

On Jews and Muslims

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Nowadays, it is taken for granted that Jews and Muslims are enemies; a statement that -in *our* lifetime- is mostly true. But when looking at the longer concurrent lifetime of both peoples, the statement of mutual enmity is mostly false; a statement that is the very antithesis of reality.

Some Jews designate Abraham as the first Jew. He was born about two thousand years before the Common Era, putting the age of Judaism at four thousand *solar* years. But the pious may arguably submit that Judaism began at Genesis and that Adam was the first Jew. This argument can be substantiated by Adam's monotheism; since monotheism is Abraham's main claim to fame, giving him the cloak of reverence and the cape of paternity over ALL three *Abrahamaic* religions. On the other hand, Islam was born in the year 610 C.E. making it fourteen hundred *solar* years old. Judaism had existed long before 610 C.E., so the 1400 years since 610.C.E. are the concurrent lifetime of the two religions. During the first thirteen and a half centuries of this lifetime, Jews and Muslims shared more harmony than hate, but the last half a century turned a rosy relation rocky.

The last six or seven decades since the birth of the State of Israel and events preceding and following it, are closer to our lifetime (and therefore our awareness) than the thirteen or so centuries that preceded. Also, the recent decades occurred in the time of the best information dissemination that the world has known. So the recent time has basked in such intense light that left the former thirteen centuries in dire darkness. One may argue that those centuries are old and gone. But they are much longer than the recent decades, cover more events, in more places, pertain to more lives and are closer to the initiation of both theologies; all factors that give the past more authenticity and more relevance than it is given. And it *was* a good time. So the current "badness" is neither inherent nor long-standing.

Unabashedly, I admit my inability to tackle the last six or so decades of Jewish-Muslim relations, so I will not try. But I have a lot to point out about Jewish- Muslim relations during the **thirteen and a half centuries** before that, and will do it under various headings:

POLITICS

Between the seventh and twentieth centuries of the Common Era, an overview of world politics shows the rise, in the first part of that period, of a political entity (or entities) located on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean and lands eastward. Those entities professed Islam and have been called Islamdom. Europe has been the home of Christendom, which gained in political supremacy and geographical stretch-into the Americas- after the middle of the second millennium. To date, these are still the boundaries of Christendom and Islamdom.

In both of these two “doms”, Jews lived as a minority; rather than having the dominant power in the land, as they do today in Israel.

Europe has had more than one organized campaign against its Jews, and those campaigns date back to the late 1000’s. An example is the law passed in the 1290 England of Edward I, mandating the expulsion of Jews from England. Jews that stayed had to pretend to be Christian, but again were caught in the Anglican-Catholic paranoia of the 1500’s. So they had to attend Anglican services on Sundays to avoid accusation (and persecution) as Catholic recusants. Not until the reign of Oliver Cromwell that English Jews were able to disclose their faith; and finally in 1657 were allowed to have a Jewish cemetery !!!

Jews escaping England in 1290 C.E., joined their coreligionists in Europe and especially Spain – which was then under Muslim rule- but only to be hit even harder –together with Muslims- by the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. This time, the Jews sought refuge in Islamdom.

Various Jewish communities in Europe and Czarist Russia suffered repeated organized pogroms. For many centuries in Europe, Jews were not allowed into the trades and professions open to everyone else. So they were relegated to money lending which though despised by gentiles, was still very necessary for business, until later in the second millennium when banks were established. Finally came the twentieth century’s European catastrophe of the Holocaust, (mercilessly also known as the Final Solution).

In comparison, Jews fared better among Muslims during those centuries. Yes, they *were* a minority, envied or admired, and certainly separate, but never faced systemic campaigns of extermination. And yes, as a minority they suffered when law and order broke down in Islamdom; as did Shi’a, Hindu, Armenian and other minorities, including the Muslim Kurds!!! But there was no organized persecution of Jews by Muslims, certainly nothing like the Armenian Genocide. The history of Jews among Muslims, has many bright pages. One example is the Jewish philosopher Maimonides who was very influential in Jewish culture while being influential in Muslim Egypt as the private physician of the First Vizier (i.e. Prime Minister). But my favorite story comes from my birthplace of Iraq (mostly Muslim). When Iraq began to gain independence from England in the 1920’s and the first Cabinet was formed under King Faisal I, the post of Minister of the Treasury went to an Iraqi Jew named Sassoon Ezekiel. Mr. Ezekiel was tasked with the duty of overseeing Iraq’s major source of revenue, its nascent oil industry. And he had to negotiate with British, French and American oil companies their agreement with the Iraqi Government. Iraqis still chuckle when they mention how Ezekiel insisted that the Agreement should stipulate that the companies pay to Iraq its share of oil revenues, not in pounds, francs nor dollars, but in ounces of gold. He defined the price of Iraq’s oil in gold, and famously said: “Currencies go up or down, but gold is gold”.

Another 20th century story comes from Morocco where a large Jewish community lived before WWII. At that time Morocco was under French control though it had a Muslim king

(Muhammed V). When France fell to the Nazi army, Morocco's control fell to the Nazi puppet regime of Vichy. Learning of Jewish persecution in Europe, Muhammed V relocated all the residents of houses around his palace elsewhere, and moved all the Jews into these vacated houses. The Nazi got the message that Moroccan Jews were under the protection of the king and left them alone.

CALENDAR

I mentioned the age of Judaism and Islam in *solar* years which is the common way we mark time. But neither faith uses the solar calendar to mark its time and therefore its religious holidays. **Each uses the lunar calendar**, an amusing similarity of the two peoples. A lunar year is about 11 days shorter than a solar year, so in any extended period of time, there are more lunar than solar years. More interestingly, because of the shorter lunar year, same months in successive lunar years will not fall in the same season, as seasons are solar based. Jewish scholars solved this problem. About every three years, when the lunar calendar falls behind the solar by a month, a Correction Month is added to the Jewish lunar calendar. (actually the correction month is added 7 times in each 18 years). As a result, Yom Kippur is always in the Fall, and Passover is always in the Spring-in the more populated Northern Hemisphere, but even the Southern Hemisphere enjoys seasonal consistency. Independence Day for the State of Israel is marked on the lunar calendar, so it has no set date on the solar calendar, but luckily always falls in the same season.

Muslim timekeeping is similarly lunar but is much worse, because it has no Correction Month. So the fasting month of Ramadan falls 11 days earlier each year than the year before, as does the time of Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). That means that on more years than not, both the onerous Fast and the hardy Hajj occur in the sweltering summer of Mecca, the Muslim holy site. Each of the two events exactly coincides with the same solar month, only once every 33 years.

Christians mark their holidays in a solar fashion, so Christmas comes in the same day, month and season every year. But with Easter, the holiest of holy days, Christians have not disowned their Jewish roots. Easter is marked by the Jewish (i.e. lunar) calendar, so it oscillates over the solar calendar, like Passover. But thanks to Jewish ingenuity, both are Spring Holidays.

LANGUAGE

The Diaspora meant that Jews live in various places in the world. Most of them only speak the language of the country where they are born and raised. But

a Jew who wants to be a rabbi (which means "teacher") *has* to master-not just learn- Hebrew. Jewish services in America-as an example- are mostly conducted in English. But the *essential* segments of the service must be in Hebrew. Lay members of the congregation learn these Hebrew statements, most at their individual Bar (or Bat) Mitzvah and some even before that. After that, an individual Jew's knowledge of Hebrew is a matter of individual effort. In Israel, Hebrew is everyone's language...everyone except my friend's grandmother. This friend speaks

English with an Israeli accent, but also says a few Arabic words in heavy Iraqi accent. I asked him when was he in Iraq. He said he wasn't. But his grandmother migrated to Israel from Iraq in 1948 and refused to learn Hebrew because she was "too old". So the whole family had to speak to her in the Iraqi slang of Arabic until she died. So her grandson/my friend learned that "lingo".

The same holds true for the 1.5 billion Muslims of the world, most of whom are not Arab. But Arabic is as essential to their religious practice, as Hebrew is essential to the religious practice of Jews. There are translations of the Koran into various languages, but when it is recited as part of a religious ceremony, Muslims insist that it is recited in the original Arabic.

Interestingly, both the Arabic, Hebrew (and Aramaic) have the same etymology (Proto-Semitic) and so they have similar alphabet-at least phonetically- and similar grammar. In each language, are words that mean and sound the same. Often these words have strong religious relevance, so they are important for the rituals and liturgy of both religions. One example is the word for charity or alms- giving, which in both languages, even sounds the same: "Arabic *sedaka*" and "Hebrew *tsedaka*".

ETHNICITY

Most Muslims are not Arab,(though most Arabs are Muslim). So it follows that Muslims belong to the various ethnicities in the world. Only a minority of the Muslims are of Arabic ethnicity. But this minority shares the same Semitic ethnicity with the Jewish people of the world. The oft-repeated story is that Abraham's wife (Sarah) was childless, so he had a son named Ishmael with his slave/servant girl. After that Sarah did get pregnant and delivered a son named Isaac who is the fore-father of the Jews. Ishmael is the fore-father of the Arabs. That's why the Jews have a common ethnicity (cousins!) with the Arabs. But given the inseparability of the Muslim faith from the Arabic language, it is no surprise the association in the minds of most of the world's population, between Arab & Muslim.

DECLARATION OF FAITH

One of the most, if not *the* most, sacred prayers in Judaism is the "*Sh'ma*" or "*Shema*" a Hebrew word that means "Hear &/or Listen" (and sounds exactly the same as the Arabic word for "Hear &/or Listen"). The "*Sh'ma*" comes from the Bible book of Deuteronomy, Chapter #6, verse #4, that states: "Listen Oh Israel, the Lord our God; the Lord is one." No Jewish believer certain of the imminence of death wants to leave this world without reciting the "*Sh'ma*", because it is *that* central to the faith.

Similarly central to the Muslim faith is the "*Shahada*" an Arabic word that means "declaration". It states that "There is no deity but God". At times, this statement is known in the less scholarly translation "There is no god but God" or in other more sloppy translations. In Islam, it is again a pre-death requirement. This statement also appears in the short (four-verse-fifteen-word) Chapter # 112 of the Koran. The first verse in this chapter is: "Say God is one." A

matter of linguistic curiosity is that in this chapter 112, for the word “one”, is used the Arabic synonym “ahad” which sounds- and means- the same as the word “akhad” which is the word for “one” in the Hebrew version of the “Sh’ma”!

MONOTHEISM

Both Judaism and Islam are strictly monotheistic. Some pious Jews even refuse to say God’s name, due to the Bible’s injunction against “using the Lord’s name in vain”. In Islam, any hint of even a possibility of deviation from obsessive monotheism is considered “shirk” the most capital offence in Islam. The common Muslim name “Abdullah” means –in its Arabic origin- that the individual named, is a slave of God. And Abdullah has ninety-nine synonyms. This stubborn adherence to solid monotheism, makes some (in both religions) hesitant to recognize the monotheism in Christianity, because Christianity embraces the Trinity.

The concept of God in Christianity is that of the embracing father who is to be loved. But in both Jewish and Islam theology, though God is still a loved father, He seems to invoke more fear, as the law-giver-law-enforcer who demands obedience and inflicts punishment.

COMPREHENSIVENESS

A religion is basically a set of guidelines for behavior.

In both Judaism and Islam, these guidelines are very extensive and comprehensive, involving every aspect of the life of a Jew or a Muslim respectively and delving pervasively even into the mundane. Also, in both religions, many of the “dos and don’ts” are similar and numerous.

In comparison, Christianity (the other Abrahamaic faith) focuses on the moralistic and the spiritual.

SCRIPTURE

Jews believe the Torah is the very word of God, written down for humanity to follow. Muslims believe the same about the Koran. That explains the extreme deference each group bestows on its holy book.

Interestingly, the Koran teaches that both the Torah, and the New Testament,(the latter called “Injeel” in the Koran) are similarly the word of God.

Hence Islam refers to Christians and Jews as the other “People of the Book”. Islam explains its *raison d’etre* on the fact that in 610 C.E., though the Middle East had Judaism and Christianity, both of which monotheistic and divinely inspired, the Arabs in their then-distant desert, south of the Holy Land were pagan and polytheistic. So Muhammed was inspired the Koran and tasked with teaching them to abandon all that materialist idolatry, and worship the *one ineffable God*.

PRACTICE

The common daily practice by Jewish believers has a lot of similarities with that of the Muslims. These similarities can be discovered in various aspects of the practice of both religions.

Prayer times

A Christian may (and does) pray, any time that individual feels the need for prayer. In both Judaism & Islam, there are set times for prayer, based on the rise and setting of the sun. There are additional optional prayers, but notice the adjectives “additional & optional” and you can guess how widely they are performed.

Direction

A Jew during prayer stands respectfully, and *must face Jerusalem*. Also, a Muslim at prayer *must face Mecca*. That means that everywhere in the world except the central Middle East, they both roughly face the same direction. More interestingly, early during most of Muhammed’s life, Muslims at prayer faced Jerusalem, before they were directed to face Mecca, a few years before Muhammed died.

Recitals

During each of the daily prayers, both Jews and Muslims are expected to recite certain predetermined portions of the scripture and liturgy.

Dietary Restrictions

The consumption of pork (and all porcine products) is proscribed in both religions. And in both, the slaughter of animals has to follow a certain method and be accompanied by certain religious pronouncement before their meat can be *kosher* for Jews and *halal* for Muslims. (Notably Islam does not prohibit the mixing of meat and milk, that Judaism prohibits.)

Fast of Yum Kippur & Ramadan

In both religions, the fast is defined as *total* abstinence from all nourishments, *including plain water*. This is especially onerous given the twenty-four-consecutive-hour duration of the Jewish Yum Kippur, that ends with a standing prayer before food or water can be had. The Muslim fasting time is shorter, lasting from about two hours before sunrise, until sunset on the same day. But then Muslims follow the same fasting rules on the subsequent twenty-nine days.

Male Circumcision is mandated as a religious duty in both faiths.

Female Segregation during prayer was practiced for millennia in Judaism, until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Reform Judaism came into being and has since allowed women to mix with men during prayer, and to even be rabbis. But to this day, Orthodox Judaism observes that segregation. Similarly, all sects of Islam, from the inception of the religion until today have continued to observe female/male segregation.

CONCLUSION

My aim is to highlight the ‘closeness’ and similarities between Jews and Muslims over thirteen centuries and a half, and suggest those as a possible explanation for the long peaceful coexistence of the two peoples.