

**Purim and its Relatives in Tripoli:  
A Comparative Perspective on the Social Uses of Biblical Stories**

**By**

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***Introduction***

It is a truism that the Bible constitutes the foundation text of Jewish society. This truism, however, hides many questions. Are the texts which compose the Bible only reflections of past literary creations, or did the biblical text become an active force in shaping Jewish society over the generations in different lands? Jews viewed the books of the Bible as constitutive of their institutions and way of life, but lived for centuries as a politically dependent society amidst civilizations which claimed either (1) that they possessed interpretations of those books which superseded their own (Christianity), or (2) that the Jews no longer had access to the correct version of their own scriptures (Islam). Nevertheless, in these settings, Jewish society nurtured an intimate relation to the biblical text, internalizing it in many aspects of their lives,<sup>2</sup> and thereby protecting their own understandings of the text from co-optation by competing civilizational claims.

The relative success of this process of textual self-preservation would not be surprising had the Jews existed as a highly segregated minority, minimally interacting with the surrounding culture and more powerful society. This was not the case, however (varying, of course, with time and place), through much of Jewish history. While it was relatively uncommon for the religious elite and literati of Jewish and non-Jewish society to be in active contact with one another (the participation of Jews in the courts of Muslim Spain being a notable exception), Jews and non-Jews normally interacted on a daily basis, and economically successful Jews had frequent contact with influential members of Gentile society. Therefore, the mechanisms by which Jews maintained their own readings of those cultural sources which partially overlapped with the foundation texts of their more powerful neighbors is of particular interest.

Moreover, the nature of relationships between Jews and non-Jews is, itself, an issue concerning which biblical texts have something to say. While this question constitutes an aspect of many biblical narratives (and biblical legislation as well), it is central to one of the last books of the Bible to be written and accepted into the canon, the Book of Esther.<sup>3</sup> This book, written with both drama and humor, and drawing on earlier biblical literary traditions, portrays a confrontation

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between Jews and their enemies taking place in ancient Persia. The book self-consciously claims that the story should become part of the tradition accepted by Jews everywhere (Esther 9:20-32). This eventually took place, with the result that the feast of Purim was incorporated into the ritual calendar and diffused throughout the Jewish world. Part of the celebration of that festival entails the reading of the entire Book of Esther, an act which is regarded as religious commandment incumbent upon the whole community, men and women alike.

The process by which the books of the bible were canonized is not well understood,<sup>4</sup> but it is clear that there were disagreements concerning the Book of Esther well into the talmudic period. One talmudic account<sup>5</sup> suggests that the rabbis felt it was not prudent for Jews to give public expression to the celebration of their stunning victory over their non-Jewish adversaries. At the same time, the rabbis place a retort to this argument in the mouth of Esther herself, who claims that the story is already written in the chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia (based on Esther 10:2), so there is no reason for the Jews to attempt to "hide" it. This talmudic debate exposes competing sentiments: that the Jews should carefully guard their own perception of history or, alternatively, that Jewish history ultimately is part of broader human history and has nothing to fear to be viewed as such.

A parallel clash of views can be illustrated with regard to one of the verses in the story. Chapter 3 describes how Ahasuerus, without giving much thought to the matter, agrees to Haman's plan to destroy a "certain people," whose identity the king does not even know. The chapter concludes with the phrase: "and the city of Susa was dumbfounded." This statement has been interpreted by RaShI, an eminent eleventh century French exegete, as referring only to "the Jews in the city,"<sup>6</sup> but another interpretation suggests that a reaction of consternation was shared by both Jews and non-Jews in the town.<sup>7</sup> This difference in opinion on how to understand a segment of a verse is indicative of a broader question. While the stark contrast between Haman on the one hand, and Mordecai and Esther on the other, may dominate the popular image of the Purim story, careful reflection upon the narrative raises the question of the place of those non-Jews who were not the Jews' obvious enemies. Are all Persians pictured as actual or potential Hamans, or do some of them show concern for the plight of the Jews, if for no other reason than that the arbitrary behavior of a high placed person in the court could eventually affect them adversely as well? Interpreters see alternative answers within the very same passage, and the varying conceptions have proved themselves relevant at different times and places in the historical record of Jewish life.

Once having been canonized, the story of Purim often was used by later generations of Jews as a model of events that affected them. Two well-known expressions of this trend within Jewish culture are the institutionalization of local and family Purims<sup>8</sup>, and the *purim-shpil* in Ashkenazi tradition<sup>9</sup>. Both of these forms of expression raise questions concerning how the themes of Purim have been situated with regard to the non-Jewish world. In the Yiddish-speaking lands of Ashkenazi Jewry, the vernacular of the Jews was not understood by their Jewish neighbors and the *purim-shpil* was mostly an internal affair. In other areas however, such as Central Europe and Italy during the eighteenth century, Purim plays attracted non-Jewish onlookers as well as Jewish audiences. This seems related to a point cited by Paul Goodman, that the themes of some of the Purim plays were

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quite parallel to those appearing in popular Christian religious drama: the fate befalling an overly proud and haughty individual.<sup>10</sup> With regard to the world of Islam, one report indicates that in some locales, Shi'ite Muslims might join Purim processions, but burn Omar, a hated Sunni leader, in effigy, rather than Haman.<sup>11</sup> In certain circumstances, Purim plays could address Jews and non-Jews alike.

Does this mean that there was no specific Jewish content to these stories and their enactment? Or did various audiences perceive these plays in different manners? Similar questions may be asked with regard to the institution of "local Purims," celebrating specific historical events in which a given Jewish community was delivered from harm in a dangerous situation. One of the characteristics of many local Purim celebrations in Mediterranean lands (particularly, but not exclusively, in the Muslim world), is that the Jews, while highlighting their own deliverance, also partook in the sense of relief and thanksgiving experienced by the society as a whole. Thus the theme of Purim, while featuring irrational enmity toward Jews, emerges in contexts in which Jews and some non-Jews have common cause.

The story of Esther, related biblical narratives (see below), and their interpreters, thus speak with diverse voices with respect to the issue of tensions *and* ties between Jews and non-Jews. Correspondingly, the ways in which these stories have been interpreted, and mobilized for social ends, have shifted according to circumstances. This diversity of expression will be explored by reference to several popular religious and dramatic forms that developed among the Jews in Tripoli, Libya, in recent centuries. The data available on these developments are not extensive, but are detailed enough to stimulate discussion and encourage further research on the ways in which Purim-linked motifs became part of the interpretation of ongoing events. The case of Purim, furthermore, should enrich our overall appreciation of the dynamics by which biblical texts animated (and continue to animate) life in Jewish communities.

### ***Tripoli's Purims***

In the early and late eighteenth century, the Jews of Tripoli instituted two local Purim holidays related to historical episodes in which the community was spared excessive suffering. The first took place in 1705, when the bey of Tunisia, in revenge for the capture of a ship carrying gifts to him, lay siege on the city of Tripoli, threatening to slaughter man, woman, and child. His troops, however, were thrown back, forcing him to lift the siege. This brought relief to the whole city, including its Jewish population, who had participated in strengthening the town's defenses, alongside its other inhabitants. A religious poem, belonging to a genre known as *mi khamokha*,<sup>12</sup> was composed at a later date, giving details of these events, and was incorporated into the local liturgy, to be recited each year commemorating the event of salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Commemoration took the form common to local Purims elsewhere. It was decreed that the anniversary of the event, the 23d day of the month of Tevet, was to be a day on which work ceased,

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feasting was in order, gifts were to be sent to friends, and alms to the poor (see Esther 9:22). The daily prayer of penitence and supplication (*nefilat apayyim*) was not to be recited, as was appropriate to a festival. The day was known as *purim ashraf*, recalling the name of the defeated tyrant, and the *mi khamokha* hymn was to be read on the Sabbath preceding *purim ashraf*.

The second event took place in the last decade of the century. At that time, a rebellion took place against Ali Pasha Qaramanli, who had ruled Tripoli since 1754. His youngest son Yusef murdered his eldest brother, establishing a state of civil war. Yusef took up position outside the city, supported by villagers and tribesmen, while his father Ali was aided by a middle son, less endowed with leadership abilities than Yusef.

The fighting between these two factions drained the local populace and some Tripolitan notables appealed to the sultan in Istanbul to reestablish direct rule over the city. The sultan's response was to grant a *firman* to one Ali el-Jezairli (commonly known as Ali Burghul), a corsair-adventurer, granting him rule over the regency based on forces that he raised through his own means. Burghul arrived in Tripoli in 1793, and assumed the position of pasha because of the divisions within the local leadership.

Burghul's installation in Tripoli initiated a "reign of terror."<sup>14</sup> He pressed taxation heavily on the population, and particularly on the Jews. Notables suspected of loyalty to the Qaramanlis were executed and several Jews were implicated in a plot against him. Among those to suffer was a son of Rabbi Avraham Khalfon. Khalfon had been head of the Jewish community for a while, and his son David, also a prominent figure in the community, was condemned by Burghul and burned alive.

A Jew named Rahamim Barda helped negotiate an agreement between the competing segments of the Qaramanli family, who, with the aid of the bey of Tunisia, were able to drive Burghul out in January of 1795.<sup>15</sup> The salvation of the city once again brought redemption to the Jews, and a special hymn, also in the form of a *mi khamokha*, was composed by Avraham Khalfon retelling the events of Burghul's downfall and the Jews' deliverance. A second local Purim festival known as *purim burghul* was established to commemorate the day (the 29th of Tevet), and Khalfon's poem was also incorporated into the liturgy.<sup>16</sup>

The two *mi khamokha* hymns cited were written in Hebrew, enabling them to be incorporated into the local liturgy. With regard to *purim burghul*, another celebratory poem, identifying itself as part of the *mi khamokha* genre but written in Judeo-Arabic, recently has been discovered and translated into Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear what the liturgic function of this latter *piyyut* was intended to be, for only in rare instances was Arabic included in the formal liturgy. Perhaps the hymn was intended for the non-learned members of the community, including women.

These brief details show that the Jews of Tripoli, while officially defined as *dhimmis* living under Muslim rule, were both aware of and could be active in the political life of the town. The city's well-being was their well-being, and they also shared, sometimes even more than others, in Tripoli's travails. Some of their leaders actively sought Ali Burghul's downfall, and when this came about, through the efforts of the dominant Muslim leaders, the Jews still found it appropriate to

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phrase their experience in tropes taken from their own tradition of Purim. Reference to the Purim paradigm did not entail a wedge between them and all non-Jews, but focused on the particular tyrant who oppressed them.

A similar picture emerges upon examining the content of the *mi khamokha* hymns. While all three poems explicitly utilize imagery of salvation taken from the Book of Esther, they also firmly locate the Jews of Tripoli within the general life of the town. The enemy forces are portrayed as attacking Tripoli and have no special score to settle with the Jews. The poem celebrating *purim ashreif* clearly identifies with Tripoli's forces:

And as the war drew near *our* soldiers scattered  
And *our* soldiers fell before his troops  
And *we* heard and *our heart* melted... (italics supplied)

Jews did not take part in the battle, but the poem presents them quite straightforwardly as part of the collective involved in the confrontation.

Even when the Jews seem to suffer excessively, as in the events in the background to *purim burghul*, the poetry does not present this as a scheme intended to single out the Jews, but as a natural continuity of the oppressor's cruelty.

The wicked one schemed evil plans in his heart  
He sought to kill the people of the city in stealth  
All creatures were terrified of him  
And he did all that was detestable to the Lord.

He roared as a lion against the seed of Jacob  
He took from them sixty thousand *mahboub*  
Each day he lay in wait for them  
"A harsh king will rule over them," spoke the Lord.

Interestingly, an explicit reference to "Jews and Muslims" occurs only once in the three poems, in the final stanza of the *mi khamokha* in Judeo-Arabic. Almost as if to answer the question as to the diverse points of view of the Jews and Muslims, the hymn extols God by stating that He stands above all human beings, who join together in His praise.

Who is like unto Thee among the mighty?  
You are powerful over all the wicked  
Neither Jew nor Muslim can stand in your presence  
But all will proclaim: *Mi khamokha*...

Although we have no direct data at our disposal, it is worth asking how the Muslims perceived the position of the Jews with regard to these conflicts, or, perhaps, more to the point of our discussion, what was the Jews' sense of the Muslims' perception of their place in the broader community? A comparative case from Morocco, relating to the French bombardment of Tangier in 1844, and the Jewish reaction to that event, helps point to the complexity of this issue. Miller's study of the 'Purim of Bombs,' stresses that the flight to European protection of some eminent Jewish families on the eve of the French attack revealed a rift in the links between local Jews and Muslims which thereafter would grow ever wider.<sup>18</sup> A 'Purim scroll' written to commemorate that event may be seen as an attempt, of only limited success, to reestablish the Jews to their rightful place in the life of the town, after the attack was over.<sup>19</sup> *Purim burghul*, stemming from the last decade of the eighteenth century, predated extensive European influence on the Jews of Tripoli, but its institution and celebration may nevertheless reflect the ambivalence with which the wider populace viewed the Jews.

The Jews were an old population in Tripoli, and ubiquitous in its affairs, but there were constant reminders of their status as protected *dhimmi*, barring them from membership in the Muslim polity. One obvious sign of this is that European consuls in the city took up residence in or near the Jewish quarter. The end of the nineteenth century was a period when European pressure against the corsair enterprise based in Tripoli was growing, and I have argued elsewhere that, in these circumstances, the Jews were sometimes symbolically associated, in the eyes of the Muslims, with the threatening Europeans.<sup>20</sup> If this interpretation is correct, and the Jews sensed the ambivalence of Muslim perceptions, then they would have reason to stress their belongingness to Tripoli even under "traditional" circumstances before the massive impact of Europe on North Africa.

There is no doubt that the *mi khamokha* hymns reflect genuine joy at the salvation of Tripoli, but perhaps the formal insertion of these poems into the synagogue liturgy also sent a message of reassurance to the Muslims that the Jews were concerned with the well-being of the town. While, on a day-to-day basis, Muslims were not overtly interested in the religious practices of the Jews, authorities were not totally indifferent to events in synagogues. An ancient formula in Jewish liturgy, beginning with the phrase: "He who brings salvation to kings," prays for the well-being of the ruler under whom the Jews lived, and the name of the individual in power is inserted into the formula.<sup>21</sup> Just as the choice of the name of the Muslim ruler inserted into the *khutba* in the mosque, in times of instability, resonated with political meaning, so the liturgical rehearsal of the victories of the city of Tripoli, within the synagogue, may have reasserted the place of the Jews in contemporary Tripolitan society. Jews, through the celebration of their special Purims, could reaffirm their ties to local residents and to Muslim authority while calling upon the images of Mordecai and Esther from a story which has accompanied them in many lands.

As discussed at the outset, images from the Book of Esther were not only part of the cultural patrimony of Jews. The Purim story was available to both Jews and Christians as a source of tropes with which to talk about Jewish society. European writers dealing with the late Qaramanli period

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were sensitive to the delicate political position in which Jews found themselves. One way that elite members of the Jewish community kept abreast of information circulating in the pasha's court was through connections to his harem.<sup>22</sup> A number of European authors describe a Jewish woman who, through the harem, was a confidante of the pasha and claim that she was dubbed "Queen Esther."<sup>23</sup> Slouschz, basing himself on an unpublished manuscript of A. Khalfon's poetry in his possession, surmises that this woman was the mother of Avraham Khalfon's wife.<sup>24</sup>

The source of this Queen Esther imagery is unclear. Was this an appellation common among the Muslims, or did it stem from European stereotypes of an "oriental" court? Bickerman discusses the changing perceptions of the Esther story in Christian eyes. At one point, both Protestants and Catholics "proudly identified themselves with the persecuted Hebrews. . .," while Voltaire, reflecting an Enlightenment outlook, "speaks of `the execrable cruelty of the sweet Esther.'"<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, too, Jews themselves used this biblical figure in commenting on their own situation? With regard to the medieval Mediterranean world, Goitein finds that Esther constituted the dominant role model for Jewish women in their domestic lives.<sup>26</sup> Mordecai Ha-Cohen, who was born in the mid-nineteenth century, is one of the main sources of information for Jewish life in the late Qaramanli period, and Slouschz acquired the Khalfon manuscript from him. Ha-Cohen, however, while pointing out the importance of harem connections to the Jews, makes no mention of "Queen Esther" in his own account of the period.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever the historic background to the existence of Queen Esther in Tripoli, literary and symbolic associations from the story of Esther and Haman were available to Jews, Muslims,<sup>28</sup> and Christians. The uses made of the story's characters and themes by each community might overlap in some instances, but could be used for differing, or even conflicting purposes in others. We further see this by examining Purim-linked play and practice in later generations.

### ***Purim moves "out of the Ghetto"***

In the late medieval situation, extending through the early nineteenth century in Tripoli, Jews still were viewed as a separate corporate community, who lived in their own quarters of the city, and followed their religion under the conditions of Muslim tolerance. From the middle of the nineteenth century, this situation began to change. In 1835, the Ottomans reestablished direct rule over Libya. Throughout the course of the century, Libya was drawn into the program of reforms affecting many provinces in the empire. This meant that the Jews were officially defined as subjects of the empire equal to other subjects, and were, in principle, free to follow their own religion on that basis. Jews were allowed some representation in the formal municipal institutions of Tripoli, and the governors placed in the town by Ottoman rulers encouraged the commercial activities of Jewish merchants. In 1874, the Ottomans appointed a chief rabbi (*hakham bashi*) to Tripoli, Eliyahu Bekhor Hazzan. Hazzan, while vigorously defending Jewish tradition, was also open to some of the changes stemming from growing European influence within the Ottoman Empire and in North Africa.

The increased participation of Jews in the civic life of Tripoli had consequences in diverse

directions. Some Jews, particularly the elite, could more comfortably find commonality with other residents of the town. This also meant, however, that their internal communal and religious life was visible to a degree unknown in the past. Not all the inhabitants of Tripoli welcomed the reforms brought about by the Ottoman governors, and some local Tripolitans clearly resented the changes, of which growing Jewish "equality" was a salient symbol. This vortex of cross-pressures had an impact on aspects of the celebration of Purim.

From antiquity, acts of dramatization have surrounded the festival of Purim.<sup>29</sup> The Talmud mentions a custom of making a bonfire and jumping over it, as part of Purim festivities.<sup>30</sup> The practice of "smiting" Haman by constructing an effigy and destroying it is known from the High Middle Ages in Islam,<sup>31</sup> and from many times and places thereafter.<sup>32</sup> In Tripoli, synagogue school children, under the supervision of their *rebbe* (teacher), would carve pieces of wood to represent the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, and, during the day of Purim, would throw these into a large bonfire. They also maintained the practice of jumping over the bonfire, with cheering and much gaiety.

Mordecai Ha-Cohen reports, however, that toward the end of the nineteenth century this custom was falling into disuse. He attributes its decline to a decree by Chief Rabbi Hazzan, in 1885, that Jewish children should no longer engage in this boisterous street playfulness. Hazzan feared that Gentiles (Muslims) might perceive the glee of destruction expressed by Jews as directed against them.<sup>33</sup> Precisely because the lives of the Jews were no longer as ghettoized as they had been in the early part of the century, they had to be wary that their internal "gut-interpretations" of the Purim story might be crossing socioreligious borders.

In other areas of Tripolitania, however, Purim-based gestures were utilized as expressions of Muslim-Jewish co-existence. In the Gharian mountain region, relations between Jews and Muslims continued according to traditional patterns, and were less affected by the Ottoman presence in the nineteenth century or Italian rule in the twentieth. In the small Jewish community of that region,<sup>34</sup> Jews would fulfill the religiously prescribed gift-giving to the poor by giving presents to indigent Muslims rather than to other Jews. This stemmed from an ethos of egalitarianism within the small Jewish community, and the shame of receiving charity. In any event, it shows that themes from a holiday known for its celebration of Jewish-Gentile boundaries could also be utilized to open up gateways linking competing groups to one another.<sup>35</sup>

The instances considered thus far raise comparative questions. What are the social configurations which go along with various forms of Purim dramatization? Under what circumstances have Jews elaborated Purim themes in a manner that is open to all, Jews and non-Jews alike, and which conditions have been conducive to sequestered Purim play, whether through spatial separation, or with the aid of a language not understood by non-Jews, such as the *purim-shpil* in Eastern Europe.<sup>36</sup> There was no tradition of *purim-shpil* in Tripoli, but, if we follow the history of Tripoli's Jews into the twentieth century, we discover situations in which plays taken from biblical tradition were presented to non-Jewish audiences, and put to specific political use. One such instance concerns the story of Joseph, which bears many resemblances to the Esther story, and,

according to some scholars, may have been an explicit model of the latter.

Both Esther and Joseph are handsome youngsters who make unexpected and rapid entries into the courts of foreign rulers. Both rise to dazzling success, attaining positions of great influence and authority. Both, while facing the potential option of merging into the dominant society, decide to act to protect their own people, and ensure its continuity. In addition to thematic similarities between the two tales, various linguistic and literary parallels point to a conscious linking of the episodes by the author of the Book of Esther. This has been appreciated by the authors of the *Midrash*, medieval commentators, as well as by modern scholars.<sup>37</sup>

Turkish rule over Tripoli ended in the fall of 1911, when the city was captured by the Italians. During the next thirty years, the Jewish community of Tripoli, and Libya generally, was buffeted by the winds which affected much of world Jewry during that period. Originally coming under the rule of a liberal Italian regime, the Jews of Tripoli were soon subject to fascist policies. While at the outset, this did not entail anti-Semitism, by the late 1930s racial laws enacted in Italy were applied in Libya as well. The British Eighth Army completed its conquest of Libya in January 1943, but in November 1945, under British Military Administration, Tripoli was rocked by a pogrom in which over 130 Jews were killed in several days of rioting. Although the future could not be envisioned at the time, this event proved to be a watershed which led the vast majority of Libyan Jews to migrate to Israel, when that became possible in the spring of 1949.<sup>38</sup>

During the years of Italian rule and British administration, Libyan Jewry underwent internal cultural developments in a number of directions. A Maccabee organization, formed in the 1920s, was a sports and social club, which often organized plays on biblical and historic themes, in both Italian and Arabic. The Ben Yehudah organization, formed in the 1930s, was devoted to the promotion of Hebrew, and demonstrated their success by staging plays for the members of the community in that language.<sup>39</sup> These were important internal cultural events, but could also be mobilized for intercommunal purposes.

After the 1945 pogrom, the British Administration convened a committee of Arab and Jewish leaders to find ways of repairing the breach between the communities.<sup>40</sup> Part of this process was the preparation of an official report by the Jewish community concerning the events during, and consequences of, the riots. The report<sup>41</sup> emphasizes a seemingly "trivial" incident under the heading "Arab-Jewish Relationships throughout the Centuries." It tells of a theatrical presentation, earlier in the year, of the biblical story *Joseph and His Brothers*, by the Maccabee Organization, stressing that the play was rendered in the local Arabic vernacular to an audience that included Muslim notables and representatives of the British Administration.

The choice of the tale of Joseph was not accidental, as it had significance in terms of both internal Jewish life and in relationship to the Muslim onlookers. For the Jews, Joseph is the prototype of Jewish success in a potentially dangerous land of exile, and his contribution to the welfare of the land is recognized by the highest echelons of society. For the Muslims, the story emphasizes how brothers, despite bitter incidents of antagonism, can be reconciled. In its Islamic

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version, the story of Joseph is a favorite Muslim tale.<sup>42</sup> That this was true in Libya is confirmed by an anecdote reporting that on the night of the performance some young Muslim "toughs" appeared outside, objecting that the Jews were "using Joseph, who belongs to us." This account concludes that the youths were placated by diplomatically assuring them that "we do not claim to own Joseph, we only wish to borrow him for one night."<sup>43</sup> Allusions to age-old scriptural imagery played a part at all levels of the "peace-making" efforts.

Jews and Muslims understood well, even if this was not appreciated fully by the British, that politics could not be carried on divorced from traditional cultural moorings.<sup>44</sup> The play carried meanings which were shared by both communities, but also pointed in specific directions for Jews on the one hand, and Muslims on the other. The orientation to Muslim ears is partially indicated by the fact that within Jewish tradition the figure of Joseph is frequently encapsulated in the phrase "Joseph the Righteous," rather than "Joseph and His Brothers," as it was billed for that occasion.<sup>45</sup> The staging of the play in Arabic should also be placed in counterpoint to Hebrew plays, which had been a feature of Zionist efforts in the pre-World War II setting. In 1945, with the beginning of Arab nationalist activity in post-war Libya, the Jewish community was not prepared to flout Hebrew drama in front of the British and Muslim leaders. Biblical stories and themes not only expressed aspects of Jewish life in a Muslim environment, but were instrumental in Jewish strategies of survival.

Our survey has shown that tropes stemming from Purim and related tales have proven apposite to Jewish life, and Jewish-Muslim links, in a variety of social and political situations in Tripoli. If one may speak of an expanded Esther-Joseph tale-type, we find that it has served as a source both of internal interpretation and of intercommunal discourse in the changing conditions of Libyan Jewry from the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. These tales and texts, which underline distinctiveness while depicting Jews as part of the general populace, continue to shape the processes of Jewish public self-reflection even as relations between Jews and non-Jews take on new forms.<sup>46</sup>

## **Notes**

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2 H. E. Goldberg, ed. *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies* (Albany, 1987), pp. 28-32, 315-329.

3 E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York, 1967), pp. 202-211.

4 N. Sarna, "Bible," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 4:818-831.

5 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 7a.

6 RaShI, *ad. loc.*

7 A. Hakham, "Commentary on the Book of Esther" [Heb.], in *The Five Megillot*, eds. A. Mirsky, F. Meltzer, and Y. Qil (Jerusalem, 1973).

8 "Purims, Special," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 13:1396-1400; P. Goodman, *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia, 1949), pp. 14-37, 498; H. Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), pp. 46-48.

9 "Purim-shpil," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 13:1396, 1401-1404, and see note 35, below.

10 Goodman, *Purim*, pp. 359, 365.

11 S. Epstein, "The Smiting of the Figures of Haman and Zeresh in Yemen," *The Mankind Quarterly* 29 (1989):401-416.

12 The phrase *mi khamokha* (who is like unto Thee?) is taken from Moses's song of deliverance after the biblical episode at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:11). Many medieval hymns of praise were composed with *mi khamokha* as the opening phrase, and utilized liturgically on various occasions. One of the most famous was a hymn (*piyyut*) authored by Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141), a Spanish Hebrew poet and religious philosopher, for the Sabbath of *Zakhor*. This is the Sabbath on which the biblical passage known as *zakhor* (Deut. 25:17-19) is read, which enjoins the people of Israel to remember Amaleq, the eponymous ancestor of Haman. That reading precedes the feast of Purim each year. See I. Davidson, *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry* [Heb.], vol. 3 (New York, 1930), pp. 121-125, and E. Hazan, "The Transformation of a Piyyut: the Way of the 'Mi Kamokha' from Spain to the Orient and North Africa" [Heb.], in *Culture and History: Ino Sciacky Memorial Volume*, ed. J. Dan, (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 67-76.

13 H. Z. Hirschberg, *History of the Jews of North Africa, vol. 2, From the Ottoman Conquests to the Present Time* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 151-153.

14 N. Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa* (Philadelphia, 1927), p. 25.

15 Hirschberg, *History*, pp. 153-155; Mordecai Ha-Cohen, *Higgid Mordecai: Histoire de la Libye et de ses Juifs, lieux\_d'habitation et coutumes* [Heb.], ed. Harvey Goldberg (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 101-107.

16 Hirschberg, *History*, pp. 180ff; The two hymns were published together in a small hymn book

entitled *Mi Khamokha* (Tripoli, 1923). They also appear in F. Zuaretz, A. Guweta, Ts. Shaked, G. Arbib, and F. Tayar, eds. *Libyan Jewry* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv, 1960) pp. 47-52. Most recently, they were included in a hymn book for the Jews of Tripoli compiled by F. Zuaretz and F. Tayar, *Seu Zimrah* (Tel Aviv, 1972), pp. 197-206.

17 See Y. Tobi, "An Unknown *Piyyut* by R. Yitzhaq Luzon on Burjil Purim (Tripoli, 1795)" [Heb.], in *Studies on the Culture of the Jews of North Africa*, ed. Issachar Ben-Ami (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 75-82. This hymn (*piyyut*), written by R. Yitzhaq Luzon, appears at the end of a book *Derekh ha-Hayyim* [The Way of Life] (Livorno, 1860), by R. Hai Maimon that was published together with another book by the same author, *Mayyim H ayyim*.

18 S. Gilson Miller, "Crisis and Community: The People of Tangier and the French Bombardment of 1844," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 [no. 4] (1991):583-596.

19 Miller, "Crisis," *ibid*.

20 H. E. Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 29-33.

21 A shortened version of this prayer is found in J. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, rev. ed. (New York, 1948), pp. 506-507. Ha-Cohen, *Higgid*, p. 117, cites an incident in which the Qaramanli ruler communicated a decree to the Jewish population by having announcements made in the synagogue.

22 Ha-Cohen, *Higgid*, p. 125; S. Dearden, *A Nest of Corsairs: The Fighting Karamanlis of Tripoli* (London, 1976) pp. 114-115.

23 R. Tully, *Letters Written during a Ten Years' Residence at the Court of Tripoli*. S. Dearden,

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Introduction and Notes (London, 1967), pp. 180, 268; L. C. Féraud, *Annales Tripolitaines* (Paris and Tunis, 1927), pp. 277, 282-284. More recent authors, using these sources, have repeated the story.

24 N. Slouschz, *Livre des voyages: Mes voyages en Lybie* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv, 1937), p. 248.

25 Bickerman, *Four Strange*, p. 213-215.

26 S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vol. 3, *The Family* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 170-171.

27 Ha-Cohen, *Higgid*, p. 125.

28 G. Vajda, "Haman," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3/1:110; Hirschberg, *History*, pp. 181-182.

29 Bickerman, *Four Strange*, pp. 109-202, suggests that Purim may have developed on the basis of seasonal mock fights in Susa and the Persian countryside in which the Jews played a part, taking place in the month of Adar. Mock fights among urban populations continued to characterize life in the Middle East, and another example, involving the Jews of Tripoli, is analyzed by Goldberg, *Jewish Life*, pp. 29-34.

30 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 64b.

31 L. Ginzberg, *Geonica*, vol. 2 (New York, 1909), pp. 1-2.

32 Y. T. Levinsky, *The Striking of Haman in Jewish Communities: A Folklore Anthology* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv, 1947); Goodman, *Purim*, pp. 322-326.

33 Ha-Cohen, *Higgid*, p. 198; See Goodman, *Purim*, pp.327-328, for comparable instances.

34 H. E. Goldberg, *Cave Dwellers and Citrus Growers: A Jewish Community in Libya and Israel* (Cambridge, 1972).

35 An account of boyhood in a Tunisian town recalls that Arab horse-and-carriage drivers, aware that Jewish children were given small monetary gifts on Purim, waited on the streets knowing that they would be hired by the children on that day. See Irene Awret, *Days of Honey: The Tunisian Boyhood of Rafael Uzan* (New York, 1984), pp. 44-45. Another Tunisian example of a ride in a carriage on Purim, which directly mimes the Purim story, is recorded in Abraham Udovitch and Lucette Valensi, *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia* (London and Chur, 1984), p. 76.

36 For additional references to *purim-shpil*, and an example of a specific performance in social context, see S. Epstein, "Drama on a Table: The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl," in *Judaism Viewed from Within and From Without: Anthropological Studies*, ed. H. E. Goldberg (Albany, 1987), pp. 195-217.

37 See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 13b, 16a; Ovadiah Sforno's commentary to Genesis 50:4, in which he uses a phrase from Esther to explain Joseph's behavior in Pharaoh's court; M. Gan, "The Book of Esther in the Light of the Story of Joseph in Egypt" [Heb.], *Tarbiz* 31 (1961-62):144-149; Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963):454-455, note 3. The parallels between the Esther and Joseph stories may perhaps shed literary, if not historical, light on the "confusion" in the Qur'an in which Haman appears as an adviser in Pharaoh's court. See note 28, above.

38 R. De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835-1970*, trans. J. Roumani (Austin, 1985), chaps. 6-7.

39 F. Zuretz, et al., eds. *Libyan Jewry* (Tel Aviv, 1960) pp. 142-160.

40 De Felice, *Jews*, pp. 197ff.

41 Comunità Israelitica della Tripolitania, *I tumulti antiebraichi in Tripolitania: 4,5,6, e 7 Novembre 1945* (Tripoli, 1945), pp.17-18.

42 B. Heller, "Yusuf b. Ya`kub," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st ed., 4:1178-1179.

43 H. Khalfon, Lanu u-Levanenu\_[For our Children after Us]: *The Life of the Libyan Jewish Community* [Heb.] (Netanya, 1986), p. 97.

44 H. E. Goldberg, *Jewish Life*, pp. 115-122; Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa during the Second World War*, trans. C. T. Zentelis (Detroit, 1989), p. 198 notes "that a *Megilat Hitler* [Book of Hitler] paraphrasing the style and content of *The Book of Esther* was written in Morocco on the day after the Allies' arrival."

45 One of the first books to be printed in Hebrew characters in nineteenth-century North Africa was *Yosef Hen* (Algiers, 1854), written in Judeo-Arabic. It constitutes the story of "Joseph the Righteous, May He Rest in Peace, and what happened with his Brothers and with Zulaykha the Wife of Potiphar..." Zulaykha appears as the name of Potiphar's wife in post-Qur'anic tradition and in Jewish literature late in the Middle Ages. The subtitle points to a tale meaningful to Jews steeped in a Muslim milieu.

46 In addition to the kaleidoscope of competing forms of Purim celebration in Israel today, the holiday serves as a public expression of Jewish ethnicity in the United States in relation to values which American Jews share with the society at large, and includes the participation of non-Jews.

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See C. Liebman, "Ritual, Ceremony and the Reconstruction of Judaism in the United States," in *Art and its Uses: The Visual Image and Modern Jewish Society. Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 6, ed. R. I. Cohen (New York, 1990), pp. 280-282.