

## Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Dar al-Islam

Shlomo Sand, historian and author of *The Invention of the Jewish People*, says that the best way to define a concept is to follow its history. It should come as no surprise that the Middle East has a history of political and social morphing. Because of this, people must have also, to some extent, gone through their own metamorphoses. The Jews of Arabia played a vital role in their communities and despite popular belief, were getting along fairly well with their polytheistic and Pagan neighbors for hundreds of years. To understand Jewish communities in the Dar al-Islam, pre- Islamic history must be examined to dissect later relations between the communities of the Arabian Peninsula.

Religious scholar and author, Reza Aslan, illustrates the influence of the diaspora noting that they were able to integrate their social and cultural traditions into the "milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia" (9). Jews were very active in Arab society, engaging not only as Bedouins, but also as merchants, farmers, warriors and poets. Unlike Sand's idea of Jews avoiding integration, Aslan says that the Jews of Arabia did indeed adopt elements of Arabian culture. Medina's Jews took Arabic names and Jewish women wore the scarf or headdress and they also spoke Arabic (Aslan 9). Before Islam, Pagan Arabs and Jews shared similar religious beliefs that related to mysticism such as the Kohens, or Jewish soothsayers, and the pagan Kahins. Though they are not the same, Aslan says that they both dealt "in divinely inspired oracles."

In the 7th century, the Prophet Muhammed received an invitation from a group of Pagans who had converted to Islam. The year 622 CE marked the Hijra, or the first year of the Muslim calendar when Muhammed left Mecca for Medina. Medina at that time was not a Muslim city, nor were Muslims the majority. There were various polytheistic clans and Jewish tribes who were well established in the region. These were the Jews of Khaybar, an Oasis town that was

located about one hundred miles north of Medina. Many of them were believed to be the descendants of the exiles from Judea after the destruction of the second temple. The Jews cultivated the land, grew dates on palm trees, and were skilled craftsmen who worked alongside Pagan Arabs. Contrary to popular belief, the Jews did not oppose the arrival of Muhammad or the newly established umma, or Muslim community.

Muhammad preached principles of respect and a moral system that were new to the Polytheists and the pagan Arab tribes, but this concept was not new to the Jews. They both identified with one another on morals and ethics. In fact, it was said that Muhammad's preaching was not viewed as “repugnant” to the Jewish religion (Aslan 99). He preached the message from Allah, which was the same as that of the Old and New Testaments, which both foretold the coming of the prophet Muhammad (Ye’or 43). Since Muhammad was the last and final prophet, the Jews and Christians were threatened by the claims he made of Islam being a “finalized” message.

Nevertheless, the Muslims gained power quickly and Islam was spreading like wildfire. This enraged the Meccans who were losing money from idol worshippers converting to Islam, which forbade the pagan practice of idolatry. A wealthy Jewish tribe, Banu Qunayqa was also not very fond of the fact that Muhammad’s tax free economy was hurting their wealth as a monopoly in Medina. The victory at Battle of Badr established Medina as the city of the prophet. It also divided Arabia where people who supported the Quraysh left Medina and this made the prophet eager to establish loyalties. Muhammad had allied with Jewish tribes under the Constitution of Medina where they all agreed that in a war, the people of the document would provide aid for one another. He suspected that Banu Qunayqa had betrayed the contract when

someone alerted the Meccans of the planned caravan raid. When they finally admitted their betrayal, they were exiled.

The results of the Battle of Uhud left two dominant Jewish clans in Medina. One of them was Banu Nadir. When Muhammad found out that the Banu Nadir were secretly meeting with the Quraysh leader he was angry. He ordered a siege of the Banu Nadir fortress. The Banu Qurayza, the other dominant Jewish clan left in the oasis, refused to help the Banu Nadir. This led to the Banu Nadir's surrender and they left Khaybar with many of their belongings. The army of Muhammed did not agree with his decision to spare the lives of Banu Nadir after they betrayed him (Aslan 92). The Banu Qurayza was the largest tribe left in Khaybar and when they openly supported the Quraysh in the Battle of Trench, they assumed that they would meet the same fate as the clans of Qunayqa and Nadir. This time, the Prophet went according to Arab tradition, where it was declared that the "fighters shall be killed, and their children [and wives] made captives and that their property shall be divided" (Aslan 93).

These events and Muhammad's treatment of the Jews have been disputed. Many Muslim scholars argue that the exile and alleged murder of Jewish tribes in Medina were not to be interpreted through religious lenses, but were political. Aslan says that they were because of "political alliances and economic ties... fueled primarily by tribal partnerships and tax-free markets, not religious zeal" (Aslan 99). On the other hand Ye'or says that the Jewish tribes of the Qurayza remained neutral and were killed for their refusal to convert to Islam, while Sand says that Muslims were quite liberal in their attitudes towards the "people of the book." As long as they were Monotheists, they did not have to convert as long as they paid a special tax, or the *jizya*. Sand also argued:

...although Muhammad fought against the Jewish tribes in the Arabian Peninsula- one of them was exiled to Jericho-the advent of Islam was viewed by many as a liberation from persecution and even as a possible future fulfillment of the messianic promise. Rumors about the rise of a new prophet in the desert spread and heartened many Jewish believers, especially as Muhammad presented himself as a successor of earlier prophets, not as a divinity (181).

It is obvious that there will be incongruities amongst scholars and historians on many aspects of the Prophet Muhammad's life as is common in all revered historical works.

There was eventually peace in the Arabian Peninsula, despite the unfortunate fate of Banu Qurayza. Many Jews and Arabs still lived amicably amongst one another in the Arabian Peninsula. Many Jews saw Muhammed's actions towards the Jewish tribes as political and not religious. The disloyalty and treason of the Jewish tribes of Khaybar may be the reason that the qibla (the direction of Muslim prayer) was turned away from Jerusalem and towards Mecca. This change was also possible due to the reconciliation between the Meccans and an attempt at reforming traditional practices. After Muhammad's army defeated the Quraysh, The Treaty of Hudaibbiyah in 628 created peace between the Muslims and the Meccans and in 629 the Ummah was permitted to go to Mecca on pilgrimage. According to Hadiths, recordings of the life of Muhammad, the Prophet made his last speech during his last pilgrimage to Mecca in 632, the year that he died. Muhammad's received revelations of God's Will were recorded and written down and came to be known as the Holy Quran, the religious book of Islam and the most root of sacred Islamic Law.

The expansion of Islam spread far beyond the Arabian Peninsula under the rule of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali succeeded in expanding the Dar al-

Islam under jihad, the wars of Islamic conquest. Thirty years after the death of Muhammad, the Muslims, under the caliphate of Umar ibn al Khattab, conquered a majority of the Byzantine Empire and the whole Sassanid Empire. Under Umar, the Jews of Khaybar were peacefully expelled to newly conquered lands of the Byzantines and Persians. This was because Muslims believed that non-Muslims should not live in the Hijaz, the Muslim holy land and that they should live elsewhere. They would live under Islamic rule as a protected people called dhimmis.

The Pact of Umar started as an agreement between the Caliph and the Christians in Syria but later became protocol for dealing with all of Ahl ul -Kittab or 'People of The Book.' Under the Pact of Umar, dhimmis were protected under Muslim rule. Although they were not forced to convert, they had to pay the jizya, a special tax to secure their protection. Other restrictions included not wearing certain colors, they could not marry Muslim women, their homes and churches and synagogues could not be built higher or more flamboyant than Muslim's homes and Mosques. They could not dress like Muslims or ride horses or bear arms. These restrictions, and there were more, excluded Jews from holding positions of power.

Some Jews and Christians in the Dar al-Islam converted to Islam as a result of the taxation (Lewis 25-27). They continued to work as merchants and craftsmen in parts of Yemen, Iraq and Morocco. They became economically successful because of their strong communities where they were also not affiliated with any states that the Muslims were at war with. While the Jews in the Dar al- Islam thrived economically and lived in cultural peace, they still lived as a minority. They were still subjected to unfair treatment. Discriminatory laws varied from region to region throughout the Dar al Islam and continued for hundreds of years.

Muslims and dhimmis were not able to inherit one another's riches. So, those who converted to Judaism could not inherit from their non-Muslim parents or grandparents and only

Muslim heirs could inherit them as well (Lewis 26). Dhimmis chose their professions, although they were not allowed to have occupations in the Hijaz under the Pact of Umar.

Jews were knowledgeable and had many skills that the Arabs did not care to learn. This served as an advantage for the dhimmis and for the Dar al-Islam as well. They were skilled at building, agriculture, navigation, science and art, medicine, and more importantly they were willing or sometimes expected to take jobs that Muslims had no interest in. A high number of non-Muslims also worked in diplomacy, commerce, banking, brokerage and espionage. Many would say that these are highly well respected positions, but for strict Muslims, they did not like dealing with unbelievers. They saw these jobs as “tainted and endangering the immortal souls of those engaged in them” (Lewis 28).

In Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia, Ibn Fadlan wrote about the Kingdom of the Khazars, whose king was Jewish. In the Land of Khazar, located in central Asia, the Jews were a minority living with Christians, Muslims, and Pagans. Their king, the Khaqan, was Jewish, but not very much about the history of the Khazars is well known. Adam Knobler explains that the Khazars are “described by Christians as a people without a known faith” (Gerevers and Powell 85). The Khazars might also be the Jews associated with the lost ten tribes of Israel mentioned in Isaiah and Jeremiah who, according to Christian legend, drifted somewhere in the East. In Spain, under the rule of Abd al Rahman III, a powerful man named Hasdai ibn Shaprut, served as his vizier. This was an honorable and trusted position and Shaprut was not an Arab but a Jew. Many Jewish documents during this time referred to Islam, not as an unjust rule but “an act of God’s mercy” (Aslan 96).

There were times of acceptance and times of prejudice throughout the Dar al-Islam towards Jews during many periods of Islamic rule. Under the rule of the Abbasids, Jews held

public office positions but had to endure undignified regulations concerning infidels under the laws of Harun al –Rashid, al Ma'mun, and al Mutawakkil in the 8th and 9th centuries, and under the rule of al Muqtadir and the Buwayhid emirs in Iraq in the 10th and 11th centuries. Under the Seljuk Turks in the 11th and twelfth centuries there was more tolerance of Jews in the Dar al-Islam. By the twelfth century, Jewish communities in Iraq improved when the Mongols abolished religious discrimination (Ye'or 70). This however did not last because when Ghazan converted to Islam, dhimmi laws were once again put into practice. Non-Muslims suffered from punishments that threatened the Jewish communities.

The Almoravids, during the rule of Yusuf ibn Tashfin, forced Jews to convert to Islam and avoided persecution by paying a high ransom. The Almohads forced conversion of Jews or they would be killed or exiled. Then in the thirteenth century, the Hafsids came along and told the Jews that they could convert back to Judaism as long as they paid the jizya along with other taxes. They also had to wear specific items of clothing to distinguish themselves from Muslims. The pattern continues throughout the Muslim world, where each caliphate decided the fate of the Jewish communities. Saladin ruled the non-Muslims under the Covenant of Omar, the Mamluks persecuted Jews and Christians, and then the Ottomans with their tolerance of the non-Muslims, put the Jews in a better position than they were before (Ye'or 71). Sultan Bayazid II allowed the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492 to practice their religion freely. The Ottoman Empire was the last of Muslim rule in the Levant.

Although some historians and scholars say that Jews were better off living under Muslim rule rather than under Christian rule, it does not mean that they were any less a minority or were treated fairly. To be tolerated did not mean to be loved, however it was not persecution either. The Jews made it a habit to seek refuge under less strict Muslim rule when unjust practices

varied from place to place for more than a thousand years (Ye'or 71-72). Although dhimmi laws caused Jews to be displaced, many of them never actually left the Middle East. Many Jews still held on to the hope of returning to the Promised Land in the Levant, as God had promised the people of Abraham. After the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the right of Jews to return to Palestine was honored. Under European colonial powers, Dhimmi laws were finally abolished and Jews were given land in Palestine under British mandate.

Putting aside the politics of modern day conflicts, we still need to distinguish between defining a concept and understanding a reality. Understanding conveys empathy, sympathy and acceptance whereas definition is simply description and explanation. Having the ability to understand perpetuates the capacity for one to step outside of themselves and their personal prejudices or ideologies. In following the history of the Jewish people, I understand the reality of the modern world. I sympathize with the people deemed the oppressed and the oppressors. I recognize the struggles of an intimidated people with a disheartened past.



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