

PART ONE

THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

The present publication of Maḥammad Ibn Zikrī's *Rašf al-darab* represents the first appearance of a unique apologetic work emanating from the ranks of the Jewish 'Marranos' known as the *muhāğirīn* or 'émigrés'. Of the several crypto-Jewish communities that existed in Islamic lands none, as far as I know, produced any substantial literary works reflecting their situation within the Muslim-Jewish *convivencia*.¹ Despite their long-standing conversion to Islam, generally by force, the descendants of the Moroccan Marranos, also known as *bildiyīn* or *blād*,² continued over the centuries to constitute a distinct section of Maghrebi society whose destiny was often to be dismal. Indeed, bias against them festered among certain sectors of Moroccan aristocracy. Retrieved from the dust of oblivion, Ibn Zikrī's work opens a new chapter in the history of interreligious polemics and constitutes the most explicit defence of Jewish ethnicity in the arena of the medieval debate

¹ A notable exception, in a somewhat different context, is the remarkable chapter 'On whether Israelites can Apostatise' in the Judeo-Persian philosophical work *Hobot Yehudah* written in 1686 by Judah b. El'azar of Kashan, who was forcibly converted to Islam during the anti-Jewish persecutions of 1656-1662 under Shah 'Abbās II. See *Hobot Yehudah le-Rabbi Yehudah ben El'azar*; Jerusalem, Ben Zvi Institute, 1995, pp. 222-225; English translation in V. B. Moreen, *In Queen Esther's Garden, An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 255-259.

² A-L. Prémare, *Dict. arabe-français*, vol. I, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993, p. 295. The meaning of this term is discussed below.

about ethnic superiority, known as the *šū'ūbiyya*. Written from a unique viewpoint, that of a 'Muslim Israelite', the *Rašf* is probably the starkest confrontation between Jewishness and Arabness. Its pages reveal the polemical arguments marshalled by the antagonistic camps involved, some of which had been inherited from the Andalusī past and beyond. At the same time, it throws light on the complexities of integration and the stigmatisation and exclusion of minority ethnicities by the dominant group. Furthermore, it affords a unique glimpse into the mental universe of crypto-Jews in a Muslim context and provides a rare testimony to the many and harsh restrictions and vexations to which they were subjected despite their having become over time, in many instances, devout and learned Muslims. Though they belong to the socio-political and religious history of the Maghreb, the multiple issues raised by this work in terms of overlapping religiosities and the construction of ethnic identities will help to illuminate the dynamic interaction of religious traditions in contact in many contexts.

1. CONVERSION OF JEWS TO ISLAM IN AL-ANDALUS AND THE MAGHREB

Individual or even mass conversion of Jews to Islam is not a phenomenon peculiar to the Maghreb. However, on account of Morocco's recurrent political upheavals and the particular conditions that prevailed in a country where Jews became over time the only non-Muslim minority, it occurred here more frequently than elsewhere. Although the *Muhāğirūn* of whom it is question in Ibn Zikrī's work, belong to the context of Morocco, in order to fully understand their embittered condition, it is necessary to harp back to the earlier history of the Maghreb and Muslim Spain.

Persecution of non-Muslims under the Almohads (1130-1269) reached its peak in 1148, when their particularly intolerant rule engulfed Al-Andalus and confronted the Jews with the choice between conversion, exile or death.³ As recounted in the doleful

³ See H. Z. Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, Leiden, 1974, vol. I, pp. 191 *et seq.*; *idem*, "The Decrees of the Almohads", in S.W.

dirge by the contemporary poet Abraham Ibn ‘Ezra, tens of communities in North Africa and Al-Andalus were either wiped out or forcefully converted to Islam.⁴ Large-scale massacres took place in Siġilmāssa, Marrakesh and Fez. The religious sages of the time, notably the *dayyan* Maymūn b. Joseph and, later, his son the famous Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) responded to the religious and psychological issues raised by this mass conversion, the former in his *Iggeret he-nehāmāh* (‘Epistle of Consolation’)⁵ and the latter in his *Iggeret ha-šemad* (‘Epistle on Forced Conversion’).⁶ Presumably, the Maimonides themselves posed as Muslims before making their escape to Fez, where, in 1160, Maymūn composed his pastoral *Epistle* in Judeo-Arabic. He comforts his disheartened fellow Jews and encourages them to secretly study the Torah and fulfil all the commandments mentally if not physically, assuring them that God would not abandon His people. He lays particular emphasis on the necessity of reciting the central daily Hebrew prayer, the *‘Amīdāh*, even in abbreviated form or in Arabic. The *Epistle* reflects the despair that had gripped his co-religionists who could not even recite a short prayer without endangering their lives.

Only a few years separate Maymūn’s *Epistle of Consolation* from Moses Maimonides’ *Epistle on forced Conversion*, also called *Epistle on Martyrdom*, which was probably composed in Fez in 1165. Its tone suggests that a turn for the worse had meanwhile occurred in the situation of the crypto-Jews. The latter were now compelled to attend at mosque, to acknowledge the prophethood of Muḥammad and to resign themselves to seeing their children brought up as Muslims. Maimonides rose to meet the existential challenge of the time. Unlike an anonymous rabbi who had been

Baron *et alia* (eds.), *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 1960, pp. 134-153 (in Heb.), and the introduction to our *Exile in the Maghreb*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵ L. Simmons, “The Letter of Consolation of Maimun ben Joseph”, *JQR* 2 (1890), pp. 62-101; and Maimon ben Joseph ha-Dayyan, *Letter of Consolation of Maimon Father of Moses Maimonides*, ed. and trans. Fred Rosner, Haifa: Maimonides Research Institute, 2003.

⁶ *Crisis and Leadership: the Epistles of Moses Maimonides*, transl. A. Halkin, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985, pp. 12-45.

previously consulted by the apostates on their predicament and who had denied them all hope of salvation, Maimonides propounds a form of Jewish *taqiyya* (‘dissimulation’). He encourages his co-religionists to remain inwardly faithful to their ancestral creed while outwardly professing Islam. Interestingly, he hints that from the outset the Muslims made light of the Jews’ conversion and doubted their sincerity:

In past persecutions they were compelled to transgress the commandments [...] but in this persecution we are not forced to commit acts prohibited [by Judaism], but merely to orally profess belief in that individual [Muḥammad] so that if someone wishes to fulfil the commandments secretly he can do so [...]. They fully realise that we do not believe in that credo, which is only uttered in order to escape the caliph’s decree, to merely appease him by stating the superiority of his religion [...]. I tell [my fellow Jew] to confess and not choose death. However, he should not remain in the domain of that ruler. He should stay in his house until he can leave the realm. If he is dependant on his work, let him carry it out in private. A persecution as unusual⁷ as this one, where the only coercion is to utter something, was hitherto unknown.⁸

Thus Maimonides most realistically advises his fellow Jews to circumvent martyrdom by paying lip service to the Muslims’ exactions. He does, however, declare the state of apostasy to be sinful and urges the apostates to make every effort to escape it by seeking elsewhere a more tolerant asylum. His insightful response was to become the religious guide for countless generations of forced converts under Islam. It is no coincidence

⁷ Probably the word underlying the Hebrew *nifla’* in the lost Arabic original was *ḡarīb*. The translation ‘marvellous’, used by certain apologists, is utterly misleading. See, for example, M. Chérif, “Encore sur le statut des *ḍimmī*-s sous les Almohades”, in M. Fierro and J. Tolan (eds.), *The Legal Status of Dhimmī-s in the Islamic West*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013, p. 71.

⁸ I have combined the readings of the two versions published respectively in *Iggeret ha-šemad la-Rambam*, ed. A. Geiger, Breslau, 1850, fol. 5a-b and *Iggerōt ha-Rambam*, vol. I, ed. Y. Shilat, Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 53-54, and compared them with Frankfurt, Ms. Heb. oct. 68, fols. 9b-10a. Cf. Halkin, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Muslim accusations about the insincerity of Jewish converts is a recurrent theme down the ages and is not limited to Morocco.

that Fez, where the *Epistle* was originally composed, later became the scene of an endemic and abiding form of Judeo-Muslim Marranism which is the subject of the present study.

Persecutions intensified with the accession in 1165 of Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (d. 1184), when still further restrictions were imposed upon the crypto-Jews, some of whom were second generation Muslims, by his successor Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184-1198).

The Andalusī Jewish philosopher and exegete Joseph Ibn ‘Aqnīn, who, like Maimonides, later settled in Fez, has left a gripping account of the persecutions under Abū Ya‘qūb.⁹ Some of the cruel disabilities imposed upon the Jewish converts in his time continued for numerous generations and eventually became part of the historical condition of crypto-Jews under Islam. Others have certain parallels, for which they may even have formed the precedents, in the ordeals suffered by the Marranos in the Christian context.

In the present persecutions, he says, the more we obey their instructions and comply with their doctrines and forsake our own, the more they burden our yoke and increase our travail. [...] The proof can be seen in the afflictions suffered by the apostates of our land who, on account of these persecutions, have utterly forsaken the faith and changed their attire. Yet their conversion has been of absolutely no avail to them, for they are subjected to the same vexations as those who have remained faithful to the creed. To be sure, even the conversion of their fathers or grandfathers a century ago has been of no advantage to them. [...] Indeed, this treatment has induced many apostates to return to their former faith.¹⁰

⁹ See A. S. Halkin, “On the History of Forced Conversion under the Almohads”, *Joshua Starr Memorial Volume*, New York, 1953, pp. 101-110 (in Heb.); *idem*, “On the figure of Joseph b. Judah Ibn Aqnīn”, in *Harry Wolfson Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew Section, Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 93-111 (in Heb.).

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Aqnīn, *Tibb al-nufūs* (‘Hygiene of the souls’), ch. 4, ms. Oxford, Bodl. Neubauer 1273, fol. 143a, translated in our *Exile in the Maghreb*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2016, text A4, pp. 51-55.

Ibn ʿAqnīn goes on to say that the persecutions were embittered by a veritable inquisition egged on by the lower elements of society:

We are made the object of inquisitions in which both great and small testify against us. Their slightest statements render lawful the shedding of our blood, the confiscation of our property, and the dishonour of our wives. But by the grace of God who has taken pity on the faithful remnant, their testimonies have proven contradictory, for the nobles pleaded in our favour whilst the commoners testified against us. Now the custom of the land would not allow the testimony of the vulgar to supersede that of the gentry. Thus though these measures were repeatedly renewed, God continuously took pity.

Among the restrictions he proceeds to enumerate is the impossibility for converts to marry outside of their social group on account of the contempt in which their women were held by the Muslims.

Such is the case that should a [Muslim] possess a female Jewish captive and have a child by her, he is belittled by them for so doing. Moreover, his children are despised and it is not easy for him to marry them off, for they are so spurned that even the meanest [Muslim] will not contract an alliance with him.

The New Muslims could only practice certain trades, their rights to inheritance were revoked, and their children were placed in the custody of Muslim guardians. On account of their state of abasement, he reports, they had become a byword:

When a [Muslim] wishes to exaggerate a state of scorn or humiliation that had befallen him or his fellows, he exclaims: 'My shame was like that of the Jews'.¹¹ Similarly, if they seek to offend a neighbour, after having exhausted all other insults, or if they are angered at a son or a slave, they exclaim: 'What a Jew!' Likewise

¹¹ The simile is widespread, even in Sufi literature. Cf. al-Ġazālī, *Ihyāʾ*, vol. 3, Beirut, Dār al-maʿrifa, n.d., p. 342; Ibn ʿAġība, *Iqāz al-himam*, Cairo, n.d., Dār al-fikr, p. 178.

if they want to curse someone in the most offensive manner possible, they say: ‘May Allāh make you like them and count you among their number!’ If they want to describe a distasteful deed or a blemish they say: ‘Even the lowest Jew would not be content with such a thing’.

One of the harshest vexations imposed upon the New Muslims was the obligation to wear distinctive and degrading attire. Forbidden to don the ‘noble’ turban, they had to wear unsightly bonnets and black tunics with long sleeves in order to make them resemble ‘the inferior state of women’.

The purpose of these distinctive garments is to differentiate us from among them so that we should be unmistakably recognised in our dealings with them, in order that they might treat us with disparagement and humiliation. This is a form of servitude that results in our blood being spilled with impunity, for whenever we travel on the road between towns, we are waylaid by robbers and brigands and are murdered secretly at night or killed in broad daylight.¹²

In short, the same humiliation and subservience demanded of the *ḍimmīs* were also deemed incumbent upon the converts.¹³

Ibn ‘Aqnīn also refers several times to the condition of the Judeo-Muslims in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Whereas the later Marranos would perceive in the Biblical story of Esther the embodiment of their plight,¹⁴ for Ibn ‘Aqnīn Solomon’s allegory of love expressed the unswerving fidelity of the crypto-Jews to the tenets of their ancestral faith despite persecution.

I suffer severe trials and on account of persecution my mind fails like that of a drunkard [...]. Yet the love in my heart for Him

¹² *Ibid.*, fols. 144-146.

¹³ The standard studies on the status of the *ḍimmīs* are A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects*, London, Frank Cass, 1930 and A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d’Islam*, Beirut, Impr. Catholique, 1958. See also M. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ See C. Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1932, pp. 186-188.

is unabated for I disobey the nations (i.e. the Muslims) who command me to transgress His precepts and constantly inflict upon me both torture and death, as it is written: ‘Yet for Thy sake we face death all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter’ (Ps. 44, 23).¹⁵

Similarly, in the verse: ‘At our doors are all manner of delicacies, old and new, which I have concealed for you, O my beloved’ (Cant. 7, 14), he perceives the situation of *taqiyya* that the apostate Jews endure:

My deeds reveal my love for Thee for I fulfil Thy will despite my being subjected to persecution and woe... This is an allusion to the generations of forced conversion in which we perform the commandments while the sword hangs over our heads and especially the present persecutions, may God annul them! Nonetheless, as is known, we indulge in the study of the Torah, evidenced by the presence in Fez of the great sage Moses Maimonides, whose extent of knowledge is sublime... If we could call upon him alone in this forced conversion, it would have been enough for us.¹⁶

This text shows that for an extended period after their forced conversion, the crypto-Jews continued to secretly practice Judaism despite the threat of death. The Muslims were not dupe, as is clear from the following passage from a Muslim chronicle:

‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. ‘Alī al-Marrākušī ordered the [Muslims] of Jewish origin residing in the Maghreb to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population by wearing a degrading attire

¹⁵ Josephi b. Judah Ibn ‘Aqnīn, *Divulgatio mysteriorum Luminumque apparentia, Commentarius in Canticum canticorum*, ed. A. S. Halkin, Jerusalem, Meqisey nirdamīm, 1964, p. 68 on Cant. 2, 4: ‘His banner over me is love’.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 398. Incidentally, it can be inferred from Ibn ‘Aqnīn’s statement that Maimonides himself was also a forced convert. The question was been recently discussed by H. A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides, The Man and His Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 9-28 and J. L. Kraemer, *Maimonides, The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds*, New York, Doubleday, 2008, ch. 7 ‘Did Maimonides convert to Islam?’, pp. 116-124.

consisting of a black robe with ridiculously long sleeves. They had to wear a skull cap in the shape of a donkey's pack-saddle instead of the usual turbans and, in addition, a distinguishing sign called a *šikla*, remained in force throughout his reign. His son, Abū 'Abdallah (d. 1227) imposed upon them yellow turbans and robes. The reason for Abū Yūsuf [al-Manšūr]'s compelling the [Neo-Muslims] to wear distinctive clothing was the doubt he entertained as to the sincerity of their belief: "Were I sure that they were true Muslims, he would say, I would allow them to merge with the Muslims through marriage or in their other affairs; if, however, I were sure that they were Infidels, I would have their men slain, their children enslaved and their property confiscated and distributed among the Believers. But I have doubts about their case."

Al-Marrākušī concludes that ever since the Almohads came to power:

Neither synagogue nor church is to be found throughout all the Muslim lands of the Maghreb. But the Jews in our parts externally profess to Islam; they pray in the mosques and teach the Qur'ān to their children complying with our religion and our law. God alone knows what their hearts conceal and what they keep in their homes behind closed doors.¹⁷

Only a century later under al-Ma'mūn (r. 1227-1232) had persecution sufficiently abated to allow Jews to timidly reappear in the capital at Marrakesh. The Almohads were succeeded by the Marīnīds (1258-1465), who did not care for their form of religious fundamentalism. They moved their capital to Fez, where, as outsiders, they were in need of Jews. They allowed them to re-

¹⁷ *Kitāb al-mu'ğib fī talhīs aḥbār ahl al-Mağrib* ('History of the Almohads', written in 1224), ed. Reinhart Dozy, Leiden, 1881, pp. 223-224. Some of the foregoing facts are discussed by M. Fierro, "Conversion, ancestry and universal religion: the case of the Almohads in the Islamic West (sixth/twelfth-seventh/thirteenth centuries)", *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 2 (2010), pp. 155-174 and M. García-Arenal, "Rapports entre les groupes dans la péninsule Ibérique. La conversion des juifs à l'islam", *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 63-64 (1992), pp. 91-101.

emerge, employing many of them in their administration.¹⁸ However, the re-conversion process was not an easy one and was fraught with mortal danger. In principle, relapse (*ridda*) from Islam was punishable by death. Indeed, a Muslim historian records that in 1276, shortly after their re-emergence under Sultan Yaʿqūb b. ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq, an anti-Jewish riot broke out in Fez resulting in the killing of numerous Jews. There would have been a total massacre had the Emir Yaʿqūb and his soldiers not driven the murderous rabble out of the Jewish quarter. Many reconverted to Islam ‘through fear of the sword’ and, for social or economic reasons, found it preferable to remain crypto-Jews while outwardly professing Islam. When the Marīnīds were eventually toppled, the Jews were again massacred or forcibly converted.

2. WHO ARE THE *MUHĀĠIRŪN*?

Perhaps nowhere else in the Islamic world are the representatives of religious nobility so numerous as in Morocco, the land of the saint and the *šarīf*. Claiming descent from the house of Muḥammad through Idrīs (d. 791), the patron saint of the Fez, the *šurafāʾ* rose to a position of social and political prestige under the Marīnīds, who aggrandised them as a means of legitimising their own authority.¹⁹ Perceiving Jews and, more so, crypto-Jews as commercial and political rivals, the *šurafāʾ* continuously incited the Muslim population against them whenever Jews occupied positions of authority within the Marīnid government as courtiers and financial advisors. The political power of the *šurafāʾ* crystallised with the ‘miraculous’ discovery in Fez of Idrīs’ tomb in 1437 during reconstruction work on the Mosque of the

¹⁸ See M. Shatzmiller, “An ethnic factor in a medieval social revolution: the role of Jewish courtiers under the Marīnīds”, in *Islamic Society and Culture, Essays in honour of Professor Aziz Ahmed*, ed. M. Israel, New Delhi, Manohar, 1983, pp. 149-163.

¹⁹ See M. García-Arenal, *Messianism and Puritanical Reform, Mahdīs of the Muslim West*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, ch. 8: The Marīnīds and Sharīfism, pp. 217-245.