MYTH AND COUNTERMYTH

The Myth of an Interfaith Utopia

Already at the end of the Middle Ages one encounters among Jews the belief that medieval Islam provided a peaceful haven for Jews, whereas Christendom relentlessly persecuted them. These Jews were aware that Muslim Turkey had granted refuge to Jewish victims of persecution from Catholic Spain and elsewhere.[1] A spate of mainly Hebrew chronicles written in the wake of the traumatic expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 drove home the contrast between Christian enmity and Muslim benevolence. In the nineteenth century, the fathers of the modern, scientific study of Jewish history transformed this perception into a historical postulate.

Frustrated by the tortuous progress of their own integration into gentile society in what was supposed to be a "liberal" age of emancipation, Jewish intellectuals seeking a historical precedent for a more tolerant attitude toward Jews hit upon a time and place that met this criterion—medieval Muslim Spain. There, they believed, Jews had achieved a remarkable level of toleration, political achievement, and cultural integration. Jewish historians took the observation of a young Lutheran scholar of Hebrew poetry who had written about a literary golden age (*das goldne Zeitalter*) that lasted from 940 to 1040, and applied the epithet to the full range of political and social life of the entire Muslim-Spanish period.[2] They contrasted this with the gloomy Jewish experience of oppression under medieval Christendom. In short, the very Jewish historians who created what Salo Baron disparagingly calls "the lachrymose conception of Jewish history" in Christian Europe also invented its counterpoint: the "myth of the interfaith utopia" in Islam.

Heinrich Graetz, the leading nineteenth-century Jewish historian, makes this point at the beginning of the story of the Jews of Arab lands in his influential *History of the Jews:*

> Wearied with contemplating the miserable plight of the Jews in their ancient home and in the countries of Europe, and fatigued by the constant sight of fanatical oppression in Christendom, the eyes of the observer rest with gladness upon their situation in the Arabian Peninsula. Here the sons of Judah were free to raise their heads, and did not need to look about them with fear and humiliation, lest the ecclesiastical wrath be discharged upon them, or the

> secular power overwhelm them. Here they were not shut out from the paths of honor, nor excluded from the privileges of the state, but, untrammeled, were allowed to develop their powers in the midst of a free, simple and talented people, to show their manly courage, to compete for the gifts of fame, and with practised hand to measure swords with their antagonists.[3]

Graetz explicitly pits his romantic, utopian slant on Jewish life among Arabs (the tribes of Arabia) against his "lachrymose" conception of Jewish life under Christendom. Further on, mindful of the advanced age in which he himself lived, and reflecting German Jewry's conviction about Sephardic supremacy over Ashkenazim (for Graetz and others, represented by contemporary Polish Jewry), Graetz extends his praise for Islam to the cultural domain:

> The height of culture which the nations of modern times are striving to attain—to be imbued with knowledge, conviction, and moral strength—was reached by the Jews of Spain in their most flourishing period. . . . No wonder, then, that the Jews of Spain were looked upon as superior beings by their uncultured brethren in other lands—in France, Germany, and Italy—and that they gladly yielded them the precedence which had formerly been enjoyed by the Babylonian academies.[4]

The premise of Islamic toleration of Jews (actually an instance of a more general axiom about Islam's forbearance toward non-Muslim monotheists) rang true to Jewish Orientalists precisely because of the comparison with medieval Christianity.[5] In Europe the period beginning with the First Crusade witnessed recurrent acts of violence directed against Jews per se. Christians came to believe that Jews murdered Christian children and extracted their blood for ritual or magical purposes. The Jewish moneylender became the object of intense Christian hatred. Jewish converts to Christianity were suspect; in Spain, especially, this led to the infamous Spanish Inquisition. In addition, entire Jewish communities were expelled from medieval Christian states. None of these excesses, however, seem to have a counterpart in Islam.

In its nineteenth-century context, the myth of the interfaith utopia was used to attempt to achieve an important political end, to challenge supposedly liberal Christian Europe to make good on its promise of political equality and unfettered professional and cultural opportunities for Jews.[6] First, if medieval Muslims could have so tolerated the Jews that a Samuel ibn Nagrela (d. 1056) could rise to the vizierate of the Spanish Muslim state of Granada, or a Maimonides to a respected position among Muslim intellectuals, could not modern Europeans grant Jews the rights and privileges promised them in the aftermath of the French Revolution? Second, did not the Christian world owe this to the Jews, to compensate for its history of

cruelty toward the Jews? Third, just as Jews in Spain (and elsewhere in the Muslim world), benefiting from liberal treatment, had benefited Arab society, so would the Jews of modern Europe, if treated with equality, contribute greatly to European civilization.

The Jewish myth of an Islamic interfaith utopia persisted into the twentieth century, long after the achievement of emancipation in Europe. The title of Adolph L. Wismar's 1927 book speaks for itself: *A Study in Tolerance as Practiced by Muhammad and His Immediate Successors*. From the 1940s, there is Rudolf Kayser's delightful biography of the Spanish Hebrew poet Judah Halevi, published by the Philosophical Library, in which Kayser reiterates Graetz's tone:

> It is like a historical miracle that in the very same era of history which produced these orgies of persecution [the Crusades], the people of Israel in Southern Europe enjoyed a golden age, the like of which they had not known since the days of the Bible.[7]

Eliyahu Ashtor's Hebrew history of the Jews in Muslim Spain, now popularized in an English translation, glorifies the Golden Age to the point of romance.[8]

A favorable appraisal of the fate of the Jews of Islam, compared with the sorrowful destiny of the Jews of Christendom, also appears in the writings of Jews from Arab lands. André Chouraqui, a North African Jewish intellectual and historian, writing about the Jews of his ancestral homeland, describes the Almohad persecution in the twelfth century as being "of a passing nature." He attributes most pogroms against the Jews in the oppressive later Middle Ages to "lust and envy, rather than outbursts of hate." Further,

> there was never any time in the Moslem Maghreb [North Africa, when there was] a philosophy and tradition of anti-Semitism such as existed in Europe from the Middle Ages down to modern times. . . . During most periods of history, the Jews of North Africa were happier than those in most parts of Europe, where they were the objects of unrelenting hate; such extreme sentiments did not exist in the Maghreb. The scorn that the adherents of the different faiths expressed for each other could not obliterate the strong bonds of a common source of inspiration and a way of life intimately shared.[9]

To a certain extent, the myth of the Islamic-Jewish interfaith utopia owes it tenacity to reinforcement during and since the Nazi era. The search for the roots of twentieth-century European antisemitism correlates with perpetuation of the myth of idyllic times under Islam in such books as *Jews in a Gentile World: The Problem of Anti-Semitism*.[10] In his "Anti-Semitism: Challenge to Christian Culture," Carl J. Friedrich invokes the expulsion of the Jews from Christian Spain in 1492 and the counterexample of Islam:

> An interesting contrast between the religious intolerance of Western Christian culture at that time and the relative tolerance of the Mohammedan culture of the Muslims occurred: when, following the brutal persecution of the Jews in Spain, many went to the Levant, the tolerant treatment given by the Ottoman Muslims to these persecuted Jews, as well as Christians, elicited the curiosity of political writers. In his political satires the post-Machiavellian Boccalini has Bodin punished for commending the tolerance of the Turks.[11]

In *Essays on Antisemitism,* first published in 1942 (reprinted in 1946), the contributor of the only chapter dealing with Jews and Islam declares: "No study of antisemitism can be complete that does not pay some attention to the position of the Jews under Islam." Yet his conclusions highlight the "comparative tolerance" of Islam as opposed to Christianity, asserting, following de Gobineau, that the religion of Islam did not play a role in anti-Jewish incidents and attitudes in the past. Rather, these resulted from "political expediency or economic rivalry."[12] As recently as 1978, the compilers of an annotated historical catalog of antisemitic outbursts relegate the discussion of Islam to a brief section at the end of the book.[13]

The Myth of an Interfaith Utopia in Arab and Arabist Writings

The "myth of the interfaith utopia" went largely unchallenged until its adoption by Arabs as a weapon in their propaganda war against Zionism. According to this view, for centuries, Jews and Arabs lived together in peace and harmony under Islamic rule—precisely at a time when the Jews were being relentlessly persecuted by Christianity. Modern antipathy toward Israel began only when the Jews destroyed the old harmony by pressing the Zionist claim against Muslim-Arab rights to Palestine. Accordingly, Arab hatred and antisemitism would end, and the ancient harmony would be restored, when Zionism abandoned both its "colonialist" and its "neo-crusader" quest.

An early example of Arab historiographical exploitation of the Jewish interfaith-utopia myth occurs in a pioneering work on Arab nationalism by the Christian-Arab writer George Antonius. The book closes with a condemnation of Zionist usurpation of Arab rights to Palestine; in an earlier remark, Antonius states:

> Both in the Middle Ages and in modern times, and thanks mainly to the civilising influence of Islam, Arab history remained remarkably free from instances of deliberate persecution and shows that some of the greatest achievements of the Jewish race were accomplished in the days of Arab power, under the aegis of Arab rulers, and with the help of their enlightened patronage. Even to-day, in spite of the animosity aroused by the conflict in Palestine, the treatment of Jewish minorities settled in the surrounding Arab countries

> continues to be not less friendly and humane than in England or the United States, and is in some ways a good deal more tolerant.[14]

This emphasis on Islamic benevolence toward the Jews was not new. Christian Arabs—like Jews, considered "infidels" by Islam—have felt a need to affirm historical Islamic tolerance of the non-Muslim for their own sake, just as many have supported Arab nationalism as a means of ensuring their continued acceptance in the Arab world.[15]

The proposition that historical Islamic tolerance gave way in the twentieth century to Arab hostility in reaction to Zionist encroachment became a theme of Arab propaganda against Israel both in politics and in writings about Jewish-Arab history, most of them appearing after the Six-Day War. Because the literature is immense, I will touch on just a few examples, from a variety of sources.

An essay by an American professor in Beirut, in 1970, is a case in point. Drawing on Jewish scholars, notably S. D. Goitein and Salo Baron, the author surveys the "new era" of tolerance for the Jews ushered in by conquering Arabs to replace Christian persecution. This tolerance led to what Jewish historians rightly called a golden age and to the "eventual integration [of the Jews] into the mainstream of life in Arab-Islamic society." In this century, by exception, he argues, anti-Jewish sentiment arose among Arabs in reaction to Zionism and its policy of usurpation. This, however, is "*strictly* a modern phenomenon, and one that runs counter to the time-honored Islamic tradition of fraternity and tolerance."[16] The first half of a book by a Pakistani scholar, published not long after the Six-Day War, extols Muslim forbearance toward religious minorities; the second half concludes with a chapter on "Muslims in Palestine" that decries Zionist and Jewish oppression of the Arabs "in spite of the fact that Arabs and Jews have lived together in peace and harmony for centuries."[17] A source of major embarrassment for many Arabs, the well-known saga in Arabic sources of Muhammad's massacre of a Jewish tribe in Medina after expelling two others, comes in for historiographical "cleansing" in many Arabist writings.[18]

Publications in Arabic give considerable prominence to the myth of the interfaith utopia. A paper read at the Fourth Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research at Al-Azhar University in 1968 (and published in both the Arabic conference proceedings and the official English translation) is entitled "Jews in the Middle Ages: Comparative Study of East and West."[19] The author summarizes:

> It may be sufficiently evident that Jews throughout history received no better or kinder treatment than that of Muslims. The egoism and greed of Jews subjected them to persecution by the Romans in early times and by various peoples of Christian Europe in the Middle Ages. They found in Muslims—*as*

Jewish writers themselves admit—merciful brothers who regarded them as fellow believers and did not allow religious differences [to] affect their treatment or attitude toward them. Spain provides a clear example of the big difference in the treatment of Jews by Muslims and Christians.[20]

Arabic books on Jewish or non-Muslim life under medieval Islam overwhelmingly favor the myth of Islamic tolerance, which, of course, is directed as much at the Christian minorities as at the Jews. A scholarly legal study by a lecturer in Islamic law at Baghdad University cites the widespread employment of non-Muslim "Protected People" in Islamic government as a sign of Islam's unprecedented tolerance (*samāḥa* or *tasāmuḥ*).[21] Qāsim ʿAbduh Qāsim, a historian at Egypt's Zagazig University, published "The Jews of Egypt from the Islamic Conquest to the Ottoman Invasion."[22] The first edition (1980) credits Islamic "tolerance" for the freedom and prosperity enjoyed by Egyptian Jewry in the Middle Ages. The second edition (1987) draws to a much greater extent than the first on recent Jewish scholarship, especially that dealing with the Egyptian Jewish florescence under the Fatimids (well documented in the Cairo Geniza), to strengthen the author's case for Islam's liberal treatment of the Jews.[23]

With undisguised polemical purpose, a propagandist of secular Pan-Arabism, ʿAlī Ḥusnī al-Kharbūṭlī, traces the story of Islamic tolerance of *dhimmīs* to the early period of Islam.[24] The chapters devoted to the Jews (there are no separate chapters on the Christian *dhimmīs*) brim with antisemitic stereotypes. One chapter contrasts the political, religious, economic, and social freedom Jews enjoyed from Muslim tolerance through the ages with the gloomy plight of the Arab refugees under the Jewish-Zionist occupation of Palestine that began in 1948.[25]

These few examples represent a trend among Arab and Arabist writers: slavish devotion to the axiom of Islamic tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) and to the myth of an interfaith utopia.[26] This version of Muslim–non-Muslim relations in history served in part to justify and excuse another trend: a virulent strain of traditional European antisemitism in Arabic garb, which came to public attention after the Israeli victory in June 1967.[27]

Arab Antisemitism Revealed

Arab antisemitism was originally fashioned in the nineteenth century by Christian Arabs using classical Christian antisemitic stereotypes.[28] It grew in intensity, and became generalized in the Arab world, with the intensification of the Arab-Jewish/Arab-Israeli conflict. Jews became aware of its prevalence and vehemence only in the late 1960s. Yehoshafat Harkabi revealed the hitherto ignored phenomenon to the public, first in newspaper articles, then in his *Arab Attitudes to Israel,* completed before the Six-Day War and published shortly afterward.[29]

Disturbing evidence of Arab antisemitism was discovered in Arabic schoolbooks and other teaching materials (including indoctrination literature for the Egyptian armed forces) found by Israeli soldiers in Arab territories occupied in June 1967.[30] Pamphlets and scholarly studies helped spread the news in Israel and abroad.[31] Just months after the war, in February 1968, *Jewish Frontier,* the labor Zionist Alliance monthly, communicated these revelations to its readers—without comment. Mentioned again and again inside and outside Israel was the wide dissemination of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Arabic translation. Similarly alarming was the warlike, anti-Israel speech of Egyptian President Sadat on April 25, 1972, on the occasion of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Sadat condemned the Jews of Medina for having acted treacherously toward the Prophet, giving this as a reason for refusing to negotiate with the present-day "nation of liars and traitors, a people of plotters, a folk created for treacherous deeds," and as a reason for fighting the Israelis to the point of powerless submission.[32] The old-new theme of Jewish hostility toward the Prophet was present in the 1950s in antisemitic writings of Islamic fundamentalists, such as Sayyid Quṭb.[33] And Rivka Yadlin has recently documented the dismaying persistence of intense antisemitism in publications in Egypt even after the peace treaty with Israel.[34]

Countermyth: The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History

Arab polemical exploitation of the myth of the interfaith utopia, coupled with Jewish awareness of the prevalence of antisemitism in the Arab world, catalyzed a reevaluation of the history of Jewish-Muslim relations which I call, interchangeably, the "countermyth of Islamic persecution of Jews" and the "neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history."[35] It achieved prominence after the Six-Day War, beginning with publications appearing in the Diaspora, especially in popular forums.

The America-Israel Public Affairs Committee's widely circulated *Near East Report* inaugurated its "Myths and Facts" supplement shortly after the Six-Day War. In a virtually forgotten essay of 1946,[36] the Jewish historian Cecil Roth warned of a curious interpretation fashionable among Arabs and Christian anti-Zionists that would "tend in the long run to do us a great deal of harm." What Roth was speaking of specifically was the propagandistic exploitation by Arabs and Christian anti-Zionists of the nineteenth-century Jewish theme of "halcyon days under the pallid light of the Crescent [and] of purgatory in the shadow of the Cross." In closing, he insists, "The idea that the Jews lived in the Arab world in perfect peace and tranquility until the militant Zionists wantonly disturbed the even tenor of the reciprocal relations is a perversion of the truth." AIPAC's purpose in reprinting the article was to let it serve as a complement to a feature on

"background to the Arab-Israel War" and to expose, in Roth's words, "a few overlooked facts" about Islamic persecution from medieval to modern times. The Muslim regime of oppression, present even during the Golden Age in Spain, "often attained what might be termed occidental virulence." Commenting on the supposed "friendliness of the Palestinian Arabs toward Jews before the arrival of the new generation of Zionists," Roth quotes from a letter by a Jewish visitor to Palestine early in the sixteenth century. The writer describes the oppression and humiliation of the local Jews as well as their general belief that life under Islam was worse than it was under Christendom. The traveler supports his assertion by quoting from the Epistle of Maimonides (the traveler erred and called it an epistle to Spain, rather than to Yemen), "in which [Maimonides] says that there is no people in the world which wishes to humiliate and to degrade the Jews as the Arabs do."

Not long after the AIPAC publication, Saul S. Friedman sounded a distress signal: "Current Arab propaganda insists that the basic cause of antagonism between Jews and Arabs is political Zionism, which is depicted as a fanaticism born of European persecution that has destroyed a Middle Eastern harmony hitherto existing for a thousand years."[37] Reacting to the "fable of Semitic brotherhood" which claims that, "while Europe denied the light of freedom to Jews shut up in ghettos, the Saadias, Maimonides, Ibn Gabirols, and Judah Halevis were free to develop and enlighten mankind under Islamic rule," Friedman proceeds to catalog the "less widely known" hatred and persecution that befell Jews in Muslim lands from the very birth of Islam: from Muhammad's violent turn against the Jews in Medina to the ritual murder accusation in Damascus, Syria, in 1840.[38]

In 1974, another contributor to the countermyth, the journalist Rose Lewis, excoriated Zionist propagandists for dwelling on the suffering of the Jews in Europe while neglecting the story of the uninterrupted Jewish presence in Palestine, as well as Arab persecution of Jews throughout history.[39] Writing in *Commentary* a year later, Lewis pointed to the failure of Israel's advocates to recognize that "in the Middle East . . . [the Jews] have endured thirteen centuries of discrimination and persecution" and also to exploit this history to argue their "right" to (as opposed to the pragmatic need for) self-determination in Israel.[40]

Tunisian-born French Jewish writer and self-proclaimed "left-wing Zionist," Albert Memmi bitterly castigates those who assert that the Arab Jews, indigenous brothers of Arab Muslims, have until Zionism had it good and that Ashkenazic Jewry holds a monopoly on suffering inflicted at the hands of the gentile:

> When it comes to Jewish misfortune, there's just enough for them: they've confiscated it for their Ashkenazim. As if there were only a Moslem East, and only a Western Diaspora! As if there were only an Arab-Moslem set of claims, by contrast with a West represented by the Jews! . . . Why shouldn't we too submit our reckoning to the world?[41]

Memmi rails against contemporary historians:

> Having suffered the frightful Nazi slaughter, those Jewish historians could not even imagine such a thing elsewhere. But if we leave out the crematoria and the murders committed in Russia, from Kichinev to Stalin, *the sum total of the Jewish victims of the Christian world is probably no greater than the total number of successive pogroms, both big and small, perpetrated in the Moslem countries.*[42]

Martin Gilbert, biographer of Winston Churchill and chronicler of the Holocaust, also took up the cause of debunking the myth of an interfaith utopia. His popular piece, "The Jews of Islam: Golden Age or Ghetto?" took a gloomy view of Jewish-Arab relations in the past.[43]

More extensive is the work of Bat Ye'or, a native of Egypt who, along with other Jews, suffered humiliation when exiled from that country in 1956. She has published several pamphlets and books that sound the theme of congenital, unremitting Arab-Islamic persecution of the non-Muslim religions, Judaism and Christianity. In *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam*, her best-known work, Bat Ye'or (or "Daughter of the Nile") marshals primary sources from all periods, documenting her thesis of the "thirteen centuries of sufferings and humiliations" that Islam heaped on the Jews and Christians.[44] In a preface to the English edition, Jacques Ellul commends the author for showing that "in many ways the *dhimmi* was comparable to the European serf of the Middle Ages."[45]

Joan Peters's *From Time Immemorial* has achieved notoriety for its assault on the demographic argument for Arab claims to the land of Palestine. Peters plays up the countermyth by presenting a litany of persecutions in Jewish-Arab history and challenging Arab rhetoric about the interfaith utopia as well as the view "that the Jews were, during certain periods in the Arab lands, 'better off' than they were in the Christian lands of Europe."[46]

The Countermyth in Scholarly Writing

Journalists and other popularizers pioneered the countermyth. Some Jewish scholars have also searched for evidence of early, innate Muslim hatred of the Jews. For instance, the theme in Egyptian President Sadat's 1972 speech denouncing Jewish treachery against Muhammad in Medina seems to have found an oblique response in a scholarly article in 1974, which argues that Muhammad never planned to tolerate the Jews and Judaism. Rather, from the very outset, the intention was to reduce the Jewish tribes of Medina to a state of powerless submission.[47] At a symposium held in Israel in 1978, six papers given on "antisemitism through the ages" dealt

with medieval or modern Arab or Islamic attitudes toward the Jews.[48] One Israeli participant, who delivered a paper entitled "Jew-Hatred in the Islamic Tradition and the Koranic Exegesis," concluded that, "if the oral tradition reflects the developments in early Muslim society, then the traditions about the Jews, without doubt, not only formed the ideological infrastructure of the anti-Jewish legislation [in the Pact of 'Umar] but were also a reflection of the actual attitude toward the Jews in the first two centuries of Islam's existence."[49] Another scholar writing on the subject of Jew-hatred opens by stating that the "positive terms" in which the social and legal status of the Jews in Muslim lands in the Middle Ages have been described, as compared with the harsher condition of the Jews in Christian Europe, while correct, "has done a great injustice to the historic truth." After the "relatively good" first three generations of Islam, the "political, legal, and security positions" of the Jews "gradually grew worse." Not unexpectedly, the author invokes Maimonides' comment in the "Epistle to Yemen" that the Ishmaelite exile was the worst ever.[50]

The Countermyth and Israel's Jews from Arab Lands

The countermyth of innately persecutory Islam figures in the political thinking of certain groups in Israel's Oriental, or Sephardic, Jewish population. The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), founded in 1975, proclaimed its philosophy in its keynote publication.[51] WOJAC held to be axiomatic that Israel's Jews from Arab lands are refugees from persecution. In compensation for the wrong these Jews had suffered at the hands of the Arabs, they deserve to live peacefully in Israel. Further, their resettlement there after 1948 represents an "exchange of populations" that counterbalances the exodus of tens of thousands of Arabs from newly born Israel and thereby cancels any obligation on Israel's part to repatriate those refugees. Rather, WOJAC contends, the responsibility for absorbing them should be borne by the other Arab countries.

In a chapter entitled "The Persecution of Jews in Arab Lands,"[52] the pamphlet features the theme of the countermyth:

> Arab oppression of Jews is not, therefore, a post-1948 phenomenon. It is rooted in Islam and has been an inescapable characteristic of the relations between Arabs and Jews since Muhammad's time. 20th century Arab persecution of Jews is only a continuation and intensification of this centuries-long tradition, in which the socially and religiously inferior Jew bore the brunt of the Muslim masses' contempt and the Muslim governments' arbitrary policies and financial troubles.[53]

This analysis may not reflect the opinion of the entire constituency WOJAC was established to represent; nonetheless, it is true that Oriental Jews in Israel are purported to mistrust the Arabs as a result of their own

experience of persecution in their original homelands. This is supposed to explain their intense anti-Arabism, their opposition to giving up the West Bank and Gaza, and their long-standing support for the Likud party. Some go so far as to claim that Oriental Jews, because of their hatred of the Arabs, pose a significant obstacle to peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

While it is true that Jews from Arab countries often voice negative views about Arabs and Islam, it is questionable to what extent this is rooted in long-term historical memory. Most Oriental Jewish voters in Israel today are children of immigrants; they never lived in Arab lands themselves or they left for Israel at a young age. The stories of hostility (and harmony) under Islam in the old country come from their elders. The animosity to Arabs reflects, in part, the desire of Oriental Jews to differentiate themselves from the Arabs, who, in an unfortunate but predictable consequence of the Arab-Israel conflict, are the object of deep prejudice among the Israeli public. Moreover, their support for Likud at the voting booth has over the years been determined in part by their political and economic experiences in Israel.

Ever since their arrival as refugees, Jews from Arab lands have been denied equal opportunities in an Israeli society founded by Ashkenazim and ruled for the first three decades of the state by a Labor party dominated by Jews of European extraction. Much of this was not explicitly discriminatory; rather, it was an unfortunate result of the overburdening task of absorbing so many immigrants in a struggling new nation. Nevertheless, many Oriental Israelis continue to hold the Labor party responsible for their low socioeconomic status.[54] Oriental Jews perceive, correctly, that the Ashkenazim stake their claim to the fruits of Jewish independence in the Jewish state as compensation for the persecution they suffered in Christian lands—persecution that culminated in the Holocaust. Consciously or unconsciously, Oriental Jews in Israel have taken to accentuating their historic persecution (and thereby contributing to the countermyth) in an attempt to justify their claim to an equal share of the Zionist dream.[55]

A similar analysis appears in an article published in *Tikkun* magazine in 1990.[56] The writer, an Israeli scholar, and himself an Oriental Jew, illustrates how Oriental Jews distort the Jewish-Arab past in order to gain "assimilation and self-identity" in the present. He describes an Israeli television documentary about the Jews of Iraq. The documentary relates little of the cultural achievement of Iraqi Jews; instead, it portrays their story as if it conformed to "an Ashkenazic history of pogroms and persecution." The film intersperses "scenes from Baghdad with scenes from Nazi concentration camps" to draw an analogy between the well-known pogrom in Baghdad in 1941 and Nazi atrocities in Europe. The writer suggests that this may have been "another desperate attempt to assimilate into Israeli society, to share in the common destiny, to take part in the Holocaust."

Indirect evidence in support of the hypothesis connecting Sephardic anti-Arabism with domestic problems in Israel comes from a small book by an American Jew of Baghdadi origin. The author writes sympathetically about what he calls the "gap" between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews in Israel. In a brief excursus on "the medieval history of the Jews in Moslem countries," he seems to prepare his reader for a countermyth revision:

> Although there were trying times for Jews in Moslem lands, many historians consider their lot superior to that of the Jews in European countries. However, instances of persecution did occur; Jews were killed and robbed with greater frequency than their Moslem neighbors.

Tellingly—and consistent with his unclouded understanding of the real problem of Oriental Jews in Israel—the author continues:

> Nevertheless, anti-Jewish pogroms were less common in Moslem countries than in Christian lands. The mass burnings at the stake which took place in many sections of Europe are not known to have occurred in the Moslem world. Whereas Jews in Europe were expelled many times from their homes, only one similar instance is recorded in Moslem history: in 1678, the Jews of Yemen were ordered to accept Islam or leave the country. They left, en masse, and settled at Mauzaʿ, a small Yemenite city at the shore of the Red Sea. By 1681 they were permitted to return to Yemen.[57]

This balanced view of Jewish-Arab history by one who lived through its final stage indicates that the stereotype of Sephardic Jews as rabid Arab-haters needs to be qualified, perhaps with attention to possible differences between Sephardic Jews living in Israel and those living in the Diaspora.

The past decade has seen attempts in Israel to counteract the popular stereotype that all Jews from Arab countries despise Arabs and oppose diplomatic accommodation. A case in point is the group "Ha-mizraḥ el shalom," literally, "The East for Peace," formed in 1983 and composed of Israeli intellectuals of Oriental background who advocate socioeconomic equality at home, acknowledgment of Israel's embeddedness in the Middle East, and diplomatic concessions in return for peace with Israel's Arab neighbors. "This is the guarantee of a future of coexistence, mutual respect, and cultural cross-fertilization on the model of the Golden Age in Spain," writes Shlomo Elbaz, chairman of "East for Peace."[58]

With this brief sketch of the "myth-countermyth" debate over the fate of the Jews of Arab lands in the past as background, we now turn to the task at hand: a comparative historical assessment of Islamic-Jewish and Christian-Jewish relations during the early and High Middle Ages.[59]

PART TWO

In Religion and Law