaspora had adhered to rabbinical piety, in Hebrew *hasidut,* and some, known as *hassidim,* had taken up asceticism and a way of life promoting humility, purity, trust in God, as a means of approaching the original spirit of Judaism. These practices were also characteristic of the first Sufis in Bagdad society, with whom " pious " Jews were acquainted. According to some reliable texts, Jews were familiar with Sufism since in

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[4] Shlomo Dov Goiten (1900-1985) : *A Mediterranean Society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles,University of California Press, 4 vols, 1967-1988 ; Samuel Rosenblatt (1902-1986) : *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, New-York, Columbia University Press, 1927, vol. 1 ; and Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1938, vol. 2.
Paul Fenton, is the only contemporary specialist in this field : *The treatise of the Pool* by Obadyah Maimonides, London, The Octagon Press, 1981 ; Deux traités de mystique juive (*Le traité du puits* et le *Guide du Détachement*, Obadia et David Maïmonide), Lagrasse, Editions Verdier, 1987.
[5] Cf. *E.J.* vol. 2 " Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon ", pp. 150-152.
[6] Cf. *E.J.* vol. 7 " al-Ghazali ", pp. 538-540.

their writings they were just as likely to use the terms *sufi-tasawwuf* as *hasid-hasidut* (sufi-sufism and pious-piety).

How can the change in religious attitudes on an individual basis into a ritualized and widespread communal behavior be accounted for? The spread of Sufism, due to increased tolerance and the " spiritual expectations " of Cairo Jews, cannot be considered to sufficiently justify the emergence and recognition of a lasting religious stream. Pietism attained maturity above all in the personality of Abraham ben Moses ben Maimun, who was instructed by his father and, when he was nineteen, succeeded him as *nagid* (head of the Jewish community in Islamic countries)[7]. This title made him the representative of all the Jews in the government and he acted as their legal authority. There is no doubt that this office, the highest Jewish office in Egypt, added to his human qualities and lineage, and gave considerable weight and credibility to his religious and ethical doctrine. Being a charismatic leader, endowed with legal power, he succeeded in attracting disciples and leading them on what was called *derek ha-hasidut/tariqa as-sufia*, i.e., the "mystical path ".

Most of the information concerning the basic principles of this path, as well as Abraham's directions as a spiritual guide to the pietists, are presented in his work entitled "*Kitab kifayat al- abidin* " (Sufficient unto the Servants of God). Although this treatise of theology in Judeo-Arabic has come down to us in an incomplete state, it indicates most of Abraham's aims, which were:

- to arouse new religious fervor by proposing a synthesis of mystical and rational trends in Judaism, as al-Ghazali had done in Islam,
- to obtain recognition of the *derek ha-hasidut* by clarifying and strengthening its precepts.

These aims set down two guidelines:

- the pietist ideals, which were meant to restore religious practices usually widespread among Jews,
- the Sufi teachings, intended as a model for mysticism of high spirituality.

Concerning these teachings, Abraham provides precious details about his relations with the Sufis : he came into fairly close contact with them and their principles, and he openly showed his admiration for them, regretting that his people did not imitate what he took to be exemplary behavior.

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[7] Cf. *E.J.* vol.12 " nagid ", pp.758-764.

The innovations introduced by Abraham on ethical and doctrinal grounds and the religious rites specific to the pietist circle due to their prevalent Sufi creed are put forward in the *Kifayat al- abidin*, and are illustrated in the *Futuhat az-zaman*. In a lyrical style supplemented with ecstatic expressions, the manuscript takes us on a disciple's spiritual journey, going through several mystical states (*hal*, pluriel *ahwal*) and passing through numerous levels (*maqam*, pluriel *maqamat*) by individual and collective practices, to follow the path upward.

Among these practices - to which Judeo-Arabic writings refer by using the Arabic Sufi lexicon - asceticism is the most significant, as is the search for purity, with the help of " exercises " such as spiritual retreat, isolation (halwa), fasting and refraining from sleep, meditation or solitary contemplation (*hitbodebut* in Hebrew). Among the new attitudes which came into use, were the following : discretion (*kitman*) about one's spiritual state, reciting God's names (*dhikr*), prostration , stretching out hands, turning towards the Temple during prayers and, before these gestures, ablution of the feet, maintaining a brotherhood and guidance structure with a religious guide - like a sufi *shayh* - leading novices, and keeping a fellowship order (*suhba*) to link all the " pilgrims " together in a mystical quest, as in Sufism. They had to attain three levels along their prophetic path, from the wish for proximity (*qurb*) with divine spirit, through virtue, to spiritual illumination (*mushahada*), and finally the annulment of the self (*fana'*) in God guaranteeing the subsistence of the soul (*baqa'*).

This brief enumeration of the main tendencies of the pietist circle illustrates the strong desire of its guides and disciples to search for and reach - through particular rituals and a specific way of life - an intimate communion with the divine. Although the Sufi inspiration which pervades Jewish pietism has been stressed, certain other elements belonging to the talmudic tradition and to neo-platonic philosophy are intermingled with it, all of which played important roles in this "ethically oriented mysticism, " as S.D. Goitein characterizes it.

After Abraham's death, his sons David (1222-1300) and Obadyah (1228-12665) followed and perpetuated the Sufi type of mysticism ; the works which have come down to us, "*al-Murshid ila t-tafarrud wal-Murfid ila t-tagarrud*" (The Guide to Loneliness and to the Leader to Detachment) , by David, and " *al Maqala al-hawdiyya* " (The Treatise of the Well) by Obadyah (see note 3), provide evidence of their spiritual debt to their father.

No precise information is available concerning the decline of this trend. In any case it may be attributed to dissension within the pietist circle itself arising from changes in the ritual and the traditional liturgy. But

other factors, both economic and political, certainly operated alongside this, and internal tensions between the long-established Egyptian Jews and the Andalus immigrant minority to which Maimonides' dynasty belonged. It is presumed that these quarrels hastened and contributed to the decline of the Cairo movement but after it died out, its influence on Middle-Eastern Jewish spirituality continued particularly in the Safed school, during the 16th century, among the Sefarad *qabbalists* who settled in this town. Again, their writings and behavior displayed a leaning towards the Sufi model, inherited from medieval Egyptian mysticism.

Thus the attraction for an ideal of piety - as experienced by the Hassids of the *tannaim* era (the Sages of the first and second centuries) - which is at the heart of Judaism - found a suitable context for its expression in medievial Egyptian society. Further, this quest made its way through the breachopened by Sufism. Well-established over a rather long period of time, Egyptian Jewish pietism is an extension of a mystic tradition particular to the history of Judaism, and ancient ties between Muslim and Jewish religions in the area of mysticism. It is remarkable for its achievement as an unusual inter-religious contact and for the force of attraction it exercised at a community level. Its influence and continuity are illustrated by the " recognition " that Abraham Maimonides obtained for his circle. No doubt that its existence was not clandestine, or restricted to its followers; references to its presence and activities are available from various sources, both by Jewish and Muslim[8].

New contemporary interest in mysticism and religious syncretism may bring this trend out of oblivion and prompts us to seek answers to the latent and unresolved issue of the true origins of the practices described here (issues which were raised by Abraham Maimonides and other scholars) : were Jewish practices borrowed from the Sufi tradition or were the Sufi traditions Jewish in origin ?

*(Translated by the author)*
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[8] Arab biographers or historians refer to it; for instance the Egyptian historian al- Maqrizi (1364-1441).