so. That, of course, was completely contrary to what Maimonides had written. All of this is of more than passing interest considering that Zaragoza had a significant Muslim population in Ishibli’s time.

Thanks to the efforts of the Judah L. Maimon Institute and a large staff of scholars in Jerusalem, a complete critical edition of Ishibli’s talmudic commentaries has been published. In addition to the Sefer ha-zikaron, his laws on blessings and various responsa were edited by Moses Blau (N.Y., 1956), and a complete edition of his responsa was edited by Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem, 1959; rpt. 1978). Ishibli’s attitude toward conversos, the increasing number of Jews converting to Christianity, demonstrates what was later to become the rule: they are not considered to have the status of Jews, even if repentant.

He also wrote treatises on the laws of holidays and Passover, and a commentary on the Passover Haggadah, all now available in critical editions. The Sefer ha-zikaron also, in the earlier edition of Kalman Kahane (Jerusalem, 1956), was reprinted with revisions from manuscripts in 1983.

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Islam and Jews
(This essay spotlights the “classical period” of Jewish life under Islam in the Middle Ages, from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to approximately the end of the twelfth. During this era, the Jews enjoyed substantial security, punctuated by infrequent aberrations of persecution, with far less violence than that experienced by their brethren living in Christendom. Against this background, the Jews of Islam realized a remarkable cultural florescence.)

Religiously, Jews were categorized by Islam as “infidels” (Arabic: kuffar). However, like Christians, they qualified as “people of the book,” possessors of a prior revelation from God that was written down. People of the book acquired a tolerated status, that of “protected people” (ahl al-dhimma, or dhimmis), who were permitted to live among Muslims, undisturbed, and to observe their faith without interference. In return, they had to remit an annual tribute—a poll tax (Arabic: jizya)—and comply with other restrictions, some of which evolved over time during the first century or so of Islamic dominion. These limited the public exhibition of their religious rites and symbols (for instance, prohibition of construction of new houses of worship and repair to old ones; enticing Muslims to their religion). Other rules prescribed or proscribed special dress and other outward signs distinguishing the dhimmis from Muslims (Arabic honorific names, for instance, were disallowed, as were the carrying of weapons and riding animals of prestige, like horses). They were prohibited from serving in positions of authority in Islamic administration. And in general they had to confirm the superiority of Islam by assuming a low profile.

The term most regularly used for this was saghar, meaning “humiliation,” and, indeed, historically, the purpose of the laws was to keep Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and other dhimmis humble. Most of the restrictions appear in the so-called Pact of ‘Umar. There was no special code, however, for the Jews per se in Islam: the dhimma “system,” part of the holy law of Islam (the shari’ā), applied equally to all non-Muslim “people of the book.” As such, the discrimination that existed was somewhat diffused among several infidel groups and hence not perceived as being pointedly anti-Jewish. This “pluralism,” characteristic of Islamic society as a whole, helped protect the Jews and their counterparts in the infidel category from the baneful effects of singular “otherness” that underlay the Jewish position in Christendom.

Moreover, in actual practice during this era, the dhimma restrictions were commonly observed in the breach. Jews—and more so the far more numerous Christians—regularly evaded the sartorial constraints, constructed new houses of worship, and, most conspicuously, abounded in the Muslim bureaucracy. Documents from daily life in the Cairo Genizah testify to this evasion. So do frequent complaints in Muslim sources that dhimmis had overstepped the boundaries imposed upon them by the
holy law—whence the restrictions would be enforced with sudden vigor, thus being perceived by the dhimmis as persecution.

Unlike the Christian West (particularly, northwestern Europe), where the Jews’ concentration in professions associated with disreputable profit seeking underscored their outsider status, the Islamic world encouraged profit seeking and the mercantile life, and Jews were well integrated into the economic life of society at large. Jewish merchants in the Muslim world were representatives of their economic profession rather than of their religion. Their economic role imparted to them more status and a higher degree of embeddedness in society at large than in the West.

One finds evidence of this, for instance, in the Abbasid empire at the beginning of the tenth century. A consortium of Jewish merchant-bankers became attached to the caliphal court at Baghdad as a provider of loans and other banking and mercantile services. But, contrary to an outdated view, these Jewish merchant-bankers did not pioneer their vocation nor did they constitute Jewish dominance in these related specialties. On the one hand, Muslims engaged in the very same economic activities. On the other, Jews exhibited substantial economic differentiation. The genizah documents show that Jews made a living from industrial crafts, like metalwork and production of cheese, raised crops on land they owned, were physicians, served in the bureaucracy, and more. They formed partnerships for profit in trade and in crafts with other Jewish and with Muslims. Thus diversified, and benefiting from the guild-free Islamic marketplace, the Jews appeared very much like their Muslim neighbors, and this militated against the social abuse that Jews in Christian lands had to endure in part on account of their identification with a limited and problematic set of occupations.

The situation of the Jews in medieval Islam as reflected in the sources from that time resonates with the findings of several anthropologists who have observed the nondiscriminatory interaction between Jews and Muslims in the traditional Arab marketplace in our own era. In fact, actual social interaction in the medieval period between Jews and Muslims, even beyond the economic realm, exhibits signs of decent human relations, despite the fact that Jews (and Christians) occupied the lowest rank in the hierarchy of the social order and always ran the risk of incurring the wrath of strict religious scholars and/or the populace when they pursued behavior that contravened the code of differentiation and discrimination. It should be added that Jews shared with Muslims the desire for separation and distinctive religious identity. Egalitarian assimilation was neither a possibility nor a desired goal. But it seems that so long as both parties recognized the hierarchical gap between them (even if the lowly Jews were frequently capable of crossing barriers between them and their Muslim superiors), and so long as general economic and social conditions in the Muslim world maintained a certain level of prosperity and freedom from external threat, Jews and their neighbors got along tolerably well, and both the incidence and the fear of persecution were minimal.

During these centuries, many changes took place in Jewish institutional life. One of these has to do with the status of talmudic law. In late antiquity, rabbinic Judaism was already fully formed around the Talmud. There were, however, two Talmuds, the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud and the Babylonian one. Moreover, different customs prevailed in Palestine and in Babylon (Iraq). In part, the separation resulted from the fact that Babylonian Jews and Palestinian Jews lived in different empires—the eastern Roman (also called Byzantine) Empire and the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire of Persia.

The Muslims put an end to this cleavage by uniting the former Byzantine and Sasanian empires under their rule through conquest. With the shift of the Islamic capital and center of gravity from Damascus to Baghdad in the middle of the eighth century, the yeshivah of Babylon gained new prominence, as did the Babylonian exilarch (Hebrew: rosh golah). Soon, the Babylonian scholars overshadowed those of Palestine; efforts were extended to disqualify some Palestinian customs; and the authority of the Babylonian Talmud among world Jewry eclipsed that of the one written in Palestine. The Babylonian geonim, as the heads of the yeshivot called themselves, trained judges, who went off with their diplomas to serve in Jewish communities of the Islamic world to the east and west (as far west as Muslim Spain). They spread Babylonian understanding of Jewish law through responsa and other halakhic writings. Among many other things, they wrote the first Jewish "prayer
books”—initially in the form of simple responsa to questions concerning the liturgy, later as full manuals, like SA’ADYAH GAON’s (d. 942) Siddur.

Geonic persistence in imposing its version of rabbinic law resulted in the emergence in the early Islamic period of an anti-Talmud sect called the QARAITES. Perhaps influenced by the parallel example of Shi’ite opposition to dominant Sunni Islam, and possibly recovering ancient Jewish traditions of rejection of the authority of the Oral Law (for instance, that of the Sadducees), the Qaraites, though a minority, presented a stiff challenge to normative Judaism and its spokesmen and even stimulated some of the intellectual creativity that will be described further on.

The Babylonian geonim succeeded in imposing their will on the Jewish people, but they also engineered their own dispensability. Waves of “Babylonian” Jews—from Iraq and Persia—migrated in the early Islamic centuries from the center of the ‘Abbasid empire to the Mediterranean lands, the new frontier, rich in economic opportunity, and also the site of burgeoning quasi-independent and sometimes fully independent provinces. New Jewish centers arose. At first these new communities were dependent upon the Iraqi geonim for guidance, and they also rendered financial support to the yeshivot. (The Palestinian yeshivah did not disappear. In fact, it continued to vie for the allegiance of Jews, and had some notable success in Egypt.) But eventually, scholars trained in Babylon or by disciples of the Babylonian halakhic tradition, with the aid of responsa, handbooks of Jewish law, and commentaries on the Mishnah and Talmud “published” by the geonim, could begin to fulfill the spiritual functions formerly dominated by the geonim themselves. This happened, sequentially, in Spain, North Africa, and in Egypt, during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

In Spain, an independent Jewish center emerged in the ninth century, around the same time that the Islamic province itself broke away from Baghdad’s hegemony to become the thriving and intellectually vibrant Umayyad caliphate, with its capital in Córdoba. A Jewish yeshivah, many illustrious rabbis, and a courtier class (from among the rabbis themselves) with close ties to the government formed the backbone of a self-sufficient Jewish community no longer subordinate to the Babylonian geonim. The Jewry of Muslim Spain flourished during this period, which nineteenth-century European Jewish scholars looked back upon as a golden age of political and cultural distinction (with short-term setbacks), until the Berber ALMOHAD conquest and persecutions of the 1140s. In that decade, many thousands of Jews were killed or forced to convert to Islam; others fled to safer Islamic lands or to the steadily advancing Christian sector of Spain or to southern France.

North Africa, notably Fez in Morocco and Qayrawân in what is modern Tunisia, developed creative centers of Jewish learning. Qayrawân, in particular, flourished. It was a bustling node in the Mediterranean trade, and the Jews among the merchant community there imparted to the community the material well-being to support institutions of learning that, by the beginning of the eleventh century, rivaled those of the geonim. The Tunisian center ended its heyday in the middle of that century due to the destruction of Qayrawân by Berber tribesmen sent on an expedition from Egypt by the Fâtimids to punish the rebellious vassal province of the Zirids.

Egyptian Jewry was geographically closer to the pre-Islamic centers of Jewish leadership in Palestine and in Babylon than Spain or North Africa. For this and other reasons, the process of breaking away in Egypt was delayed until the latter part of the eleventh century.

The geonim observed the emergence of self-sufficient communities in the distant provinces with some dismay and strove to retain their relationship with them. Nominal deference to the geonim on the part of the provincial Jewish elites, and geonic awards of lofty Hebrew titles to Jewish magnates in Spain, North Africa, and Egypt, continued, but geonic complaints about delinquency in maintaining financial support at its former level signal the weakening of ties.

Jewish culture underwent major transformations as a result of contact with Arab-Muslim civilization. For instance, in addition to the internal motives to unify Jewish law that animated the geonim and laid the foundation for a standardized Judaism from Persia to Spain, external influences played a prominent role. Muslim jurists, many of the most important working in Iraq, set an example by their own vigorous undertaking to collect and codify Islamic law. But this was but one of the numerous instances in which Islamic-Arabic culture had a fructifying effect on the Jews.
At the base came the extraordinary linguistic transformation. Jews in the Fertile Crescent had spoken Aramaic for centuries, using Hebrew and Hebrew-Aramaic as their literary languages. By the tenth century, Arabic had superseded both of these as the unified spoken and written tongue of the Jews. This contrasts revealingly with Europe. There, Jews adopted local dialects (French, German, etc.) for speaking purposes. But they did not use Latin, the language of most written culture, for literary purposes. Rather, they continued to employ rabbinic Hebrew for their writings.

Jews in the East were less uncomfortable with Islam as a religion, and anti-Jewish polemics in Arabic were far less prevalent and less inimical than Latin polemics against the Jews and Judaism. Moreover, Arabic represented the means of acquiring secular culture (medicine, science, historiography, belles lettres, secular poetry, etc.), to which Jews were powerfully attracted. One should add that Arabic is so close to Hebrew linguistically that its adoption for everyday as well as formal literary purposes must have seemed relatively effortless.

Sa’adyah Geon’s writings set the new standard in the use of Arabic for literary purposes. His halakhic works are in Arabic, and he was (apparently) the first to translate the Hebrew Bible into Arabic—clearly to take the place of the ancient Aramaic translation called Targum that hailed from the time when that language formed the Jewish vernacular.

Jews mostly wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters, which they apparently found easier than Arabic script and perhaps more “Jewish,” in that it allowed them readily to punctuate their writing with Hebrew words, phrases, or classical Jewish citations, as was so common and often necessary. But Jewish comfort with the Arabic language stretched to a certain liberty with the religious vocabulary of Islam. Such a prominent paragon of rabbinic leadership as Sa’adyah, for instance, could refer unselfconsciously to the Torah as shari’a (the Islamic term for the holy law), to the Jerusalem-oriented direction of prayer as qibla (Muslims use this word for Mecca), and to the Jewish hazan as imam.

Proficient knowledge of Arabic eased Jewish access to the innumerable volumes of Hellenistic writings that were being translated into Arabic during the ‘Abbasid period, thanks to the efforts of Oriental Christians. It similarly made it possible for the Jewish intelligentsia to become part of the multidenominational cultural elite of the Arab world. Jewish intellectuals frequented the courts of Muslim rulers, forming a veritable Jewish courtier class, best known in Muslim Spain but also existing elsewhere. Jews sat alongside Muslims and Christians in erudite “sessions” (called majlises), where matters of the intellect, including religion, were discussed and debated in a fairly impartial manner.

This social and cultural integration left its mark in numerous ways. One was the restudy of the Bible and its elevation to a distinguished position in the Jewish curriculum, after having been long pushed into the background by the study of Jewish law. Jews observed the reverence that Muslims lavished on the Qur’an and the Arabic language in which it was written. With so many foreigners in their empire (Greeks, Syrians, Persians, Spaniards, Berbers, Jews, etc.) coming over to their parlance, Arab scholars investigated and described the grammar of the Arabic language. This included, for the first time, creating vowel signs for the—like Hebrew—consonantal, nonvocalic Arabic script. A primary reason for this was to ensure the proper pronunciation of the Qur’an.

Jews followed suit, though it is likely that Qaraite emphasis on the centrality of the Bible formed another stimulus to this emulation. In the early Islamic period, Jews in both Babylon and in Palestine worked toward establishing vowel signs and other notations to guide the proper recitation of the Torah. Our Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible is the product of this enterprise (it represents the system developed in Tiberias, Palestine).

Hebrew grammarians, imitating their Arab counterparts, delved into the structure of the classical Hebrew language. How many letters constituted the root of a Hebrew word; five, four, three, less? Debates among Hebrew philologists lent spice to the project, which eventually determined the linguistic makeup of the biblical language as it has been ever since understood.

Emulation of Arabic poetry produced intriguing results. Jews living in the Arabic-speaking world were enormously impressed by the poetry of the Arabs and self-consciously contrasted it with their own liturgical verse. The latter expressed only religious sentiments, its thematics drew heavily on talmudic and
midrashic concepts and words, and its locus of performance was restricted to the synagogue. Its most conspicuous poetic convention was a rhyme syllable at the ends of lines. Arabic poetry adhered closely to its classical language and had both meter and rhyme. Its themes of love, wine, women, war, friendship, and parting gave expression to values of secular Arabic leisure life, set in a garden rather than in a mosque, and went hand in hand with the courtier society that Jews had come to admire and wish to reproduce among themselves. Rather than adopting Arabic for this purpose, however, the Jewish poets chose to write in Hebrew. But, still emulating the Arabs, they wrote solely in classical Hebrew, the language of the Bible, eschewing the postbiblical language and talmudic allusions of pre-Islamic Jewish religious verse. Inventively, they figured out how to adapt Arabic quantitative (syllabic) meter to Hebrew, to clothe genres of Arabic poems in Hebrew garb, and to describe in biblical vocabulary (with some neologisms borrowed from Arabic) the secular themes that had captivated their imagination. They also wrote religious poetry according to Arabic conventions, adding some new theological concepts current in the Muslim milieu.

Since Philo of Alexandria in the first century, PHILOSOPHY and Judaism had not had contact with one another. But Muslim civilization gave new prominence to the scientific and philosophical-rationalist legacy of Hellenism. This is not the place to dwell in detail on this important chapter in medieval Jewish civilization, nor to review the contributions of such great names of Jewish religious philosophy who wrote in Arabic as Isaac Israeli, Sa’adyah Gaon, Abraham Ibn Daud, MAIMONIDES, and Judah HA-LEVY, to name just a few. Suffice it to say that, in the Islamic world, Jewish religious thinking underwent a major revolution, grappling with the question of how to understand Bible and rabbinic literature in the light of rationalistic challenges about the nature of God, the origins of the world, theodicy, and other questions fundamental to monotheistic faiths.

This essay has highlighted the classical period of Jewish life under Islam. In the later Islamic Middle Ages, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on, society at large experienced stress, and, proportionately, so did the Jews. External threats from Christian Europe (the CRUSADES, the Christian reconquest in Spain) and from Central Asia (the Mongols), a loss of commercial precedence to non-Muslims in both the Mediterranean and the India trades, and the rise of military regimes like the Mamluks of Egypt (who also controlled Palestine and Syria), contributed to the decline. Jews felt the effects. Their economic prosperity waned. Muslim authorities, jittery about possible collusion between their external enemies and dhimmis, increasingly enforced the restrictive laws of the Pact of ’Umar. The bent for philosophy in Islam, which the Jews had shared, receded. In its place, ascetic, mystical Sufism, formerly cultivated mainly by individuals, came to the fore as a communal movement, and Jews, too, became attracted to both the theosophical and experiential components of this religious trend. Worthy of note, though, in their economic and political decline and in their attraction to Sufism in the late Islamic Middle Ages, Jews exhibited the same kind of embeddedness in majority culture that had characterized their relationship to the Islamic world during the classical period.

The most difficult places for Jews in the late Middle Ages were two: Iran, where the establishment of Shi’ism as the “state religion” in the sixteenth century brought the harsher attitude toward non-Muslims of this form of Islam to bear heavily on Jews and other dhimmis; and North Africa, where, as the only dhimmis on the scene since the Almohad persecutions had subsided (Jews had returned to Judaism, but Christian converts had not returned to Christianity), they absorbed singularly the brunt of Muslim contempt.

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