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Muslim-Jewish Sexual Liaisons Remembered and Imagined in 20th-Century Yemen

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Abstract

Despite mutual taboos against exogamy, memoirs and similar materials written by Jews from Yemen contain a number of anecdotes describing love affairs and sexual encounters between Muslims and Jews prior to the mass migration of the vast majority of Yemen's Jews to Israel in 1949–50. These stories associate these liaisons with vulnerability, poverty, and marginalization. In them, sex and conversion to Islam are intrinsically connected, yet this interreligious intimacy leads not to resolution but to ongoing identity crises that persist beyond the community's realignment with a majority-Jewish society. The staging of the anecdotes in rural areas where shari'a norms held only nominal sway, in watering places and hostels where strangers might interact, and at dusk, when identity is difficult to discern, heightened their ambiguity.

Keywords: Yemen; courtship; folklore; Muslim-Jew relations; religious conversion

In *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, Bronislaw Malinowski offers a tongue-in-cheek lament over the humdrum details of courtship and marriage among Trobriand islanders, details “that do not present any of those ‘savage’ features, so lurid, and at the same time so attractive to the antiquarian.”¹ However, he goes on: “We have to ask ourselves why, in a society where marriage adds nothing to sexual freedom, and, indeed, takes a great deal away from it, where two lovers can possess each other as long as they like without legal obligation, they still wish to be bound in marriage.”² Malinowski concludes that for them marriage functions as “a pivot in the constitution of tribal power, and in the whole economic system.”³

Here I examine accounts of sexual liaisons between Muslims and Jews in Yemen to try to discern their implicit logic using disparate corpora: Jewish folktales, memoirs by Muslims and Jews who lived before the mass emigration of Jews from Yemen to Israel in 1949–50, and folk songs by women and for women about “runaway brides.” All three corpora betray a (sometimes morbid) fascination with the topic of these forbidden liaisons, but for vastly different reasons. For the Jewish memoirists, such affairs generally trigger ongoing and unresolved identity crises. The women's songs offer a window into a frightening and chaotic world where women are in charge.

“Functional sociology,” anthropologist David Lipset observes, “has sought to evaluate romantic love in two contrary ways: as either integrative or disruptive.”⁴ Although it may seem counterintuitive to treat ostensibly factual and fictive corpora within the same study, historian Lawrence Stone, in his study of the historical development of romantic love, asks “Would anyone in fact ‘fall in love’ if they had not read about it or heard it talked about? Did poetry invent love, or love poetry?”⁵ Moreover, although

¹Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (New York: Readers' League of America/Eugenics Publishing Company, 1929), 76.

²Ibid., 78.

³Ibid., 77.

⁴David Lipset, “Modernity without Romance? Masculinity and Desire in Courtship Stories Told by Young Papua New Guianan Men,” *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 2 (2004): 206.

⁵Lawrence Stone, “Passionate Attachments in the West in Historical Perspective,” in *Passionate Attachments: Thinking about Love*, ed. Willard Gaylin and Ethel Person (New York: Free Press, 1988), 16.

the peculiar “frenetically individualistic” concept of romantic love that Stone analyzes may have originated in Western Europe, its broad dissemination through all forms of media has long since unmoored it from this context, and it is no less relevant to Yemeni Muslims and Jews or nonliterate Pacific islanders than to readers of early English novels. Although there exist striking parallels between romantic love and forbidden liaisons in their paradoxical creativity and destructiveness, it must be borne in mind that romantic love plays a role only in a few examples of the evidence that will be examined. Thus the phrase “sexual liaisons” is more accurate than a resonant, if hackneyed, “forbidden love.”

Legal and Anthropological Dimensions

Jewish law (*halakha*) does not allow the legal marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew. David Nirenberg and Moshe Yagur have written the only programmatic studies of sexual relationships between Jews and Muslims (in medieval Spain and in the Cairo Geniza, respectively).⁶ Scholarship on the diverse Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa has touched upon intermarriage and sexual liaisons between Jews and Muslims.⁷

The idea that shari‘a norms permit a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim woman of the People of the Book (a *kitābiyya*) is a commonplace in the secondary literature of Islamic studies.⁸ Indeed, historian Christian Sahner attributes the rapid Islamization of the former Byzantine Empire to the fact that Muslim men could, and did, take large numbers of Christian women as wives, concubines, and slaves. He goes on to say that solving the practical difficulties of such marriages was far from straightforward: “[The responsa literature of Ahmad ibn Hanbal]—echoed in other early legal sources—reveal[s] a world of the most intimate kinds of mixing, in which families bound together by blood might find themselves divided by religion.” He notes further that although “Christian clergy frowned upon intermarriage . . . Christians were subjects of a land they did not rule and, therefore, had to accept the marriage of Christian women to Muslim men as a melancholy fact of life.”⁹ Although the practical benefits to Muslims of permitting Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women were clear in some regions and periods (for example, the early Islamic expansion throughout former Byzantine lands or during Ottoman rule over southern Europe), there were other contexts, such as Yemen in the early 20th century, where such marriages posed serious problems to Muslims as well as Jews.

In Islamic legal literature, two main substantive branches of the law informed the question of whether or not unions between Muslims and Jews could be licit: (1) the question of whether or not a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim, which falls under the rules of *nikāḥ* (licit sexual intercourse), and (2) spousal equality of status, or *kafā‘a*.

⁶David Nirenberg, “Love between Muslim and Jew in Medieval Spain: A Triangular Affair,” in *Jews, Muslims, and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon: Essays in Honour of Professor Elena Lourie*, ed. Harvey J. Hames (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 127–55; Moshe Yagur, “Religiously Mixed Families in the Mediterranean Society of the Cairo Geniza,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 35, no. 1 (2020): 27–42.

⁷In France, see Michel LeClerc’s 2010 film *Le Nom de gens*, the love story of a French Ashkenazi Jew and a French-Algerian Muslim; and the index (“romantic relationships”) of Ethan B. Katz, *Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). In Morocco: Laila Marrakchi’s 2005 film, *Marock*, about an affair between a Jewish man and a Muslim woman in Casablanca; and André Levy, *Return to Casablanca: Jews, Muslims, and an Israeli Anthropologist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 107–8. In Iraq: Mordechai Zaken, *Jewish Subjects and Their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007), 252–57, 261. In Israel and Palestine: Sami Mikhail’s 1988 novel *Hasut* (Refuge); Soddik Gohar, “Mapping the Image of the Jew in Postmodern Arabic Fiction,” *The Postcolonialist* 2, no. 1 (2014): 2–14; *Aravim Rokdim* (*Dancing Arabs*, also released as *A Borrowed Identity*), a 2014 film directed by Eran Riklis based on the Hebrew novel by Sayed Kashua of the same name; the 2017 controversy over the inclusion of Dorit Rabinyan’s *Gader Haya* (*All the Rivers*) in the national secondary school curriculum; Zmiron Ron David, “Sippurei Ahava be-Ezorei Sikhsukh: Sippurim Ishiyim Be’al Peh u-Miktavim” (PhD diss., Ben Gurion University, 2017); “A Rising Tide? Mixed Families in Israel,” *Journal of Israeli History* 36, no. 2 (2017). It is also the central theme of Dror Zahavi’s 2008 film, *Bishvil Aba Sheli* (*For My Father*), Keren Yedaya’s 2009 *Kalat ha-yam* (*Jaffa*), and Muayad Alayan’s 2019 *al-Taqarir hawl sarah wa-salim* (*The Reports on Sarah and Saleem*). Sameh Zoabi and Dan Kleinman’s 2018 film *Tel Aviv ‘al ha-esh* (*Tel Aviv on Fire*) brilliantly satirizes the entire genre of Arab-Jewish love stories in fiction and film.

⁸See the references in Christian Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 60n132.

⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

Yemeni Muslims were (and are) roughly equally divided between (Shī'i) Zaydis and (Sunni) Shafī'i. Nevertheless, during the first half of the 20th century, which is the focus here, Zaydis could and did impose their interpretation of Islam upon the Shafī'i populace. Zaydi jurists denied the legality of a Muslim man marrying a non-Muslim woman, or even a Shafī'i for that matter.¹⁰

The British-Palestinian jurist Jamal Nasir first drew attention to the relevance of *kafā'a* to interfaith liaisons in his 1955 SOAS University of London dissertation. In theory, those jurists who permit Muslim men to marry women from the "People of the Book" also allow them to "marry down." Only the Twelver school categorically forbids a Muslim man to marry a *kitābiyya*. It is a matter of controversy within other *madhāhib* (schools of law). Thus, the commonplace assertion that a Muslim man can marry a *kitābiyya* needs qualification.¹¹

Many jurists considered equality of profession (*hirfa*) relevant in determining *kafā'a*, and certain professions (barbers, cuppers, weavers, donkey drivers, watchmen, grocers, scavengers) conferred low status. Commenting upon changing attitudes toward these professions in the mid-1950s, Nasir noted that "in al-Yaman, for example, craftsmen were, until very recently, Jews or people of low social status."¹² Nasir was certainly not the first to point to this sociological fact, yet by placing it in the context of *kafā'a* he explains why Muslim men in Yemen might have been reluctant to marry Jews (and Muslim women converts to Islam from Judaism), even though profession was not a basis for *kafā'a* among Zaydis, who made up roughly half of the Muslim population of Yemen. In 1939, Ettore Rossi observed that, in northern Yemen, Hashimite *sāda* (families who claimed descent from Muhammad's daughter, Fatima) only married other *sāda*, Zaydis never married Shafī'is, and neither would marry the black pariah castes (called *'abid* or *akhdām*).¹³ Imam Yahya (r. 1904–48) relaxed the rules of *kafā'a*, and his son, Imam Ahmad (r. 1948–62), in turn, is said to have tightened them yet again.¹⁴

As for the other roughly half of Yemen's Muslim population—the Shafī'is—Nasir wrote: "I understand from Dr. R. Serjeant that among the Shafī'is in Hadramaut the custom is that no woman of any social class such as the sayyid and shaiikh classes or tribesmen, craftsmen (*miskin*), agricultural workers (*ḍā'if*) can marry into a class below her own."¹⁵

Whether or not Serjeant's observations on Hadramawt would apply to the other predominantly Shafī'i regions of Yemen is not clear. Nevertheless, it suggests that marrying down to Jews, although allowed in theory, was not generally practiced. The evidence of the memoirs, presented below, will shed light on what actually happened, versus the concern of jurists with what was supposed to happen.

Nasir demonstrates convincingly that in the legal literature on *kafā'a*, "religion" (*dīn*) denotes piety, and not Islam per se.¹⁶ Zaydis were divided as to whether equality in piety satisfied the requirement of *kafā'a* or whether equality of descent (*nasab*) also was required. The latter had the potential to complicate the picture considerably. Was a Hashimite superior to a non-Hashimite? Was a Qurayshi superior to a Muttalibi? What about a run-of-the mill Arab? Was an Arab superior to a Persian? A Persian to a Turk? Where did various non-Muslims fall within this familial and ethnic hierarchy?

In a marginal note to the *Commentary [on the Book of] the Flowers (Sharh al-Azhar)*, the Imam al-Mu'ayyad Yahya ibn Hamza (1270–1346) brings up an argument (which he proceeds to contest) that the Jews of Yemen constitute a special case in that they are Arabs who converted

¹⁰Ahmad ibn Qasim al-'Ansi, *al-Taj al-Mudhhab li-Ahkam al-Madhhab* (Sanaa: Dar al-Hikma al-Yamaniyya, 1993), 2:210; 'Abd Allah ibn Miftah, *Sharh al-Azhar* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Turath al-Islami, 2014), 4:482–484.

¹¹See, for example, Alex B. Leeman, "Reexamining Interfaith Marriage in Islam: An Examination of the Legal Theory behind the Traditional and Reformist Positions," *Indiana Law Journal* 84 (2009): 755; and Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 4th ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 348.

¹²Jamal J. Nasir, "The Doctrine of Kafaa According to the Early Islamic Authorities and Modern Practice, with a Critical Edition of the Zaidi MS 'al-Mir'at al-Mubayyina li-l-Nazir ma Huwa al-Haqq fi Mas'alat al-Kafa'a' by al-Sayyid al-Hasan b. Ishaq b. al-Mahdi" (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, 1955), 172.

¹³Ettore Rossi, *L'Arabo Parlato a san'a' (Grammatica-Testi-Lessico)* (Rome: Istituto Per L'Oriente, 1939), 97–102.

¹⁴Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 204, 214.

¹⁵Nasir, "Doctrine," 64n18.

¹⁶Ibid., 11–12.

to Judaism.¹⁷ This suggests that at least a small minority of Muslims argued that Yemeni Jews had a higher status than run-of-the-mill Jews by virtue of being ethnically Arab.

In ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Sablani’s 1970 *Wrestling with Death (Musara’at al-Mawt)*, a work of historical fiction about the 1962 Yemeni Revolution, a forbidden love affair takes center stage. The novel, shot through with an anticlerical tone, details the struggle to get married of a Muslim couple from differing social backgrounds. The novel is noteworthy here insofar as it includes a reproduction of an actual fatwa that a prominent judge under Imam Yahya, a judge who was beheaded after the revolution, wrote on the topic of *kafā’a*.

Although the practical reasons for Jews’ acquiescence to what Sahner calls the “melancholy fact of life,” namely that Jewish women would leave the fold with Muslim men, are perfectly clear, it is worth asking whether they derived any benefit from the practice.¹⁸ In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that endogamy, which can be reduced *ad absurdum* to incest, necessarily coexists with exogamy, and further, that such exogamy complements endogamy. On one level, the reaction of Yemeni Jews to the phenomenon of Jewish women marrying Muslims was shaped by the exogamy taboo. One can presume that the sole reason Jewish communities did not inflict violence upon those who contravened the taboo in reality (as opposed to in fiction) was that they were not in a position to do so. However, it is worth considering whether the infrequent outmarriage of women might have possessed any social benefit, or complementarity, in Lévi-Straussian terms.

Economist Murat Iyigun argues that there was a direct relationship between the Christianity of an Ottoman sultan’s mother and his unwillingness to make war against her land of birth. “A European [Christian] matrilineal tie reduced the Ottomans’ military ventures in Europe (or against them) by close to 70%.”¹⁹ This suggests an element of reciprocity in non-Muslim–Muslim female exogamy that might work as a kind of strategic miscegenation leading to “crypto-kinship.”

In what follows, I explore a variety of functions that Muslim–Jewish liaisons perform in a diverse collection of sources. Within these sources, distinguishing between Arabic and Hebrew as markers of Islam or Jewishness is quite problematic. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, I describe the sources as Jewish or Muslim.

The Evidence of the Jewish Sources

According to a Jewish proverb from Yemen, only two things separated Muslims from Jews: “butchering animals and licit sexual intercourse” (*al-dhabāḥ wa-l-nikāḥ*).²⁰ Although the proverb, and the social ethos it represented, considered the consumption of nonkosher meat a red line beyond which Jews dared not tread if they planned to remain Jews, Bat Zion Eraqi Klorman and I have discussed the many problem cases that arose in the daily interactions between Muslims and Jews in connection with it.²¹

Significant ambiguities also surrounded sex, the second red line in the proverb. Jewish folktales from Yemen warned Jews of the undesirability, even danger, posed by intimate relationships with Muslims. One tale (or perhaps a mere rumor) attributes the devastating Mawza’ exile (*galut mawza’*) in 1679 to impregnation of the reigning Imam’s daughter by a Jew.²²

A more widespread tale involves the wonder-working rabbi Salim al-Shabazi (d. circa 1679). According to it, the reigning Imam took a fancy to Shabazi’s daughter, Sham’ah, and asked the sage

¹⁷Ibn Miftah, *Sharh al-Azhar*, 4:484.

¹⁸Sahner, *Christian Martyrs*, 61.

¹⁹Murat Iyigun, “Lessons From the Ottoman Harem on Ethnicity, Religion, and War,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 61, no. 4 (2013): 712.

²⁰Yehudah Ratzhaby, “Yehudim u-Muslimim bi-Sifrut ha-Meshalim,” in *Be-Me’aglot Teman: Mivhar Mehqarim be-Tarbut Yehude Teman* (Tel Aviv: Author, 1987), 231; Isaac Hollander, “Ibra in Highland Yemen: Two Jewish Divorce Settlements,” *Islamic Law and Society* 2, no. 1 (1995): 1; Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, “Muslim Society as an Alternative: Jews Converting to Islam,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14 (2007): 108.

²¹Eraqi Klorman, “Muslim Society,” 101–2, 108; index (“*kashrut*”) of Mark S. Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law in Early 20th-Century Yemen* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

²²In 1679 the reigning Imam ordered Yemen’s Jews to be assembled at Mawza’, a port on the Red Sea coast, until their removal to India could be arranged. Reuben Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry: Origins, Culture, and Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 121; Dan Ben-Amos, ed., *Folktales of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 3:224. On this historical episode see Yosef Tobi, “Mawza’, Expulsion of,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010).

to consent to his marrying her. Although her father outwardly consented, either God, Shabazi, or some combination of the two caused her to fall from her horse and die on her procession to the wedding. Alternatively, just before the wedding she miraculously willed herself to disappear into a batch of batter for sourdough flatbread. Her grave, in Najd al-Walid, became a pilgrimage site. This motif is common enough that the Israel Folklore Archives developed an oikotype for it and others like it: 956*F, “Young Girl Chooses Death over Submitting Herself to a Gentile Pursuer.” This case also fits Stith Thompson’s motifs, including C162.3, “Tabu: marrying outside of group (or caste),” T321, “Escape from undesired lover by suicide,” and T326, “Suicide to save virginity.”²³

Such warnings against the contravention of the exogamy taboo are what one might expect. Remarkably, they represent only one element of the overall picture. Menashe Anzi, Bat Zion Eraqi Klorman, and I have made ample use of the corpus of roughly fifty memoirs and memoir-like accounts that have proliferated from the 1980s until today.²⁴ I describe the difficulties these sources present in the introduction to *Jews and Islamic Law in Early 20th-Century Yemen*.²⁵ To summarize the main points here, the authors of these works are largely elderly and religiously observant and often lack a high degree of formal education. The works themselves are self-published, arbitrarily organized, and unindexed. Although many of these works contain reproductions of Arabic documents the authors brought to Israel from Yemen and what purport to be verbatim conversations in Arabic, storytelling motifs and the intervention of supernatural powers in human affairs tend to proliferate. Despite their challenges, the use of rich sources such as these for research on the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa ought to be more widespread.

The evidence of the memoirs shows that even if a Jewish woman converted to Islam and married a Muslim, hers was very much an “entry-level” position in the new social hierarchy. Imam Yahya had a bodyguard, a black slave named Sumsam Tawfiq b. ‘Abd Allah. After Sumsam was freed, he was unable to find a Muslim woman to marry. Thus, he chose a Jewish woman, older and unmarried, who agreed to convert to Islam and marry him.²⁶ For Zaydis, *kafa’a* depended upon either piety alone or piety and lineage. Where lineage was concerned, the main factor was whether or not a woman was a Hashimite. A Jewish writer, Nissim Gamlieli, observed the practical manner in which lineage operated beyond the Hashimite–non-Hashimite divide. He said that society was composed of three classes, each of which had its own elite: *sāda*, who descended from the Prophet Muhammad; tribesmen, some of whom were immensely powerful; and those who held low-status professions or were black, but who were rich in some cases. A Jewish woman who converted and was not a virgin could only marry a man from the last group.²⁷ Another Jewish writer adds the strongest piece of evidence for the conceptual overlap between Jewishness and blackness as markers of social marginality in Yemen. In a letter from 1949, Shalom Qorah wrote that whereas Jews were asked to teach their professions to Muslims before emigrating to Israel, Jewish sanitation workers had to teach that specific job to black people.²⁸

²³Ben-Amos, *Folktales*, 3:222–225.

²⁴Menashe Anzi, “Yehudei Tsan’a be-Idan Shel Temurot, Diyun Histori ba-Merhav ha-Tsibori: Mi-ha-Kibush ha-‘Othmani ve’ad ‘Aliyatam le-Yisra’el, 1872–1950” PhD Diss, The Hebrew University, 2011; Bat Zion Eraqi Klorman, *Traditional Society in Transition: The Yemeni Jewish Experience* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015); Bat Zion Eraqi Klorman, “The Forced Conversion of Jewish Orphans in Yemen,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 1 (2001): 23–47; Eraqi Klorman, “Muslim Society”; Mark S. Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*; Wagner, “Jewish Mysticism on Trial in a Muslim Court: A *Fatwa* on the *Zohar*, Yemen 1914,” *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 2 (2007): 207–31; Wagner, “*Halakhah* through the Lens of *Shari’ah*: The Case of the Kuhlani Synagogue in San’a’, 1933–1944,” in *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam: The Religious, Scientific and Cultural Dimensions*, ed. Michael Laskier and Yaacov Lev (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), 126–46; Wagner, “When Jews Attack: Towards a Social Psychology of Inter-Communal Violence in Yemen,” in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: A Festschrift in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*, ed. Joseph E. Lowry and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2017), 416–24; Wagner, “Rekhush Yehudi be-Teman ve-ha-Be’ayah Shel Hoqe Matsranut be-Mishpat ha-Islamit,” in *The Jews of Yemen: Identity and Heritage*, ed. Yosef Tobi and Aharon Gaimani (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute and Bar Ilan University Press, 2019), 101–18.

²⁵Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 12–15.

²⁶Taqiya bint al-Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din, *Yatimat al-Ahzan fi Hawadith al-Zaman: Dhikrayat Taqiya bint al-Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din Rahamahu Allah* (Beirut: n. p., 2008); Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 16, 72.

²⁷Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 8.

²⁸Shalom (Salim) Mansura, *‘Aliyat Mirbad ha-Qsamim: Tiyyur ha-‘Aliyah ha-Gedola Shel Yehude Teman*, ed. Moshe Gavra (Bene Beraq, Israel: Ha-Makhon le-Heqer Hakhme Teman, 2003), 293.

In theory, conversion to Islam ought to signify an individual Jew's figurative rebirth as a Muslim. The legal shorthand for this idea was the hadith: "Islam effaces that which precedes it" (*al-Islām yajubbū mā qablahu*). In practice, this was not the case. Arabic expressions like "the stupid Jew's sidelocks are on the inside" (*al-Yahūdī al-ghabī zanānīruh fī qalbih*); "a Jew is a Jew, even if he converts to Islam" (*al-Yahūdī Yahūdī wa-law aslam*); or "Jewishness is in the heart [and cannot be removed]" (*al-yahwada fī al-qalb*) capture this idea.

Similarly, a Jewish proverb concerning a convert who dies immediately after conversion says of that person: "Moses is not happy with him, nor will Muhammad intercede on his behalf" (*lā tijammal minhu Mūsa wa-lā shafa' lahu Muḥammad*).²⁹ In one Jewish folktale, villagers in an exclusively Jewish village were chagrined to find that not one of the cows they slaughtered was kosher. When they converted to Islam to spite the God of Israel, God had the last laugh. They became the lowest-status Muslims of all: black "town criers" (*dawāshīn*) who lived in tents and could not intermarry with other tribesmen.

One of the findings that can be gleaned from the Jewish memoirs is that kinship ties between Jews and Jews who converted to Islam normally persisted after the conversion itself. In the third volume of his memoirs, construction worker, poet, and autodidact Ratson Halevi describes a meeting between two Jewish orphan-smugglers, Itamar Sayyani and his nephew, Yosef, with a wealthy Muslim named 'Atif (or 'Awatif) al-Kindi, who had formerly been a Jew, in Shahara, in the far north of Yemen, in the 1920s or 1930s. The men have an amusing conversation:

[AK]: Why did you come such a long way to speak with me?

[IS]: In order to ask you if you believe in the religion to which you converted.

[AK]: What if I told you that there are a thousand ways to reach God, including through Islam, which upholds the seven Noahide laws?³⁰

[IS]: Is Judaism one of them?

[AK]: On this issue there is no need to mince words. The way of Israel's Torah is the best way.

[IS]: Then why did you leave the path of Israel?

[AK]: I owe you my gratitude for asking that question. In truth, I could kiss you. Out of all of the Jews I know it never occurred to even one of them to ask why I changed my religion. The reason was saving a life. I know that you will say: it is impossible to save a life by changing one's religion unless one does so as a ruse to escape and return to Judaism, as Maimonides ruled.

For me it was simply an issue of love, lust, and sex (*ahava, yetzrim ve-znunim*). [My family] moved next-door to a respected [Muslim] farming family. They had a pretty daughter. She loved me. I loved her. And so we fell into doing something that must not be done. Then [her family] came to betroth her to her cousin so she told her father what had happened between us. Those people were moderate and decent. They advised me: 'either convert to Islam and get married or off with your head.' I won't deny that I chose what I chose and you see with your own eyes my success in life. You know the power of love for a woman.³¹

It is noteworthy that Halevi's anecdote about 'Atif al-Kindi is one of the few that mentions love. Relatively easy interactions between Jews and former Jews, such as the one described above, may have been the norm rather than the exception. (However, as in Christian Europe, divulging of Jewish concepts by converts could get Jews in trouble).³²

In a recent publication, Danny Bar Ma'oz describes a meeting between a Jewish woman who was born in Yemen and emigrated to Canada and a Jewish family in Yemen in the early 1990s. During her visit to

²⁹Ratzhaby, "Yehudim u-Muslimim," 234; Nasir Yahya, "Suwar al-Yahudi 'al-Murabi wa al-Mutadayyin' bi Amthal al-Yaman," *al-Jazeera*, Nov. 5, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2016/5/11/%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%87%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%84>.

³⁰See Matthew P. Van Zile, "The Sons of Noah and the Sons of Abraham: The Origins of Noahide Law," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 48, no. 3 (2017): 386–417.

³¹Ratson Halevi, *Derakhim me-'Olam le-'Olam* (Tel Aviv: Afiqim, 2006), 42–43.

³²On a conspiracy theory concerning the Jewish origins of the Qur'an, see Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 66.

one of the Jewish homes in Rayda, a local [Muslim] Arab entered the house with his wife. The foreign woman wanted to converse with the guests, but the homeowner instructed her to leave them alone, since the wife of his Arab neighbor was a Jewish woman who had converted to Islam. It follows, therefore, that the Jewish society did not necessarily excommunicate converted women, and the event herein described attests to the good neighborly relations the Jews had with Muslims, even when the latter had consummated marriages with their daughters.³³

Although Bar Ma'oz perhaps paints with too broad a brush, the anecdote certainly suggests that the Jewish woman who converted to Islam had no compunctions about interacting socially with her Jewish neighbors. Nor is this phenomenon limited to the post-1962 period, when Yemen's Jewish communities represented a tiny remnant of their former selves.

In his study of the records of the Sanaa rabbinical court, Amnon Hever noticed that Jewish converts to Islam often divorced in Jewish religious courts. What was their incentive to do so after said courts no longer had any moral authority? Hever surmises that a financial reward may have been in the offing.³⁴ Yet it is possible that they maintained some allegiance to the moral authority of the Jewish courts, to their Jewish kin, or some combination of these factors. One memoirist tells of the heroic efforts of Jewish and Muslim half-brothers to meet face-to-face following the brief thaw in Arab-Israeli relations that the Oslo Accords afforded.³⁵ What would have been the purpose of such efforts had one or both of the brothers not recognized the continuing validity of their kinship ties? Such crypto-kinship between Muslims and Jews also may have undergirded the persistent suspicions that certain prominent Muslims' origins lay in one of the humblest of places: among Yemen's Jewish minority.³⁶

In 1989, a Jewish Israeli writer of Yemeni origin, Yonah 'Amir-Wahb Levi, published a historical novel in Hebrew with the hebraized Arabic title *Kadya*. In Yemeni Arabic, *kādhiya* is the aromatic screw-pine plant and a woman's name: in this case, the novel's protagonist. The story is based upon the suspicion, widespread among Jews from Yemen, that Imam Yahya took a Jewish wife. In the book's prologue, scholar Yosef Tobi states that the book was "written primarily based upon the testimony of a Jewish woman who used to visit the Imam's palace often" but constituted a "literary work of fiction, and not a documented historical source."³⁷ In this manner, the novel's academic introducer mischievously complicates the question of the plot's historicity. As noted above, the comingling of the factual and the fictive is endemic to the memoirs and memoir-like sources in question.

One particular detail, that an ordinary pair of shoes played a key role in determining with which of his many wives Imam Yahya would spend the night, occurs only here and in his daughter Taqiya's memoir, suggesting that the novel's oral source was indeed privy to sensitive information.³⁸ On the other hand, information concerning the Imam's wives and the maternity of his fourteen sons and unknown number of daughters is so scanty as to invite speculation.

One scene foreshadows the centrality of the ambiguity that inheres in the boundaries between Muslim and Jew, an ambiguity that is apparently more relevant to women than to men. Already at the age of nine, the novel's protagonist, Kadya, is surprised to learn from her Jewish friend that Muslim women draw water from the same well as those in the village to which they have been forced by circumstances to relocate: "How is it that I could not tell them [from us]? Can you tell them from Jewish women? "Of course I can," her friend says. "In time you also will learn to distinguish between a Jewish woman and an Arab woman, even if they dress similarly. Pay close attention and you will know."³⁹

Early in the novel, the Jew Kadya's parents die, and she is seized by the Muslim state under the authority of Yemen's Orphans' Decree. In the story, she is brought to live in the Imam's residence in al-Qafla

³³Danny Bar Ma'oz, "The Jewish Remnant in Yemen (1962–2017)" in *Ascending the Palm Tree: An Anthology of the Yemenite Jewish Heritage*, ed. Rachel Yedid and Danny Bar Ma'oz (Rehovot, Israel: E'ele Be-Tamar, 2018), 359.

³⁴Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 24.

³⁵Shalom Lahav, *Qehilat Yehude Bayhan* (Netanya, Israel: Ha-Aguda la-Tipuah Hevra ve-Tarbut, 1996), 132–37.

³⁶Yonah Levi-Wahb, *Kadya* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1989), 10; Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 66–67.

³⁷Levi-Wahb, *Kadya*, 10–11.

³⁸Ibid., 52; Taqiya bint al-Imam Yahya, *Yatimat al-Ahzan*, 13–15.

³⁹Levi-Wahb, *Kadya*, 23.

village.⁴⁰ She refuses to wear any of the showy clothes presented to her, and instead wears only black, in solidarity with her coreligionists.⁴¹ Nevertheless, she is soon seduced by the opulence of her surroundings and the Imam's solicitous attention (he is portrayed as a sensitive lover).⁴² Her conversion to Islam is implicit but is not described in the narrative. Her only reflection on her personal history seems to be borne by an animal fable she heard from her aunt.

[All of the Imam's children] especially loved [Kadya's] story of the hungry fox who sneaked into the vineyard through a small hole in the wall and gorged himself on grapes. In three days, he got so fat that he could not escape through the same hole so he was compelled to fast for three days so that he would become skinny again. Finally, when he was able to get out, he looked back and said: "Vineyard, vineyard, what is the use of your grapes if I enter you hungry and leave hungry?"⁴³

In Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes the fox cannot reach the grapes and so belittles them as sour. In this version, the fox gets the grapes but ends up no better off, much like the convert in the Jewish proverb who pleases neither Moses nor Muhammad.

In the story, Kadya bears the Imam three children, Ahmad, Ibrahim, and Sharifa, but never acquiesces to eat nonkosher meat.⁴⁴ When she is very ill and needs meat for her strength, she sends a Jewish servant on a secret mission to fetch her kosher chicken.⁴⁵

The author's choice of Ahmad and Ibrahim as Kadya's two sons heightens the plot's drama considerably. (Again, although there were rumors that Imam Yahya took a Jewish wife and had children by her, there is no proof.) In real life, Imam Yahya's son Ibrahim sided with those who rebelled against his father and became prime minister under the short-lived government of 'Abd Allah al-Wazir (February–March, 1948). His elder brother, Ahmad, who stayed loyal to his father, had him poisoned after al-Wazir took power and became Yemen's last Imam. In the novel's Hebrew, this fratricidal struggle echoes the deadly sibling rivalries of the Hebrew Bible. In one instance, Imam Ahmad's putative Jewishness in the novel forces the author into a difficult place. In real life, in the early 1930s Ahmad had the tomb of Rabbi Salim al-Shabazi in Taizz destroyed as part of a general campaign of destroying Sufi tombs.⁴⁶ In *Kadya*, an underling of his undertakes this action.⁴⁷ Moreover, the saintly rabbi later appears to Imam Ahmad in a dream and inspires him to save Yemen's Jews from an Arab plot to kill them all.⁴⁸

In *Kadya*, the main characters' crypto-Jewishness provides a layer of irony. It also introduces the romantic cliché of *cri du sang*, the idea that relatives can unconsciously recognize their affinity with one another.⁴⁹ Like Harun al-Rashid in *The 1001 Nights*, Ibrahim disguises himself to go unnoticed among his father's subjects. In *Kadya*, he dresses like a Jew to satisfy his curiosity about the Jewish Quarter. Unbeknownst to him, he shares Jewish ancestry with those he encounters.⁵⁰ Kadya's daughter Sharifa is widowed when her husband is identified among the plotters of Imam Yahya's assassination. She

⁴⁰The Orphan's Decree arose out of a dispute within Zaydi Islam in the 18th century in which a group of Muslim scholars argued that Jewish minors whose fathers had died should be seized by the state and raised as Muslims. Although it seems to have fallen into desuetude, Imam Yahya renewed it when he took power from the Ottoman Empire following the 1911 Treaty of Da'an. See Eraqi Klorman, "Forced Conversion"; Aharon Gaimani, "The 'Orphans' Decree' in Yemen: Two New Episodes," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (2004): 171–84; Ari Ariel, "Orphans' Decree" (*Gezerat ha-Yetomim*) in *Encyclopedia*, ed. Stillman; Ari Ariel, *Jewish-Muslim Relations and Migration From Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014); and Kerstin Hünefeld, "Dhimma-Raum: Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din, die Juden Sanaa, und die (Aus-)Handlung islamischen Rechts im zaiditischen Jemen" (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2019), 278–363.

⁴¹Levi-Wahb, *Kadya*, 51, 53.

⁴²Ibid., 75, 122.

⁴³Ibid., 82.

⁴⁴Ibid., 45, 77, 87.

⁴⁵Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 90.

⁴⁷Levi-Wahb, *Kadya*, 159.

⁴⁸Ibid., 166.

⁴⁹See Silvia Montiglio, "The Call of Blood: Greek Origins of a Motif, from Euripides to Heliodorus," *Syllecta Classica* 22 (2011): 113–29.

⁵⁰Levi-Wahb, *Kadya*, 125.

goes to live in Taizz with her brother, Ahmad. She meets a Jew and elopes with him, changes her name to Ruth, and the two leave Yemen for Israel.⁵¹ Ahmad sends men to look for her, but secretly hopes they will not find her, wryly observing: “a kidnapped girl daughter of a kidnapped girl—unbelievable!”⁵²

The idea that the lives of the Hamid al-Din Imams interacted with the grand narrative of Jewish salvation history is quite common in memoirs by Jews from Yemen, beyond the work in question here. For example, in *Kadya* the princes obtain alcohol from Jews and are caught drinking by their father. He then cracks down on Jewish alcohol production, and God punishes him by causing another of his sons to drown.⁵³ Of course, the idea of Jewish exogamy as part of a divine plan is not new; it informs the theology of the Book of Esther.

Two Jewish sources describe an instructive case of a young Jewish married woman who converted to Islam to marry a Muslim, but they differ sharply on key details. According to Gamlieli’s account, the Jewish community of Qa’taba, a town on the border between north Yemen (under the control of the Imams) and the British-controlled Aden Protectorate, was exceptionally small and weak. Nevertheless, one local Jewish man rose to prominence and wealth, in part through his strong relationships with the Muslim elite.

The Jew became infatuated with, and took as a second wife, a substantially younger Jewish woman. When it became clear that the old man was sterile (he had no children by his first wife) other Jews advised him to grant her a divorce but he refused to do so. Meanwhile the Muslims who thronged his house by day “jeered at the bearded man whose largesse they enjoyed and incited the pretty woman to change her religion in order to be rid of the sterile and impotent old man.”

One day, having been promised marriage to the local governor, she slipped away to the customs house and converted to Islam. However, the governor did not keep his promise and made her a mere concubine. When she complained, he married her off to a low-level servant who was “virile and muscular.” The woman was finally reduced to being a “concubine and a miserable peon” who “cranked out babies like a bitch.” Meanwhile, when news of the matter spread, the ex-husband lost everything he had since Muslim creditors no longer repaid debts owed to him, and he left Yemen for Israel with nothing but the shirt on his back.⁵⁴

Gamlieli’s account combines several oikotypes: the old man who “bites off more than he can chew” wife-wise; the willful ignorance of good advice from pious coreligionists; the flouting of the ban on exogamy; the fragility of reputation; and the imminent downfall of the “gold-digging” woman. Within the larger narrative of the 1966 book in which the anecdote is contained, *Yemen and [Aden’s] Camp Redemption (Teman u-Mahanat Ge’ula)*, detailing the trials and tribulations of Jews who emigrated from Yemen, the man of Qa’taba represents a Jewish refugee who is morally culpable for his own penury and that of other innocents.

Like many Jews who made their way from northern Yemen to Aden, Shalom Bene Moshe stopped in Qa’taba. There he stayed the night with the Jew in question, who he describes as generous, handsome, wealthy, and sterile. Unlike Gamlieli, Bene Moshe further specifies that the man used his family home as a hostel for traveling merchants and soldiers in the Imam’s army. The next morning, as Bene Moshe was leaving town, he saw throngs of Muslims playing drums and blowing trumpets in celebration of a Jew’s conversion to Islam. The Jew in question turned out to be the younger wife, Trunja, who had fled her husband’s house in the middle of the night. She converted to Islam and married the governor. (Bene Moshe ends the story there.)⁵⁵

Several elements of the two anecdotes benefit from additional context. Social contact between Muslim men and Jewish women was relatively common. Due to their less strict standards of modesty, Jewish women could work as servants, nannies, launderers, and clothing ironers in Muslim homes.⁵⁶ In the popular imagination, even after the mass emigration of the Jews of Yemen in 1949–50, Muslim men

⁵¹Ibid., 191.

⁵²Ibid., 198.

⁵³Ibid., 143.

⁵⁴Nissim Gamlieli, *Teman u-Mahanat Ge’ula* (Tel Aviv: Author, 1966), 106. Eraqi-Klorman discusses this case in “Muslim Society,” 99, 104.

⁵⁵Shalom Bene Moshe, *Sefer Bamsila Na’ale* (Rehovot, Israel: Author, 1988), 100–1.

⁵⁶Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 97.

remembered Jewish women as being particularly beautiful (although one wonders how much of this reputation derived from the fact that they were generally the only unveiled women in urban settings).

Despite the allowable social mixing of Muslim men and Jewish women, travelers' hostels (*samāsira*) were considered houses of ill repute. S. D. Goitein translated the word "*funduqiyya*" (hotel-woman) as it occurred in Cairo Geniza documents as "prostitute."⁵⁷ Karl Rathjens, who did research in Yemen in the mid-1930s, wrote in 1951 that women who owned hostels for male travelers in towns and villages of highland Yemen made prostitutes available to their guests. Two Jewish writers who describe such specialized hostels in the southern towns of Ibb and Lahj, both run by widows, say that guests were notable Muslims and Jews. Similarly, in the "Dawdahiya" stories the father of the girl who goes astray allows strangers to spend the night in the family home.⁵⁸

Moreover, 'ulama' in Yemen complain bitterly about the sexual freedom that they perceive to be the norm in rural tribal areas and point to it as a key area where shari'a has yet to overcome local custom. A 17th-century writer complains that the people of northernmost Yemen allowed a woman to leave her husband and remarry whenever and whomever she wanted. Anthropologist Walter Dostal discusses the "phenomenon of socially permitted pre- and extramarital sexual relations practiced by girls and wives in South Arabian tribes." In 1951 Karl Rathjens wrote that among tribes in northern and eastern Yemen, "offering women as sexual hospitality (*Gastfreundschaftsprostitution*) is still common." One contemporary Yemeni qadi complains bitterly that tribal shaykhs marry off pregnant unmarried women without following shari'a rules governing fornication.⁵⁹

Taking account of the anecdote's staging in a hostel, where women were implicitly "available" to men, its setting in a tribal area where looser sexual norms prevailed, the Jew's age and sterility, and the second wife's youth, the narrator has set up the story as a "perfect storm" that only the husband's negligence explains.

High-status Muslim women (*sharifa/sharā'if*) generally observed elaborate precautions against coming into contact with non-*mahram* (unmarriageable kin) men. To avoid such contact, women ordinarily used prepubescent errand boys (*dawādira*), who they kept in confidence. Such servants, who might be Jewish, might facilitate extramarital affairs for their mistresses. Yehiel Hibshush heard from a Muslim who sold butter to his family that a wealthy woman had espied him making a delivery to her home. Taken with his good looks, neat appearance, and the thick and unruly mass of hair on his head (called a *qa'sha* in Yemeni Arabic), she made advances toward him. After he failed to ascertain their import, she sent her *duwaydār* to speak frankly with him and the adults' affair began in earnest (or so the butter-salesman claimed).⁶⁰

When he was a boy, Avraham 'Ovadia's father worked as a mattress-maker and upholsterer in a new residence of Imam Yahya's. The Jewish boy became a confidant of, and messenger for, the Imam's wives and the Imam himself. Once he softly sang a song in Arabic by R. Salim al-Shabazi: "O my beloved, how cruel you are, being away from you has disturbed my mind and you are well aware of it" (*yā khillī l-mahbūb wa-kam ḥadd al-jafā / hijrek balash 'aqlī wa-mā minnek khafā*). The wives insisted he repeat the song in a loud voice and all burst into tears, having interpreted the verses as references to themselves. The Imam's wives, especially one young and pretty one, joked with him, gave him sweets, and advised him to convert to Islam. He found the attention intimidating and asked to go back to stay at home with his mother.⁶¹ In her memoir from 2008, Imam Yahya's daughter Taqiya offers a fascinating glimpse into their family life. In it, she writes that one of her father's other wives, Huriya al-Mutawakkil, took a keen interest in befriending the Jewish women who worked as domestic servants and cleaning ladies in the palace with the hope that they might convert to Islam. One such Jewish convert taught the author to

⁵⁷S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Depicted in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), vol. 1, 350.

⁵⁸Mark S. Wagner, "A Murder Ballad between Yemen, Israel, and the Internet: The Mystery of the Dawdahi Girl," in *Jews and Muslims in the Modern Age: Place, Language, and Memory*, ed. Nancy Berg and Dina Danon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁹Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 4–5.

⁶⁰Yehiel Hibshush, *Mishpahat Hibshush* (Shlomo Davidovitch, 1985), 2:489–90.

⁶¹Avraham 'Ovadia, *Netivot Teman ve-Tsiyon: Zikhronot*, ed. Yosef Tobi. (Tel Aviv: Afiqim, 1985), 38–39.

swim in exchange for a gold ring.⁶² (Insofar as the acceptance of a Muslim's friendship with non-Muslims was predicated upon the desire for conversion, there is a possibility of pious exaggeration here.)

The dominance of Jews in professions like making jewelry, weaving, tailoring, embroidering, selling fabric, and selling sewing goods brought Jewish men in close contact with Muslim women and reinforced popular stereotypes that they constituted a kind of "third sex." Muslim women went shopping in the Jewish Quarter because they found a good selection of fabric there. These shopping trips also were a social activity where they came into contact with men. The Subayri brothers opened a big women's clothing store on a road separating the Jewish Quarter of Sanaa from a Muslim neighborhood. A Syrian traveler describes the orderly stacks of colorful silks from Syria and France, cotton cloth, and English wool in the store, all shipped by caravan from Aden. The popularity of the store created tension with Muslim merchants, and they or others asked qadi 'Abd Allah al-'Amri, Imam Yahya's chief minister, to investigate. The qadi found men and women crowding the doors of the shop flirting with one another. Yehiel Hibshush, who relates this anecdote, explains that such activity could only have taken place in the Jewish Quarter of Sanaa, where the authorities already turned a blind eye to various morally dubious activities like wine making, to say nothing of the observance of Jewish rituals.

Qadi al-'Amri ordered the Subayri brothers not to allow Muslim women into their shop, an order that was disastrous to their business. One of the Subayris appealed to Imam Yahya, and he devised a solution: to designate separate doors for men and women. However, after the opening of the second door, some men and women still gravitated toward the opposite sex, claiming they had no way to distinguish between the two doors. Eventually a policeman had to be posted at the door to the shop to solve the problem.

The showiness of women's clothing related, at least in part, to popular superstition and the world of magic, another area in which Jews were thought to play an important mediating role. According to Yosef 'Atstah, a Jew in Dhamar whose children had all died in infancy finally had a healthy son. His mother, a healer, advised him to pierce the child's ears and dress him in girls' clothing: a striped robe adorned with seashells and mother-of-pearl. 'Atstah explains that pretty girls wore such garments to draw the attention of passers-by away from their beauty, thus averting the evil eye.

Jewish men, who theoretically could not bear arms and were protected by others, in a sense occupied an intermediate space between male and female. The Jews of Turba, a town in Lower Yemen, repaired jewelry for Muslim women. Unlike Muslim men, they were allowed to ascend to the women's quarters on the top floors of their homes.⁶³ Nissim Tayri recalls that Muslim men did not protest when male Jewish workers interacted socially with the women of their families.⁶⁴ In addition, Muslim families with many children allowed their sons and daughters to act as the manual laborers under the direction of a Jewish artisan, a license they would not permit for Muslim artisans. "One ought to trust neither a Jew nor a woman," one shaykh is reported to have said in prefacing his arbitration of a dispute between a Jew and a Muslim woman. He continued (the dialogue is in Hebrew): "Women and Jews make mountains out of molehills" (*ha-isha ve-ha-yehudi 'osim mehuma 'al lo me'uma*).⁶⁵

In the popular imagination of both Muslims and Jews, at least some Jews were considered particularly effective intermediaries between the mundane and the supernatural. Therefore, Jews were amply represented in professions related to magic. Salih al-Zahiri, a Jew with connections to the Muslim elite who went on to become the first mayor of Rosh ha-'Ayin, in Israel, was neither a believer in amulets nor a monogamist. Nevertheless, he was approached by a wealthy Muslim woman who wanted an amulet that would prevent her husband from marrying a second woman. A Muslim guard was imprisoned with Mordecai al-Zahiri, his son, for having been derelict in his duties. He had allowed the assassins of two of Imam Yahya's sons to escape without firing his gun.

Immediately after Imam Yahya's assassination in 1948, an Iraqi officer who backed the coup's plotters, Jamal Jamil, went to the palace in Sanaa and confronted three of the Imam's sons outside. One of them, Husayn, tried to negotiate with Jamil, but when Jamil refused he ordered the guards to open fire.

⁶²Taqiya bint al-Imam Yahya, *Yatimat al-Ahzan*, 11, 16.

⁶³This also was the case with Jewish peddlers in Libya. Harvey E. Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals and Relatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 75; Eraqi Klorman, *Traditional Society*, 9–10.

⁶⁴Nissim Tayri, *Bi-Tela'ot ha-Galut ve-ha-Ge'ula: Harpatqa'ot ve-Nisim Bein Rada' le-'Aden* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Author, 1998), 36.

⁶⁵Nissim Gamlieli, *Hevyon Teman: Zikhronot, Sippurim, Aggadot Hayyim mi-'Olam Aher* (Ramlah, Israel: Author, 1983), 74.

Unbeknownst to the brothers, Jamil had posted snipers and two of the three were shot dead. The third pretended to be dead. Afterward the guards dragged their bodies inside.⁶⁶

According to Mordecai al-Zahiri, Salih's son, this guard had fallen in love with one of the Imam's daughters after having watched her come and go to the palace regularly. He asked the Jew to obtain a "bill of love" (*waraqat ḥubb*) for him to ensure the success of his unlikely love affair. The younger Zahiri began to make preparations to comply with the strange request but was relieved not to have to furnish the item in question. The soldier was transferred to another prison before the promised liaison with the princess could be realized.⁶⁷

In the second volume of his memoirs, Ratson Halevi tells the story of the "Ape Boy" (*Na'ar ha-Kofim*), a Jew who was raised in the wilderness of Yemen by baboons.⁶⁸ After emerging from the wilderness and having his sidelocks shorn off by a wicked Muslim, the Ape Boy becomes a liminal figure—Yusuf al-Baydani—neither wholly Muslim nor wholly Jewish, wandering through the villages of Yemen, using his good looks to con Muslim women out of food, pilfering produce from fields, sleeping in mosques, and stealing shoes from said mosques, but all the while adhering to the principle that "I will accept any Muslim as a human being as long as he is a beggar like me."⁶⁹ Although his Muslim disguise is purely tonsorial, forced upon him by an old man who forcibly removed his sidelocks, he continues eating non-kosher food as he did in the wild.

Now age seventeen, he decides to earn enough money to have himself smuggled to Aden by truck and finds a job near Taizz picking coffee and qat for an unmarried thirty-five-year-old Muslim woman named 'Unayza and her two younger brothers. Although his attentiveness to Jewish dietary laws increases, he stays on the farm long after having collected the funds necessary to go to Aden. After 'Unayza's brothers go on a trip, she begins to flirt with him, and he recalls, from the depths of his memory, the Biblical verse: "From my own flesh (literally 'meat') I shall apprehend God" (Job 19:26), linking his consumption of forbidden meat while lost in the wilderness to his own corporeal form.⁷⁰ 'Unayza gives him a book of Psalms, left behind by a Jewish tailor who has since left for Aden, and then Palestine, and plies him with the finest qat and with arak that a Jew has taught her family to make. This 'Unayza seems not to have been a model of Islamic piety herself. After just one night of lovemaking, the narrator says of Yusuf: "He enlisted every supplication, entreaty and liturgical poem that he knew by heart from childhood to push the name "'Unayza' out of his thoughts, as well as the bed of life (*matza' he-ḥayim*) that she made before him."⁷¹

The following morning, Yusuf is gripped with an uncharacteristic (and unprecedented) turn to asceticism, leaving 'Unayza and, in the course of his journey to Aden, meeting and befriending a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl who has converted to Islam, and accompanies him to Palestine to be his wife. (The girl's story, also lengthy and complicated, is noteworthy here, as she, like Yusuf, makes her escape by virtue of a kind and world-weary Muslim woman.) After arriving in Israel, the couple name their first daughter Sharifa ("honorable woman") in honor of both women.⁷²

There is an antinomian quality to the way in which the Jewish Tarzan and his Muslim Jane nonchalantly cross the commensal and sexual boundaries that demarcate the two communities, dining on non-kosher food and drinking Jewish arak, respectively. Both are, in a sense, damaged goods, she an old maid and he an ape boy, and their life in a big house surrounded by verdant qat groves is so appealing that his sudden turn to asceticism and piety seems rather contrived.

The physical settings for Jewish anecdotes concerning forbidden liaisons between men and women of different religions mirrored popular (Muslim) ideas that Jews occupied a liminal position with regard to descent, gender, and the supernatural. For example, such anecdotes were often set in watering places. Women frequently bathed in rivers and streams outside of cities in the evenings. There were few

⁶⁶Abd Allah b. 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Shamahi, *al-Yaman: al-Insan wa-l-Hadara* (Beirut: Manshurat al-Madina, 1985), 245.

⁶⁷Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 103–4.

⁶⁸I am currently translating this and other stories from Ratson Halevi's three volumes of memoirs into English.

⁶⁹Ratson Halevi, *'Alilot me-'Olam le-'Olam* (Tel Aviv: Afiqim, 2005), 190.

⁷⁰Ibid., 198.

⁷¹Ibid., 204.

⁷²Ibid., 210.

observers in such places, the light was generally dim even before sunset, and the bathers' nakedness—it goes without saying—dissolved the sartorial boundaries between Muslim and Jew.

An 1882 fatwa from Damt details a case of a Muslim man attempting to rape a Jewish woman while she was bathing in the river outside of town. It is preserved among a trove of Arabic legal documents brought to Israel with a Jewish family from the Damt area and published with commentary by Nissim Gamlieli in *Teman be-Te'udot: Yehude Damt ve-ha-Mahoz* (Yemen in Documents: The Jews of Damt and its Environs). The document first describes in detail the woman's bruises and scratches. The qadi accepted her testimony regarding the identity of her attacker and described the latter as "an enemy of Allah" (*'aduww Allāh*), whom she successfully fought off. Although sparing the man death by stoning, the judge levied a heavy fine against him and banished him.⁷³

The fatwa alone is not enough to reconstruct what actually happened. The idea that the woman fought him off is plausible, and certainly helps explain why her family preserved the document for more than a century. However, it also is possible that the man raped her and that the qadi sought a solution that would not force him to execute her attacker for fornication and ruin the woman's reputation.

Gamlieli also tells the story of a Jew from a well-off family commonly known as "Crazy Sa'id" (*Sa'id al-Majnūn*) who was quite proud of his reputation as one whose mind was inhabited by a jinni. He undertook various exploits in the small village where he lived and when he reached puberty these began to take on a sexual dimension.

Once, while looking for trouble, he espied a woman bathing in a pool next to the river. She was a Muslim from a prominent family. Crazy Sa'id promptly disrobed and jumped into the pool with her "as Resh Lakish had done in his day." (The Babylonian Talmud—Bava Metzia 84a—describes gladiator and thief-turned rabbi Shimon ben Lakish jumping naked into the Jordan River with the handsome Rabbi Yohanan.) The Muslim woman fled, screaming, and her cries alerted men guarding the surrounding fields. Sa'id sneaked home and pretended to be asleep but was nonetheless brought before the shaykh along with his father. He insisted that he had been framed. No witnesses were produced so the case against him was not strong. The locals knew that the watering place was known to be inhabited by an entire tribe of jinn who were especially active at nightfall, one of whom could have easily assumed Sa'id's appearance, he argued. This is what the shaykh decided was most likely to have happened.⁷⁴

In a case from 1933, a wealthy Jew eloped to Sanaa, where he married his maid in a rushed ceremony. It was evening, and in his haste to consummate the marriage he followed her to the river where she intended to bathe. In the darkness he groped the wrong woman and a great hue and cry ensued. The man's blunder put him in a weak bargaining position that allowed a rabbi to dole out a generous settlement to the maid's Jewish first husband, who had divorced her but wanted to reconcile (or at least claimed as much).⁷⁵

Yemeni Arabic Folk Songs About Forbidden Liaisons

Nissim Gamlieli was a Jew from a remote area of Yemen's hinterlands, near Damt, where many Jews lived in small isolated villages. In 1942 he moved to Aden, where he became the librarian for Camp Hashid, a refugee camp jointly run by the British government and the Jewish Agency for the thousands of Jewish refugees who streamed into the British colony from the Yemeni interior in hopes of emigrating to Palestine. He emigrated to Israel in 1949, where he worked as a schoolteacher and published rich studies based on documents and interviews of Jews from his region, many of whom lived near him in his adopted home of Ramla.

Gamlieli's *Ahavat Teman: Ha-shira ha-'amamit ha-temanit, shirat nashim* (Love in Yemen: Yemeni Popular Songs; Women's Songs), first published in 1974 and reprinted three times, based upon the author's interviews with women and men from his region, is a treasure trove of information on popular song and women's experiences in rural Yemen. Since Jewish women were largely excluded from the world

⁷³Nissim Gamlieli, *Teman be-Te'udot: Yehude Damt ve-ha-Mahoz* (Jerusalem: Makhon Shalom le-Shivte Yeshurun, 1997), 87–90.

⁷⁴Nissim Gamlieli, *Tahat Kanfeha Shel Ima: Roman Otobiografi mi-Hayyav Shel Yeled Yehudi be-Teman* (Tel Aviv: Afiqim, 2002), 233.

⁷⁵Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 23.

of traditional Jewish learning, the book also tells us a lot about the lives of Muslim women, their private lives, relationships between the sexes, and other taboo topics.

The book consists of folk songs in Arabic that Gamlieli collected from Jewish women who sang at weddings, interspersed with his own commentary. In many cases, the Islam or Judaism of the song's characters was completely irrelevant. For example, singing a song about a tragic misunderstanding between Muslim lovers that closely parallels the Romeo and Juliet romance was a common part of doing a Yemeni Jewish bride's hair before her wedding.⁷⁶

Jewish women also passed down a song, a variation on the Cinderella theme, about a poor orphaned beggar girl, called Dabdab on account of her slow gait (in Yemeni Arabic, the verb *dabdaba* can mean "to walk slowly").⁷⁷ As a wealthy couple was preparing to marry, each craftsman responsible for making one of the luxurious garments and ornaments for the bride teased Dabdab as she made her rounds looking for scraps to eat, one after the other: "Try on your wedding dress (or jewelry, or slippers)!" To each, she replied: "If you say it, God makes it so!" (*In qultū, qāl al-Rabb*). The bride-to-be's mother and aunts knew that she was no longer a virgin. In the midst of their consternation on the day before the wedding, Dabdab appeared at their door with her begging basket. One of the women knew that she was a virgin, that she was the same size as the bride, and that the bridal attire fit her, so hatched a plot to have Dabdab take the bride's place on the wedding night. She ordered Dabdab to stay silent through the sexual encounter with the groom and to leave immediately afterward. All Dabdab asked in return was that they fill her begging basket with scraps of leftover food.

Dabdab got the last laugh. At dawn after the wedding night, the women gathered, wondering where she was. In the meantime, the sun had risen, the new husband awoke, and the jig was up. The women thought that Dabdab had overslept, so they whispered to her through the keyhole: "*Dabdab Dabdab zinbilish dhabbab*" (Dabdab, Dabdab, your food basket is crawling with flies). She replied with two rhymed couplets: "*Yidhabbib lah wi-lā lā dhabbab / qad anā fawq al-sarīr al-midhhab / wa-l-shaykh qad finī raḥab*" (Let them swarm over her—[the disgraced bride-to-be]—or let them swarm over [my basket] / I am already reclining on a gilded bed / the shaykh has already enjoyed himself with me). Dabdab had told the groom about the plot and, moved by this honest beggar, he agreed to marry her. Therefore, her retort to the mocking craftsmen, "if you say it, God makes it so!" was proven true.⁷⁸

Although Dabdab's religious identity remained unknown, and the tale was set in a time before Islam, "in the time of Dhu Nuwas, the [Himyarite] king of Yemen," in the tragic ballad of the "Dawdahiya", a Muslim girl from a prominent family who became pregnant in Lower Yemen in the 1930s and was publicly shamed and perhaps killed was standard fare for Jewish women who sang at weddings. Although I have traced the events at its core to the 1930s, some versions of this folk song cast the story to the distant past.⁷⁹ Thus, the chronological setting of the story of Dabdab before Islam should be taken with a grain of salt.

In explaining one of the Jewish women's wedding songs he collected, Nissim Gamlieli recounts the grisly story of "Badra the Slut" (*Badra al-Nābira*). In al-Muhris, a village in a mountain pass between Taizz and Ibb, a wealthy man had four daughters. His eldest daughter, Badra, fell in love with a shepherd in his employ. The father refused to marry her to one as lowly as the shepherd, so she ran away with him. The women of the village heaped invective upon her so mercilessly that the father made an oath to them in poetic form (the text of the song), promising to deliver them his daughter's severed head.

Yiqul Ibn Zayid / mā zāyid illā ant yā Allāh / billāh yā nisā muḥris / kuthr al-kalām qallilīnā / wallāh yā rās Badra / mā bidikkīn mā tarīnā / wi-lā fa-jirrayn diqnī / wa-bi l-liḥūmam ḥammimīnā / wi-lā fa-jirrayn jabīnī / wa-bi l-khaḍāb khaḍabayna / wi-lā fa-jirrayn wajhī / wa bi l-herid haridīna / billāh yā nisā muḥris / kuthr al-kalām qallilīnā / wallāh yā rās Badra / mā bidikkīn mā tarīnā

Ibn Zayid says / none "add" (*zāyid*) but you, God! / By God, women of Muhris / reduce your incessant prattling / By God, O Badra's head / your eyes will witness it / If not, pull out my beard / and

⁷⁶Nissim Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman: Ha-Shira ha-Amamit ha-Temanit, Shirat Nashim* (Tel Aviv: Afiqim, 1996), 207.

⁷⁷Moshe Piamenta, *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 143.

⁷⁸Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman*, 218–19.

⁷⁹Wagner, "Murder Ballad."

burn it over hot coals / If not, pull off my forehead / and stain it with black henna / If not, pull off my face / and paint it with turmeric / none “add” but you, God! / By God, women of Muhris / reduce your incessant prattling / By God, O Badra’s head / your eyes will witness it.⁸⁰

It is worth noting that in each of the verses in which Ibn Zayid promises negative consequences to himself if he does not deliver his daughter’s head, the consequence involves some form of feminization at the hands of the gossiping women of the village: a humiliating beard-shaving, staining the face with black henna, and painting the face with turmeric or saffron as both cosmetic and skin softener.

According to Gamlieli’s narrative, the man proceeded to disguise himself as a Jewish peddler. The narrator does not clarify exactly how he did this, but Yemeni Jewish men wore a black garment that reached mid-calf, a distinctive small black hat, and a dark-colored prayer shawl (that also might be used for mundane tasks like laying out one’s goods), and had sidelocks.⁸¹ He then traveled from one village to the next offering his wares to the local women. In one remote village he recognized his daughter among the women who perused his wares. However, she “did not sense that the same shabby Jew with a moustache could be her father,” so he followed her home and killed her.⁸² Whether this anecdote is historical, folkloric morality tale, or both, the high-status Muslim’s disguise operates with diabolical genius, its Jewishness enabling him access to strange Muslim women and rendering him unrecognizably pitiable to his own daughter.

In this and other Yemeni folk songs discussed by Gamlieli, both men and women collaborate in brutally reining in a “runaway bride.” Although the lyrics of the preceding song are presented as a father’s monologue before the women of his village, it would have been sung by and for women (and Jewish women, no less). Thus, a number of the songs he records and discusses draw attention to women’s own role, even those from marginalized minorities, in perpetuating the patriarchal system.

In cases of forbidden relationships between Muslims and Jews, a Jewish woman becoming romantically involved with a Muslim man seems to have been the most common scenario. According to Bat Zion Eraqi Klorman, the story of Bint al-Basara is one of two exceptions.⁸³ Sometime in the 1930s a Jew, Yosef Halevi, and a Muslim girl in al-Hadad village known only as Bint al-Basara fell in love. The couple eloped to Shaykh ʿUthman, a modern neighborhood in the port city of Aden, where “he converted her to Judaism” (*hu giyyer otah*) and they were married in secret. They planned to emigrate to Palestine. Their fellow villagers were scandalized, Muslim and Jew alike. The local shaykh, identified by Gamlieli only as al-Madhaji (a man of the Mudhhij tribe), was embarrassed and sought to save face. “He was one of the minor shaykhs and so he affected jealousy and took revenge by making himself the shield of Islam,” Gamlieli writes.⁸⁴ The shaykh imprisoned all of the Jewish men of the village and tasked them with finding the errant couple. They, in turn, contacted relatives and other villagers who had moved to Aden who hired detectives to find them and bribed local police. Almost six months later they were found and sent to the most important town in the region, al-Nadira, for sentencing.

The girl stayed faithful to Judaism. She was subjected to public parading (*dirḏāḥ*) and given a life sentence under harsh conditions.⁸⁵ Gamlieli continues:

That selfsame young girl was already pregnant and her soul was extinguished in prison along with the fruit of her womb. She was buried with a donkey’s burial. It was neither a Jewish cemetery nor a Muslim cemetery, rather a lonely and godforsaken place where [only] the prophet [Elijah] would

⁸⁰Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman*, 228. Gamlieli says that the man was named Ibn Zayid because he had a sixth toe on each foot. The figure of ʿAli b. Zayid is a standard mouthpiece for Yemeni folk wisdom. See Jean Lambert, “La geste d’Ibn Zā’id ou la sagesse de l’honneur,” *Cahiers de littérature orale* 17 (1985): 163–94.

⁸¹On clothing and jewelry see Carmela Abdar, ed., *Ma’ase Roqem: Ha-Levush ve-ha-Takhshit bi-Masoret Yehudei Teman* (Tel Aviv: E’ele Be-Tamar, 2008).

⁸²Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman*, 228–29.

⁸³Eraqi Klorman, “Muslim Society,” 96–97.

⁸⁴Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman*, 226.

⁸⁵On this practice see R. B. Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock, *San’a: An Arabian Islamic City* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983), 150.

decide the case of where she belonged on Resurrection Day—either with the Jewish community or among the believers.⁸⁶

Yosef Halevi was given the choice of converting to Islam or serving a life sentence. He chose the latter. He was moved from one prison to another for several years before eventually being freed (how this happened is unclear). He had himself smuggled from Aden to Asmara, then traveled through Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt to Palestine. He lived in solitude in Rehovot for a short while after that. Gamlieli claims no firsthand knowledge of the story. He simply avers that its details were well known to the general public in Yemen in the 1930s, and provides the text of the following folk song:

Bint al-Basara / qad ‘annanih wa-sārah / qad shallahā Yusuf / walad Ghazala
Bint al-Basara / qad ‘annanih wa-sārah / qad shallahā al-Laywī / bi-ghayr khasāra
Bint al-Basara / qad ‘annanih wa-sārah / lā shallat al-maghmūq / wi-lā al-sitāra

Bint al-Basara held her head high and set off. Yusuf, the son of Ghazala, had taken her.
 Bint al-Basara held her head high and set off. The Levi boy took her
 without paying the bride money.
 Bint al-Basara held her head high and set off. She did not take with her either face veil or burka.⁸⁷

In the song’s lyrics, the fact that the runaway bride ran off with a Jew seems the least grievous of the woman’s outrageous acts flouting the norms of courtship and marriage. His first name and that of his mother are ambiguous. The only “Jewish” elements of the song are his surname and the manner in which his Jewishness sets the stage for the woman casting aside her veil and burka. (Jewish women had less strict standards of modesty than did Muslim women.) The normal use for the verb ‘*annana* (to hold its head high) is for a horse. Thus, this song partakes in the wider tradition of Yemeni women’s wedding songs that portray brides-to-be as livestock auctioned off by their fathers.⁸⁸

The Evidence of a Muslim Memoir

The idea that a Jew’s low status adhered to him even after conversion to Islam is discussed in one Muslim source. In an Arabic memoir, Salih al-Sunaydar reports on the relationship between a friend of his, the candy maker and leader of a revolutionary cell Muhammad al-Mahalwi, and Chief Rabbi Yahya al-Abyad. The two men engaged in far-ranging discussions of religion. They discussed the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. After reading a refutation of Christianity by an Indian Muslim, a book on which the Muslim and the Jew had no trouble agreeing, they reached more fraught territory. Mahalwi asked why Abyad did not convert to Islam, given his extensive knowledge of Islamic texts. According to one of Mahalwi’s Muslim disciples, Abyad said to him, “I possess status and position among the Jews, even among the Muslims—especially those in the government. If I converted to Islam how would they regard me? I would either clean up filth or roughen grindstones. . . . Who among them would marry me to his sister or his daughter?”⁸⁹

The rabbi’s snarky comment operated on another level as well. By rounding off his retort with a reference to roughening grindstones he congratulated himself for his wit. R. B. Serjeant wrote:

A trade that brought Jews into close contact with the Muslim household was the roughening of mill-stones when they had worn smooth. The Jewish stone-sharpener (*muwaqqir*) was credited with a tongue so sharp in repartee that *ḥiddat muwaqqir* [as sharp as a stone-sharpener] has become proverbial for a crushing retort.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Gamlieli, *Ahavat Teman*, 226.

⁸⁷Ibid., 226–27.

⁸⁸Mark Wagner, *Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), 96–101.

⁸⁹Wagner, *Jews and Islamic Law*, 77.

⁹⁰Serjeant and Lewcock, *San’a*, 425; Isma’il al-Akwa’, *al-Amthal al-Yamaniyya*, 2nd ed. (Sanaa: Maktabat al-Jil al-Jadid, Mu’assasat al-Risala, 1984), 1:411.

Conclusion

Accounts of affairs between Muslims and Jews between 1882 and 1949 reveal some common threads. They were set in transition points like hostels and common watering areas in the evening, when low light made identity relatively difficult to discern and comparative solitude made it hard to read social cues. They generally involved low-status Jews whose perceived gender ambiguity (in the case of men) paradoxically allowed them greater social access to the fairer sex or Jewish women who would have not been expected to adhere to urban Islamic standards of modesty. This intermediate position also applied to the heightened insight they were widely believed to have been afforded into the world of the supernatural. A given anecdote's setting in the countryside would have heightened the suspicion that what went on was just barely under the jurisdiction of civilized religious norms. Whereas some folktales admonished Jews to regard outmarriage as dangerous, in general the door seems to have been left open for converts and their children to return to the fold. Moshe Yagur found the same held true in the Cairo Geniza.⁹¹ The scandal at the heart of the Jewish women's songs is the renegade girl's denial of her father's financial rights, not the inappropriateness of her spouse.

⁹¹Yagur, "Religiously Mixed Families," 36–38.