Ritual Mutuality Between Jews and Muslims in North Africa

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It is common sense that when two societies are in long-term contact, they will begin to share some cultural characteristics. It is somewhat less obvious that sustained interaction may also lead to the growth of differences, often a reflecting a societal "drive" to create and sustain marks of distinction. Both processes may coexist and even reinforce one another. This may be seen with reference to the Jewish minority within the Muslim world. This essay considers some dynamics of cultural interaction in the realm of ritual among small Jewish communities in rural North Africa.

The examples to be considered derive from anthropological interviews in Israel with former residents of such small communities, as well as some historical-ethnographic data. These need to be placed, however, in a broad historical framework of Jewish life within Islamic realms. There are some perspectives relevant to all instances of Jewish communities under Islam, but also some specifics to keep in mind with regard to the case of North Africa. First, from the standpoint of Islamic law, Jews and Christians are not random minority groups, but have a defined social-religious status. Known by the term *dhimmi,* they live under the terms of an "agreement," sometimes spelled out and for the most part implicit, that they are restricted in certain ways: for example a wedding procession should not be boisterous and disturb Muslims. If *dhimmis* adhere to these rules, the Muslims in power are obliged to protect their lives and property. This "contract" is based on the recognition that there is something shared by the three religions. They all received divine revelation: Jews and Christians are "people of the book," but their lower status stems from not having accepted God's last revelation—His messages to Muhammad that form the basis of Islam.

Within this paradigm, some additional features are relevant to Jews in rural North



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Wealthy Jewish families from Tripoli (Libya), 1940s, out in the fields for the Blessing of the Trees, *Birkat Ilanot*.

Africa, the Maghrib. There is an old notion, found in some medieval Arab writers, that Jews arrived in the region before Islam was founded, in the 7th century. Not only that, there is an assertion that some of the autochthonous inhabitants—the Berbers—had converted to Judaism. Jews thus not only enjoy the merit of having been the first recipients of revelation, but were settled in the area earlier than the Arab Muslims. In this setting, the logic of "protection" in which Jews were enmeshed only partially stemmed from Islamic norms. Their situation equally reflected local structures of patronage. Jews were individually linked to tribal strongmen, whether Arab or Berber, who might display their political will by resolutely standing behind the weaker members of society who were dependent on them.

The Jews' rootedness in the area was reinforced on other levels. The Jewish ritual calendar, stemming from the seasonal cycle of the ancient Levant, is also attuned to the seasonal and agricultural regime of the Maghrib. The Jewish festivals—Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—make local ecological sense, while Muslim canonical festivals based on the lunar cycle shift across the solar year. A sense of the belonging of the Jews was also enhanced by the absence of the ancient Christian communities, all of which disappeared in the Middle Ages. This made Jews the *dhimmis,* inherent to the local scene, even as their lowered status was also part of the existential "givens."

This intimate yet intricate web of links and meanings was the ground in which the ritual life of the two groups was enmeshed even while retaining their distinctiveness. An example is the *Mimuna:* a springtime celebration of Jews in Morocco that began on the evening that Passover ends and continued into the next day. Tables in Jewish homes, adorned with green stalks, were loaded with dried fruits and nuts, beans, honey, sweets, milk, a fish, and a special post-Passover crêpe prepared with flour. Families visited each other throughout the night, with greetings for a coming year of merit and blessing. The following day, families went outdoors, picnicking in fields or near water.

The celebration engaged local Muslims who provided green stalks and wheat to the Jews, sometimes loaned clothes to young people who dressed up in Muslim garb, and invited Jews to picnic on their land. The festival had many symbolic dimensions: one meaning was the reintegration of Jews into daily life—commerce, crafts, and neighborliness—after they had been distanced from Muslims for eight days due to Passover dietary restrictions. During this period, Jews had celebrated the Exodus from Egypt and their salvation at the Red Sea, while yearning for messianic redemption. They now had to return to the gray reality of life "in exile"; the *Mimuna* assisted Jews and their neighbors to reinsert themselves into mundane routines.

In other places in North Africa, Jews would go out to fields in the spring, with the permission or even invitation of Muslims, and recite an ancient blessing—*brakha*—thanking God for the sprouting trees. This practice and the *Mimuna* "picnics" resonated with the perception of the Jews' deep roots in the land. Another expression of this notion is a custom, noted already in the Middle Ages, of Jews frolicking while pouring water on one another during the days of Shavuot. One interviewee from a mountainous region in Libya described the practice thus: "We would walk around in groups, and who ever had a 'girl friend' would try to throw water on her. And the Arabs would prepare [buckets of] water so to be able to watch how the Jews throw them [at each other]." An eyewitness from the early 20th-century also stresses how the Jews' water-play was encouraged by Muslims, who saw it as a

sign of blessing. Jews found ways of placing the custom within tradition. "The Torah is likened to water," it is asserted, and Shavuot is the festival of God's giving the Torah. It is clear that this was not the origin of the ancient practice, but a way of "Judaizing" it. Similarly, the term *mimuna*—an Arabic word meaning fortune—has been "made Jewish" by linking it to the Hebrew word *emuna*—belief.

These are a few examples of what might be called ritual mutuality, and there were also cases of Muslims expecting Jewish participation in, and acknowledgment of, Muslim practice. There is still much to be learned of how sameness and difference, intertwined with simultaneous hierarchy and collegiality, coexisted in ritual gestures as well as within the broader fabric of daily life that engaged both Muslims and Jews.