

A DRAWING BROUGHT TO LIFE THE ŞŪFĪ BACKGROUND OF AN ALGERIAN JEWISH LEGEND

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According to a legend which circulated among Algerian Jews even in the 19th century, at the time of the 1391 persecutions by the order of the “king of Spain”, a group of Jews were imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, their rabbi saved them miraculously by drawing a boat on the wall of the prison, which by the power of the community’s prayer was converted into a real boat. The prisoners boarded it, and sailed through the sea to the shore of the African coast.

The paper wishes to present a possible Şūfī background of this legend.

1. Algerian Jews of Iberian origin

The so-called Maghrebi Jews settled in North Africa since the Roman period, forming their peculiar tribes and communities there. From the time of the Almo-had persecutions the influx of Iberian (Sephardi) Jews to North Africa increased gradually, reaching its peaks following the tragic events that afflicted Iberian Jews in the years 1391 and 1492 respectively. In 1391 due to disorder and riots in Castile, Andalusia and Aragon, Jewish communities were decimated, many of their members killed or forcibly baptized. Jews were leaving Iberia for North Africa *en masse*. They were not always welcomed by the native Maghrebi Jewish population, since their economic capacities and cultural heritage in most cases overshadowed that of Maghrebi Jews¹. Iberian newcomers soon claimed political, economic and social supremacy. Their positions were reinforced definitively by the arrival of the Jews expelled from the dominions of the Catholic Monarchs in 1492. With respect to the tribulations endured by Jews under Christian rule, life in Muslim lands must have been regarded in general satis-

¹ This widely accepted view (e.g.: *EJ* s.v. “Algeria”; Epstein 1968:11-12) is questioned by various scholars, see e.g. Hirschberg 1974:9-10, 13-14.

factory, albeit the vicissitudes narrated by some Jewish historians². In any case, leading rabbinical authorities agreed that Iberian Jews suffering from the religious intolerance of Christians should immigrate to Muslim territories, where – according to the North African rabbis – they could practice Judaism freely³. The Algerian Jewish community had been continuously increasing till the years of the Algerian War (1954-1962), when almost the entire Jewish population of Algeria left mainly for France (some 70,000 persons), and – in a considerably lesser extent – for Israel⁴.

Sephardi Jews living in Algeria or elsewhere never abandoned entirely their characteristic culture which distinguished them from Jews of other origin. Some of their peculiarities had gradually disappeared in the course of time, but Sephardi Jews preserved their romance language (ladino) for centuries besides adopting Arabic, and later on, French. They adhered to their social customs, legal system and religious rituals. Their ties with Iberia were loosened gradually, all the more so, since the edict of expulsion promulgated by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492 explicitly forbade the presence of Jews (if not baptized) in their kingdoms⁵. Consequently, even commercial relations decreased among Algerian Sephardi Jews and their former coreligionists remaining in Iberia. Thus “Spain” became a vague place of origin, the memory of which grew more and more indistinct and opaque.

2. A legend concerning the origin of Sephardi Jews in Algeria: the Jews’ miraculous escape from the prison of the Spanish king

Isidore Epstein begins his book on the legal decisions (*responsa*) of Rabbi Shimeon ben Tsemah Duran by giving a detailed account of an Algerian Jewish legend as follows:

“It is related that at the time when the persecutions began a certain rabbi was arrested, with a large number of other Jews, by order of the King of Spain; they were thrown into prison, and the order of execution was issued. The night preceding the day fixed for the execution was passed by the rabbi and his flock in prayer and supplications to be saved from the impending doom. Suddenly, the rabbi took a piece of charcoal and sketched on the

² For a couple of these narrations see Hirschberg 1974:385-410.

³ Cf. Ribash, *Responsa* nos. 4, 11; Tashbets, *Responsa* 1:63, 1:66, 3:47; Duran, *Yachin* II, 31. These Rabbis themselves were Sephardi immigrants residing in Algeria, or the descendants of such immigrants.

⁴ Cf. *EJ* s.v. “Algeria”.

⁵ Cf. the text of the edict in *Documentos* 391-395.

wall of the dungeon the design of a boat. Then addressing his brethren in distress, he said: ‘Let all who fear God and wish to quit this country place a finger on the boat as I do’. They all did so, and lo! the miraculous happened, the design became a real boat, began to move of its own accord, passed through the wall which enclosed it, glided through the streets of the town, made straight towards the sea, and began to sail, moving towards the African coast until it reached the port of Algiers. The refugees [...] sent an embassy to the Algerian authorities asking for permission to land, and after an interview had taken place between the rabbi and Sydi b. Jusuf, a famous Marabout, the desired request was granted” (Epstein 1968:2-3).

Epstein states without any further argumentation that the central figure of the legend was none else but Rabbi Shimeon ben Tsemah Duran, notwithstanding the fact that this name as such was not mentioned by the first transmitter of the story, Claude-Antoine Rozet, who related the legend in his *Voyage dans la régence d’Alger*, which was published in 1833 in Paris. The name that appears in Rozet’s narration is “Simon ben Smia”, who is identified by the author as the “premier rabbin de Séville” (Rozet 1833: 211). Shimeon ben Tsemah Duran – as Epstein also admits – never lived in Seville. He was born in Mallorca in 1361 and he resided there till thirty years later, when due to the massive religious persecution that affected Iberian Jewry and which reached the island as well, he left Mallorca and settled in Algiers, where he became a leading rabbinical authority. Apart from the not entirely conclusive resemblance of the names Shimeon ben Tsemah and “Simon ben Smia” there are no further proofs that would corroborate the identity of the protagonist of the legend.

Epstein, when translating the French version of the story of the miraculous escape of the Jews omits some interesting details; among these we find that in Rozet’s version Jews and Moors shared the lot of being arrested and sentenced to death, and that they escaped together. He fails to give details about the marabout figuring in the story, and contends himself with mentioning his name, although in Rozet’s version the sheikh’s place of residence is mentioned. The plausible identification of “Sydi-Ben-Youcef, Marabout fameux qui habitat Méliana” (Rozet 1833:212-213) with Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf who in fact was the most famous Ṣūfī sheikh residing in Miliāna, presents further difficulties as to the interpretation of the story. For both Rozet and Epstein related the story of the miraculous escape and crossing as taking place in 1391 during the persecutions of the Jews in Iberia⁶. Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf, however, was born sometimes in

⁶ It should be noted that in the version narrated by Rozet the year 1390 appears, which might be due to the inaccuracy of oral transmission; or may result from the impreciseness of the conversion of the Jewish date to the Gregorian calendar. The first month of the Jewish calendar is Tishrei

the middle of the fifteenth century, and died in 1524, which means that he was active roughly a century later than the alleged date of the story. Since Jewish history is not short of persecutions, and the most fatal of these with respect to Sephardi Jews occurred in fact a century later, in 1492, one might suggest that the legend does not refer to the 1391 persecutions, but to the 1492 expulsion. That year was a turning point in Spanish history; the Granada war against the Nasrid dynasty was over, and thus the Reconquista completed. In the wake of the successful military campaign the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon decided to reinforce the unity of their subjects also in the religious sphere. Jews and Muslims were no longer welcomed in their kingdoms; in 1492 the Jews, ten years later the Muslims were given the choice of converting to Christianity or leaving the country. The descendants of the converted Muslims, the *moriscos* were finally forced to leave Spain in the first decades of the seventeenth century, while the descendants of converted Jews were allowed to stay – under the dreadful supervision of the Spanish National Inquisition.

However, I would not opt for this suggestion for two reasons; partly because the historical setting of the story, with respect to Jews at least, fits better 1391, when Jews were in fact detained and murdered, while in 1492 this was not the case; but mostly because it seems to be senseless to harmonize miraculous legends with historical facts forcedly. Several arguments could be brought in favour of both dating, but none of them can be agreed upon unquestionably. Apparently the vague and imprecise memory of various historical facts became combined in one story, the threads of which need not to be disjoined by all means.

Therefore it might be of greater interest to reveal the background of such a legend, and to find what can be learnt from it with regard to the relation of Jews and Muslims in Algiers.

3. A marabout tolerant towards Jews

The marabout mentioned in the story, Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf⁷ (d. 1524), was the disciple of a famous Ṣūfī sheikh of the Ṣāḍilī Ṣūfī order, Aḥmad Zarrūq (1442-1493/94). There is a tradition which sheds light on the personality of Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf. When his master asked him about his purpose in life, he answered: “I wish I was made by God like the earth on which believers and unbelievers, righteous and evil, slaves and freemen, men and women equally tread on” (Der-

(September / October in terms of the Gregorian calendar). In consequence of this difference, the year in which the massive forced conversion took place, that is ה'קנ"א (1511) corresponds to 1390/1391 of the Gregorian calendar.

⁷ On his life and cult, see Dermenghem 1954:223-250.

menghem 1954:224). This answer reflects the unprejudiced and tolerant character of Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf, who besides having become a spiritual leader of the circle of his disciples, also became a holy person popular among various groups of Algerian and Moroccan society. A sheikh revered as a saint usually pertains either to a rural or to an urban environment, operating thus either in a tribal context or among city-dwellers (Gellner 1963:71). Some widely-known saints are, however, equally popular in the city and in the country; Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf was one of these renowned personalities. He also had considerable political influence, which led to severe confrontations between him and the emir of Oran, who imprisoned the sheikh for a while. His political influence is reflected in the Jewish legend: He was the authority who permitted the settlement of the Jewish newcomers in Algeria. He is revered till this very day by Arabs and Berbers alike, his tomb in Miliana is visited not only by the city dwellers but by various nomad tribes in fixed periods of the year. Among these are tribes of even Gipsy origin whose attachment to popular beliefs is very marked and manifests itself in the extensive use of magical devices. Connection between Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf and Jews is well attested by a brief remark made by Ferdinand Ossendowski, the famous Polish traveller in his book on Morocco written in the twenties of the last century:

“The Zkara, like the tribes of Mlaina and Ghouta, are known for their indifference to Islam and to the laws of the Koran. They recognize only the prophet Sidi Ahmed ben Yusuf of Miliana and his disciple, Omar ben Sli-man, who was previously mentioned as a renegade Jew. They have their Marabouts from the family of Ben Yusuf, and the so-called “rusma” is the oldest hereditary priest” (Ossendowski 1926:98).

Thus, Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf was a popular and influential Ṣūfī sheikh who attracted adherents from non-Arab and non-Muslim groups as well. Apparently he did not refuse some of those controversial Ṣūfī practices which are not necessarily tolerated by main-stream Muslim religious authorities, like more extreme forms of *ḍikr*; that include music, ecstatic dance (even of men and women together), intoxication and repeating strange and unintelligible names of God. He was one of those sheikhs who did approve of *ḍikr* accompanied by music and dance, and ecstatic utterances; and who taught hidden names of God even to women (Dermenghem 1954: 224).

4. A Ṣūfī martyr appealing to Jews: al-Ḥallāḡ

One of the most famous representatives of the so-called ecstatic Ṣūfism was al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ (857-922), who attained such a degree of mystical union with God that finally he was unable to differentiate between his own

self and that of God. This complete union led to his famous utterance “I am the Truth” (Truth being one of the names of God), which scandalized a great number of Muslims, but fascinated others. His extraordinary preaching and public activity were severely censured and rejected by the religious authorities, as a consequence he was arrested and kept in prison for nine years. In prison, for lack of other audience he continued to preach to the prisoners. Religious and political intrigues led to the execution of al-Ḥallāğ, that took place in Baghdad while his supporters were raging and ravaging in the downtown of the city, setting fire on the shops of the market, and an enormous crowd was witnessing his long agony. His tongue was cut off and his body dismembered. It is related that when he expired,

“From each one of his members came the declaration, ‘I am the Truth’. Next day they declared, ‘This scandal will be even greater than while he was alive’. So they burned his limbs. From his ashes came the cry, ‘I am the Truth’. [...] Dumbfounded, they cast his ashes into the Tigris. As they floated on the surface of the water, they continued to cry, ‘I am the Truth’” (Arberry 1966:271).

Thus al-Ḥallāğ became the prototype of mystical martyr. His controversial figure does not cease to be widely known and popular among Muslims. Legends and traditions concerning his extraordinary life and death were collected in various anonymous compilations bearing titles like *Qiṣṣat al-Ḥallāğ*, *Aḥbār al-Ḥallāğ*, *as-Sīra aš-šaʿbiyya li-l-Ḥallāğ*.

The unique personality of al-Ḥallāğ influenced and greatly inspired his environment, and made a lasting impression on Muslim culture. His influence, however, was not limited to Muslim culture but made his way into Jewish literacy as well. As Paul Fenton has demonstrated in his article (Fenton 2001), traditions concerning al-Ḥallāğ were known among Jews from the eleventh till the seventeenth centuries. Most of the references collected by Fenton were found in fragments from the Cairo Genizah. A part of these fragments dealing with al-Ḥallāğ was written in Arabic language but in Hebrew characters, indicating clearly that they were meant especially for a Jewish public. Some of the texts are fragments of well-known Ṣūfī works transcribed in Hebrew characters preserved in the Cairo Genizah, for example fragments of the famous *ar-Risāla al-Quṣayriyya*, the *Lawāmiʿ anwār al-qulūb* by Abū l-Maʿālī ʿAzīz aš-Šayḍala, the *Iḥyāʿ ʿulūm ad-dīn* and the *Miškāt al-anwār* by al-Ġazālī (which survived also in two mediaeval Hebrew translations), and the *Kalimat at-taṣawwuf* by Šihāb ad-Dīn as-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl. A manuscript preserved in the British Library containing the *Kitāb at-tağalliyāt* by Ibn ʿArabī copied in Hebrew characters in the beginning of the seventeenth century contains a passage treating al-Ḥallāğ

as well. (Fenton 2001:113-119) Other references occur in genuine Jewish works as *Inkišāf al-asrār* by Yūsuf b. Aqnīn (12th cent, Spain, Ceuta), *al-Muršid ilā t-tafarrud* by Dawūd Maymūnī (c. 1335-1415), *Sirāğ al-^cuqūl* by Hoter ben Shlomo (known also as Maṣūr b. Sulaymān aḍ-Ḍamārī, Yemen, 15th cent.), etc. (Fenton 2001: 120-124). Apparently, al-Ḥallāğ was appealing to Jewish authors in the first place because of his ardent love towards God that blurred the limits between his identity and God's self. In consequence, al-Ḥallāğ was most attractive due to his mystical poems, two of which in particular attained popularity among Jewish writers.

A popular poem of al-Ḥallāğ beginning “*ra’aytu Rabbī bi-^cayn qalbi*” (al-Ḥallāğ, *Dīwān* 131-132) is preserved in Jewish sources in several versions, e.g. in a Genizah fragment from the collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary (ENA 2462.55), in Hebrew characters (Fenton 2001:107-108), and in the *Commentary to the Song of Songs* by Zekarya ha-Rofe (known also as Yaḥyā b. Sulaymān aḍ-Ḍamārī, Yemen, 15th cent.), in Hebrew characters (Fenton 2001:123-124). An English translation of the version that appears (this time, in Arabic characters) in the *Sirāğ al-^cuqūl* by Hoter ben Shlomo (Fenton 2001:122) is the following⁸:

I have seen the Lord through the eyes of my heart
 He asked me: Who are you? I replied: You
 You are the one who is everywhere
 But nowhere you are known to be
 Being here I am nowhere
 Being nowhere I persist with You

Versions of the poem beginning “*anā man ahwā wa-man ahwā anā*” (al-Ḥallāğ, *Dīwān* 166) are preserved also in the Genizah, in the collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary (ENA 4195.195a), in Hebrew characters (Fenton 2001:116). It can also be found in a collection of Ṣūfī parables and sayings written in Arabic characters, in the collection of the Cambridge University Library (Taylor-Schechter Arabic 41.1)⁹. The poem is also quoted in *al-Muršid ilā t-tafarrud* by Dawūd Maymūnī (Fenton 2001:121). The versions in the last two texts are more or less identical with the one cited in the *Kitāb al-luma^c*, which was translated by Michael A. Sells as follows¹⁰:

⁸ In the author's translation. For the Arabic text and the French translation of the poem see Fenton 2001:122-123.

⁹ I had the fortune to see the first four hemistichs of this poem in this Genizah fragment. Fenton does not mention it in his article.

¹⁰ Sells 1996:218. For the Arabic versions and their French translation see Fenton 2001:116, 121.

“I am my beloved and my beloved is I
 If you see me, you see us both
 Two spirits in one flesh
 clothed by Allah in a single body”

5. The origin of the Jewish legend: al-Ḥallāğ’s miraculous escape from prison

Muslim works treating the biography of al-Ḥallāğ relate several miraculous stories about his imprisonment. These stories are in fact variations of one theme: The mystic’s capacity of liberating himself from captivity. The stories have of course an allegorical interpretation as well; namely the flight of the soul from the prison of the body, the material word, or any physical or spiritual phenomena impeding it from attaching itself to God. One of these stories presents striking similarities to that of the miraculous salvation of the Sephardi Jews from the prison of the “Spanish king”. It can be found in different versions in various compilations treating the biography of al-Ḥallāğ, but its origin cannot clearly be traced back¹¹. The story goes as follows:

“When Ḥusayn [b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāğ] finished reciting his poem, he stood up and called to the evening prayer. Then he recited with the prisoners the last evening prayer and when he finished it, he sat down and repeated the name of God – may He be exalted – and the prisoners kept repeating the name of God together with him till the morning. Then he stood up and recited with them the morning prayer, and when he finished it, he got up and he drew a [circular]12 line on the prison’s ground13. Then he elaborated it into a boat, he sat into its middle, and he said: ‘My brethren, he who wants salvation for his soul, and rescue from the prison, let him come and sit together with me in this boat, the boat of salvation’. Hearing this, the prisoners got up and sat in the boat together with him. Then he got up and said to them: ‘My brethren, move your boat by repeating the name of God, but you must repeat His name with true love! So let you say together with me with sincere devotion: There is no other god but God, Muḥammad is the messenger of God’. And when they rose, their voice repeating the name of God, all of a sudden the line [drawn to the ground of the prison] got into motion, and it was turned into a huge boat, and at once it was in the middle of the sea. Then he said to them: ‘Let you persist in the repetition of the name of God!’ With that

¹¹ *Qiṣṣa* (ed. Massignon) 294, (ed. ‘Abd al- Fattāḥ) 84–85; *Sīra* 50–51.

¹² In the version transmitted by Massignon it is explicit that a circular line was converted into a boat: “He got up and drew a line on the prison’s ground, in the shape of a boat, and he sat in its middle. Then he said: He who wants salvation, let him sit with me in the circle!” (Massignon, *Qiṣṣa* 294)

¹³ In a manuscript and a printed edition consulted by as-Saḥḥ: “on the ground, by the wall of the prison”. (Cf. *Sīra* 50, n. 2.)

he rose, and got out of the boat. He started to walk on the surface of the sea, and the boat was following him until he led her to the land. Then they disembarked and he said to them: ‘Go wherever you wish!’” (*Sīra* 50-51).

I think that the parallel between the Jewish legend and the story of al-Ḥallāḡ is self evident. The common elements are the prison; the night; the rabbi / Ṣūfī sheikh offering salvation to the people; the line drawn to the wall / the ground; the drawing which materializes by the prayer of the people; the boat sailing in the open sea and finally reaching the land.

The motifs of sea, sailing, drowning and delivery are extensively used in Ṣūfī texts. The symbolism of these texts is not that obvious as it might appear at first view. The sea can symbolize both God and other-than-God, or the way towards God; while the boat can equally be a false or a true means of salvation¹⁴. In the Jewish version of the story, prison and boat, sea and land, sailing and salvation can be understood in a very literal way – just as many Muslims would not seek the allegorical sense of the Ṣūfī story, but would contend themselves with enjoying the plain meaning of the tale. As for this specific Ṣūfī story, its allegoric interpretation does not seem to be complicated; the prison from which salvation is sought symbolizes probably the obstacles that separate man from God; the sea appears to be life itself as a way towards God; and the boat of salvation is the mystical knowledge which can lead to the land, that is, the maximal proximity to God.

Certain visual elements of the Ṣūfī story might recall some aspects of *dīkr*. During some methods of *dīkr* people are standing in circle, surrounding the sheikh who controls and dominates the passion of the believers. They repeat God’s name performing an ever accelerating movement by turning their heads and bodies to the left and to the right in a semi-circular motion, which is accompanied by their rhythmical, ever faster and louder expiration, till they achieve a state of ecstasy in which they “disappear”, achieving the state of extinction (*fanā’*) of their own self by annulling their consciousness separating them from God. This rhythmical, dynamic, physical movement that includes swaying, rolling and wavering inevitably recurs in the visualized motion of the circular line drawn by the sheikh: a circumference that gets into a wavering motion, attaining thus to three dimensions, and materializing in the form of a boat rolling in the sea.

Unfortunately I could not ascertain the first to put this legend down on paper. Ridwān as-Sahḥ (whose version I translated above) does not identify the source

¹⁴ Cf. three divergent commentaries on the Station of the Sea from the *Kitāb al-mawāqif* by an-Niffārī, discussed and translated by Arberry and Nicholson (Arberry 1935:198-201).

of the legend¹⁵; °Abd al-Fattāḥ (whose version is almost identical with that of as-Sahḥ) refers vaguely to the first volume of *Taḍkirat al-awliyā'* by Farīd ad-Dīn al-°Aṭṭār (first half of the 13th century)¹⁶.

However, in the chapter about al-Ḥallāğ¹⁷ this story cannot be found, although several traditions concerning the imprisonment of al-Ḥallāğ are related there, including stories about his miraculous power by which he could set prisoners free, vanish from prison, or make the prison itself disappear. (°Abd al-°Azīz 2006-2009: II, 234-235; Arberry 1966:267-268) A slightly different version from the one translated above was published by Louis Massignon (*Qiṣṣa* /ed. Massignon/ 294). The difference lays both in the form and the content of the story. In that version, part of the prisoners does not follow al-Ḥallāğ, but regards the whole attempt at flight as “madness”. Moreover, that narration presents some features of rhymed prose, which makes probable that it was recited publicly by professional storytellers for a wide audience¹⁸. According to the statements of Massignon the story of al-Ḥallāğ (*Qiṣṣat Ḥusayn al-Ḥallāğ*) published by him (on the basis of five manuscripts dating from the 18th-20th centuries) in its present form had been constituted already in the 13th century¹⁹. The most important part of the story (including the significant variants from the versions quoted previously) is the following:

“He did not cease to pray with them till midnight. In the agitation of his love, passion and ardour towards the Omniscient King, he lost his senses [*fa-tāra bihi l-wağd*]. Then he started the *dīkr* and they persisted in the *dīkr* with him till the morning. When morning came, he got up and drew a line on the prison’s ground, in the shape of a boat, and he sat in its middle. Then he said: ‘He who wants salvation, let him sit with me in the circle!’ Some sat with him there, but some refused. And these said: ‘This guy must be out

¹⁵ Riḍwān as-Sahḥ compiled his edition of the biography of al-Ḥallāğ on the basis of two manuscripts and one printed edition. He did not date the manuscripts. The printed edition was published in 1939. Cf. *Sīra* 6, 23.

¹⁶ For the imprecise reference see, *Qiṣṣa* (ed. °Abd al-Fattāḥ) 23, for the story of the miraculous escape see *Qiṣṣa* (ed. °Abd al-Fattāḥ) 84-85. The manuscript that °Abd al-Fattāḥ published was copied in 1785, see *Qiṣṣa* (ed. °Abd al-Fattāḥ) 46.

¹⁷ In the second volume, since al-Ḥallāğ is not mentioned in the first volume at all.

¹⁸ For the recitation of the biography, miracles and poems of al-Ḥallāğ see Massignon 1982:341-353. For an abridged translation of the story in French see Massignon 1975: II, 475; for the English translation by Herbert Mason see Massignon 1982: II, 453. It has to be noted, however, that the text which Massignon translated was based on several manuscripts, and it is not evident exactly which one of these he took as his main source, and where and why did he depart from it. Consequently his translation in Massignon 1975 differs considerably from the Arabic text published in the *Qiṣṣa* edited by him. And thus the English translation of Herbert is different as well.

¹⁹ See Massignon 1982:360; *Qiṣṣa* 287 (ed. Massignon).

of his mind [*hādā min fi'l al-mağānīn*]!' Ḥusayn al-Ḥallāğ said: 'Move the boat by means of the *dikr*!' [...] And that line became a boat sailing in the middle of the sea. Ḥusayn al-Ḥallāğ said: 'This is the boat of salvation, so persist in the *dikr* of God!'"²⁰

6. Another adaptation of the legend: Maimonides's miraculous escape from prison

Apparently the story of al-Ḥallāğ's miraculous escape gained popularity among North-African Jews to such an extent that it survived in different versions. Apart from the Algerian variation which seems to be an adaptation of the story published by as-Sahh and °Abd al-Fattāh, there is another Jewish variation that is likely to be an adaptation of the rhymed-prose version published by Massignon. The protagonist of this Judaeo-Arabic version is Moses Maimonides, the leading figure of mediaeval North-African Jewry. As it is widely known, Maimonides was born in Córdoba in 1135, but due to the religious intolerance of the Almohads was forced to leave Andalusia for Morocco, and finally he settled in Fuṣṭāṭ, where he acted as a physician to the Sultan. His codification of Jewish law is of unique importance. As such a leading and famous personage, he became the protagonist of several Jewish tales. Series of fables transmitted by Jews living in different Muslim countries narrate the biography of Maimonides. The cycle about the life of Maimonides survived in various divergent versions in a number of manuscripts. One of these, copied in Egypt in 1840, and published by Yitṣḥaq Avishur²¹ contains a story which presents certain similarities to al-Ḥallāğ's escape in the rhymed prose narration. According to it, in consequence of a legal decision offensive to Muslims, Maimonides was detained and sentenced to be burnt at the stake. This mode of execution was not practiced by the Almohads, and in general, it is not included in the methods of carrying out capital punishment used by Muslims. A person whose body was burnt as part of his execution was al-Ḥallāğ, but neither was he burnt alive. It was, however, a typical penalty imposed by the Spanish National Inquisition. Possibly as a consequence of inadequacy in collective memory different historical facts became combined in the tale: The flight of Maimonides from Andalusia (12th century), the stakes of the Inquisition in Spain (from the 15th century on), the execution of al-Ḥallāğ (in the 10th century).

²⁰ In the author's translation. *Qiṣṣa* (ed. Massignon) 294.

²¹ MS Paris 583, the series of fables narrating the life of Maimonides can be found on pp. 148-155 of the manuscript. Cf. Avishur 1998:53-74.

“In prison he [Maimonides] folded a paper boat. The prison had a window looking on the sea. He took the paper boat, and threw it through the window to the sea. Then he said to the prisoners: “My brethren, is there anyone among you who comes with me?” But they laughed at him, and said to each other: “This miserable must be out of his mind [*hādā r-ragul miskīn itgannin*] that he says he will board a paper boat! He must have lost his senses [*‘aqluhu nuqūs [...] min wağđihi*] now that he will be burnt soon!” Then he put out his legs through the window, one after the other, and with the help of God, he got out of the window through an opening so small that a man could hardly set forth his arm through it. The prisoners were dumbfounded. He embarked the boat saying to the prisoners: “I wish you all the best!” Then he shoved off the boat, and with the help of God he began to sail. He pronounced the Name of God, and in the twinkling of an eye he reached Egypt”²².

Similarities and discrepancies are manifest among this Judaeo-Arabic variation and the rhymed prose version. I would like to call attention merely to some interesting parallels in the wording. First and foremost, one should note the term *wağđ* appearing in both texts. In the al-Ḥallāğ-story it retains its primordial meaning in Šūfī terminology, that is: ecstasy, being in a state of unconsciousness: “In the agitation of his love, passion and ardour towards the Omniscient King he lost his senses [*fa-tāra bihi l-wağđ*].” In the Judaeo-Arabic version, however, the word *wağđ* is no longer a term. The other detail to be noted is the reaction of the prisoners refusing to follow al-Ḥallāğ / Maimonides: Both versions use expressions containing the Arabic root *ğnn* (to be mad, to be out of one’s mind): “*hādā min fi’l al-mağānīn / hādā r-ragul miskīn itgannin*”.

7. A *ḥizb* called “boat of salvation”

The boat of salvation (*markab / safīnat an-nağāt*) for a great number of Muslims is more than a literary symbol appearing in these Šūfī stories. It is the name of a litany (*ḥizb*) attributed to Aḥmad Zarrūq, that is, the master of the marabout Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf, who – according to the Jewish narrative – permitted the settlement of the Sephardi Jews in Algiers²³. The litanies are to be recited in pre-determined periods of the day, fulfilling special requirements like being in a state of purity, etc. They are generally attributed a quasi-magical power due to secrets and names contained in them. The uses and benefits of the litanies are frequently enumerated in the booklets containing them together with instruc-

²² Avishur 1998:66-69 (the Judaeo-Arabic text and its Hebrew translation).

²³ For the text of the *ḥizb* and explications concerning its use, see Zarrūq, *Bisāt* 58-88.

tions concerning their recitations. The litany called the “boat of salvation” is destined to guard the believer against a wide range of impacts endangering him, and to secure good outcome and success in general. Since this *hizb* is attributed to the master of the marabout mentioned in the Sephardi legend, it is reasonable to suppose that the concept of “the boat of salvation” was current in the circle of Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf.

8. Conclusion

The parallels which I enumerated (on the one hand, the story of al-Ḥallāğ’s escape, which survived in two versions; and, on the other hand, the escape of the rabbi / Maimonides) suggest that North-African Jews in general, and Algerian Jews in particular were familiar with the legend of al-Ḥallāğ’s miraculous flight.

Given the popularity of al-Ḥallāğ among Muslims and Jews alike, and the obvious similarities among the Ṣūfī and the Jewish stories, it might be suggested that the Algerian Jews made use of this popular story adapting it to their conditions, changing the main character, the setting and the purpose, but conserving the motifs and adding a hint to the Ṣūfī background of the story by completing it with a more elaborate happy ending featuring Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf, the tolerant marabout permitting the settlement of the Jews.

The story can be instructive as to the relations of Jews and Muslims in Algeria. The fact that in this Jewish myth of origin Moors are included as sharing the Jews’ lot, and the positive role the marabout played in the outcome of the events point toward a major degree of tolerance among Jews and Muslims. If the Jewish story is indeed an adoption of the Ṣūfī legend, it indicates the acculturation of the Jews to their Muslim environment, manifesting itself in the assimilation, borrowing of concepts and the internalization of popular narratives and motifs current among their Muslim neighbours.

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Calligraphic panel in the form of a boat with the following text:

أعوذ بالله من الشيطان الرجيم بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
اللهم يا مفتاح الأبواب افتح لنا خير الباب