Review Essay: A Portrait of the Sephardi as Swindler

Daniel J. Schroeter, The Sultan's Jew: Morocco and the Sephardi World, Stanford University Press, 2002

Of all the ethnic histories that I can think of in modern times, perhaps the most contested in terms of the manner in which it is has been written and perceived is that of the Sephardic Jews. Jews who once lived in the Arab-Muslim world have been placed in a very difficult position; the standard Zionist trajectory of Jewish persecution culminating in the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, has continually served to manipulate the history of Sephardic Jewry, a group that has had deep ties to the Arab world, a world now seen as the inveterate enemy of the West and of Israel, the Jewish state.

The nature of this manipulation, as Daniel Schroeter points out in his troubling but very important new book, has been the development of two differing schools of thought regarding this contested history: On the one hand we have a group led by Bernard Lewis and Norman Stillman that has sought to present Sephardic Jewry as a community that was left to be persecuted by cruel and zealous Muslim fanatics. While Lewis and Stillman have at times conceded the point that during the High Middle Ages the Sephardim, from Spain to Baghdad, were capable of great cultural achievement based on the efflorescence of Arabic civilization from the 7th to the 13th centuries, with the establishment of the European Enlightenment and cultural dominance of the modern period, this school has sought to occlude in *toto* the cultural and political viability of the Sephardim.

Such a viewpoint has sought to lay bare a brutal political rationale for the emergence of a Western-oriented Zionism that has served to ignore the culture and history of the Eastern Sephardim: Arabs have always hated and abused the Jews.

In his most recent work *What Went Wrong?* Lewis continues his vicious assault on the Jews of the East that began with his book *The Jews of Islam* some years ago. Stillman, in his own writings, has also jumped on this anti-Sephardi bandwagon by affirming the paradigm of a static culture in decline and under threat of Muslim fanaticism.

In counter-distinction to this school of thought, the work of Ammiel Alcalay has served to draw a vastly differing methodological paradigm in order to interpret Sephardic history. In Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs* the world of the Sephardim is seen from within its very own cultural parameters. Rather than permitting the Sephardi voice to be co-opted by European Orientalism, as Stillman does in his translation of Samuel Romanelli's travelogue in Morocco, Alcalay uses the literary, historical and philosophical texts of Sephardim in a post-modern mélange that attempts to articulate the lost voices of the Sephardim themselves, voices that are then set in counterpoint to the other native voices of the Levant.

The implicit argument of Alcalay, and others such as Daniel Boyarin, Joelle Bahloul, Joel Beinin and Victor Perera in their own philo-Sephardi writings, is that Jews were an integral part of the fabric of the Middle East and developed a way of life and a culture that maintained the continuity of its Semitic past from the ancient Near East into the later Hellenic period and the Islamic epoch.

According to this interpretation of the Sephardic past, Sephardim were part of a rich, polyglot civilization that continued to extend its pluralism and tolerance well into the modern period – even under the strains of Imperialism and the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

In works as divergent as Zvi Zohar's *Tradition and Change: Halakhic Responses of Middle Eastern Rabbis to Legal and Technological Change 1880-1920* and Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt*, works which followed the path blazed by Albert Hourani in his seminal study of Arab reform in the modern period, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, we see that the Arab world, in both its Jewish and Muslim aspects, developed new ways of articulating a distinctive modernity, a modernity that attempted to piece together the ways of the past in a manner that would maintain the fluidity of the present shifts in technology and ideological paradigm(s).

After important attempts by Aron Rodrigue and Esther Benbassa to detail with even greater precision the Sephardi transition to modernity in their important studies of Haim Nahum and Gabriel Arie, we now have the presentation by Daniel J. Schroeter of the political and economic biography of a Moroccan Jewish merchant, Meir Macnin, who was utilized by a series of Moroccan sultans in the late 18th and early 19th century as the most pre-eminent Jewish merchant in the kingdom. Macnin effectively served the various sultans of Morocco as a European emissary and as a member of the elite merchant class of Essaouira, a port city that had been developed with the idea of solidifying the ties between a newly emergent Europe and a steadily weakening Muslim North Africa.

The story of Macnin as presented by Schroeter is one that is as simple as it is tortuous: After rising through the ranks of the merchants at Essaouira, Macnin and his brothers develop a relationship with the Makhzan (the central administration of the Moroccan government) and begin a very profitable relationship with the crown. This relationship permitted Macnin to trade and speculate using credit and loans proffered by the crown: Macnin was effectively an agent of the crown in its dealings with foreign governments and businesses.

Over the course of three decades, Macnin was able to amass a fortune in his business dealings and the purchase of property in cities all over Morocco. During this time, Macnin, according to the evidence presented by Schroeter, mostly from British and French sources, accrued huge debts which he defaulted on using the cover of his diplomatic immunity.

Thus, the story of *The Sultan's Jew* is one that fixates on the political and economic degeneration of Islamic Morocco and the manner in which Jews fit into the picture of that degeneration.

Schroeter begins his portrait with a sketch of Jewish life in Morocco over the centuries. Even at this early stage of the book, Schroeter seems to ally himself with the negative view of the Muslims as hostile to minorities:

Marrakesh was founded in 1062 as the capital of the Berber dynasty known to Europe as the Almoravids, builders of an extensive empire that ruled over the Maghrib and Spain. Forbidden to reside in the new capital, Jews lived about forty kilometers southeast of Marrakesh, though they were undoubtedly were able to come to the city for business. It is unclear if Jews actually lived in Marrakesh at the time that the Almohads, the dynasty that succeeded the Almoravids, conquered the city in 1147. The Almohads were intolerant of non-Muslims, and the Jews were subjected to persecution and forced conversion.

We see from this that, as Schroeter presents it, rather than Morocco being an interfaith utopia, the Jews, from the very beginning of their stay in Morocco, were subject to a heinous religious persecution.

By highlighting the Almoravid/Almohad period (and eliding the fact that Jewish settlement in Morocco went back to the Carthaginian period rather than merely begun in the 11th century), a period that proved the exception rather than the rule in Jewish life in the Islamic Maghreb, which was essentially that of peaceful relations with their Muslim hosts, Schroeter tilts the story in favor of the negative relations under Muslim fanatics who indeed made life just as miserable for their Muslim subjects as well as for their minorities.

In bringing the story down to the 18th century, Schroeter does make it clear however that Jews were permitted for many centuries to practice their religion freely and tend to their communal affairs and business dealings in relative security.

The great tension of the persecution of the Jews in Morocco is therefore belied by much of the documentary evidence presented:

Essaouira was to become Morocco's principal port of trade, where all the consulates and merchants trading with Europe were to be concentrated. A tradition of the Jewish community of Essaouira relates that in 1766 representatives of ten of the most important Jewish families in Morocco were chosen by the principal Jewish diplomatic agent and secretary of the sharifian court of that era, Samuel Sumbal, to conduct the town's trade… Typically, the Makhzan leased Moroccan ports to Jews, who paid for the exclusive privilege of collecting customs.

Jews it would seem held many lucrative and powerful positions in the Moroccan economic system. Meir Macnin would simply continue this tradition of powerful Jewish entrepreneurs in the region.

As we have seen in S.D. Goitein's magisterial work *A Mediterranean Society*, Jews functioned at an intimate level in the rapidly expanding trade network that developed in and around the Mediterranean in the pre-Columbian era. Jews developed social and familial strategies to create a network, usually based along the sea routes of the medieval world, of settlements that would link Jewish business interests with one another, thus creating a virtual monopoly of crucial geographical markers bringing together far-flung regions such as Manchester, Bombay and Shaghai, in addition to its home bases in the Middle East and North Africa. Sephardic Jews could communicate in the cultured languages of the time, Arabic, Spanish Romance and French, and were key intermediaries in the development of economic and cultural linkages between East and West.

Thus it comes as little surprise that with the outreach of the sultans to Western Europe, Jews would, by dint of their widespread social network, be able to own a huge chunk of the import-export trade:

The elite Jews were part of this cosmopolitan society of foreign commerce, well acquainted with Europe. The Jewish merchants who traded with Amsterdam, Livorno, London, and Marseilles often had members of their families in these European ports. For example, Mordechai De La Mar's brother Masahod (Masud) resided in Amsterdam and dispatched ships to his brother in Essaouira or El Jadida.

Rather than permitting the limitations of their geographical boundaries, most particularly their expulsion from Spain in 1492, to fix their places of abode, Sephardic Jews continued to utilize their mobility in new and dynamic ways to create an interconnected Sephardic world that would transcend any specific handicap that could be imparted as a result of persecution of their minority status. Sephardic Jews continued, under good and bad circumstances, to build and secure their economic and cultural stability in a world that was continually heaving in the wake of political and dynastic changes.

It was at the time of Sultan Mawlay al-Yazid that such changes wreaked havoc on the Jewish community of Morocco:

According to a tradition of the Jewish community of Fez, the sultan gave the order to exterminate all the Jews in his kingdom, but was persuaded instead to pillage them, stripping them of all their belongings. But in fact Mawlay al-Yazid's reign of terror was a bloodbath, a violation of the Islamic ruler's obligation to protect the Jews. Such occasions of government-sanctioned violence against Jews were practically unheard-of in Morocco, but when it was perceived that Jews had acquired too much power or overstepped the bounds of their subordinate position as dhimmis [protected minorities

under Islamic law], then popular hostility could be aroused and violence sometimes ensued.

Again, we have the presentation by Schroeter of an exception to the general rule of peaceful coexistence as a sign of the persecuting strain in Islamic culture and politics that is consistently kept in *potentio*; a menacing backdrop which is apt to emerge at any time. While Mawlay al-Yazid is clearly betraying the traditional Muslim approach under shari'a to maintain peaceful relations with the Jews, the impression is given that such brutality was a central feature of Jewish life under Islam.

Rather than posit that the Jewish adaptation and success within the area of commercial relations was a mark of the vitality of the community, Schroeter throughout the book continues to insist that the economic well-being of the community was an indication of the community's vulnerability, a case that will be made with the presentation of Macnin's biography.

After the installation of Mawlay Sulayman as sultan in 1792, the fortunes of Meir Macnin are way on the rise:

Now, Meir Macnin was to be the instrument for Mawlay Sulayman's effort to control trade in Agadir, as we learn from a letter to the sultan's nephew Mawlay 'Abd al-Malik al'Zayzun, the governor of Agadir: "We order you to provide him with a house that he can live in and fill with commerce because he [the sultan] wishes commerce in Agadir to be represented by the merchant Zuzab [?], his [Macnin's] associate. He [Macnin] should be given favor and privilege over the other Jews there since he is our dhimmi and our chattel." Already, Meir Macnin was climbing the ladder to become one of the state's principal Jewish merchants, with the condition of both power and subservience that such a position entailed.

It is at this point that Macnin's rise gives pause to Schroeter who continues to put into question the legitimacy of the Jews and their position within Moroccan society. Are the Jews simply, as the key term in Mawlay 'Abd al-Malik's letter seems to imply, "chattel" in the eyes of the government, or are they truly the trusted emissaries of their employers?

While I would not doubt that the essential difference in religion and nationality was an important mitigating factor in the interethnic relations between the Makhzan and the Jewish merchant class, Schroeter neglects to provide any evidence regarding the status of two other classes that might permit us to see more clearly the role and status of the class represented by Macnin. These classes would be the Muslim merchant class, seemingly passed over in the European trade in favor of the Jews, and the Jewish working classes – a class which formed the vast majority of the Jewish population in an Arab country at that time.

While Goitein is able through the Genizah documents that formed the archive from which his massive series of books were written to see the various strata of the Jewish

community in Egypt and the rest of the Arab-Muslim world, including the world of women, Schroeter is consistently limited by the nature of the evidence that he is working with regarding Macnin as an emblem of Moroccan Jewish society. The evidence regarding Macnin, even though it does not carry with it the authenticity of Macnin's own voice and some idea of his own interior state, is rich in the realistic detail of a merchant living in a time of great political and cultural change; a series of changes that ultimately, as Schroeter points out, saw the evisceration of the dense interconnectedness of the Sephardi world.

But with the lack of material witness and documentary evidence regarding the standing of Muslims in Morocco at the very same time, Schroeter's argument loses a good deal of its trenchancy. It is impossible to make any certain assertions regarding how Jews such as Macnin were treated if we do not know how Macnin's Muslim peers were treated.

It is likely that all those, Jews as well as Muslims, who had a role to play in the Makhzan's affairs were manipulated in the same manner – used by the sultan to get the money he needed for his own treasury. In this sense, it quite possible that the Jews, notwithstanding the compulsion evidenced by Ashkenazi Jewish scholars of the Arab world to see any interference or manipulation as evidence of anti-Jewish prejudice, lived in relative equality with their Muslim compatriots – all of whom were at the relative mercies of a despotic regime, and all of whom did their level-headed best to negotiate with that despotism in terms that would be the most advantageous to their own self-interest.

In 1799 the plague struck Morocco and Macnin, perhaps to escape the scourge, traveled to England. At this time, the status of Jews in Western Europe was still rather precarious. The Spanish Inquisition was still in effect (although Schroeter presents evidence that Jews managed to travel in and out of Spain with some frequency) and most European countries continued to prevent Jews from settling in their domains (unlike, of course, the countries of the Arab-Muslim world such as Morocco, who had continued to maintain a stable and welcoming relationship to Jews throughout the ages). The great exception to this was England, which, after Cromwell's revolution, loosened the restriction on Jewish settlement. Soon London developed a relatively sizeable Jewish community replete with Marrano émigrés, North African adventurers like Macnin and Jews who had already created a notable community in Amsterdam.

As we have already seen, Sephardic Jews, unlike their Ashkenazi counterparts, developed over the course of many centuries in the Mediterranean culture a cosmopolitanism and a worldliness that had been encouraged by its rabbinical intellectual culture that mixed a great affinity for scholarship with a great care and concern for trade and enterprise.

In the 18th century, as the walls of Christian Europe began to be penetrated by Jews, it was therefore logical that the Sephardim would expand their interests into the newly offered domain. A man like Macnin, who could travel in both Arab and European circles, was naturally suited to bridge these worlds. The mobility of the Sephardim and

their ability to translate from different idioms and cultures, gave them a leg up on the Christians who were still viewed with suspicion and disdain by the Arabs, and buoyed by the relative lack of interest by European governments in the possibility of continued normal trade relations with an Arab world in steady decline both politically and technologically.

Macnin's arrival to London on the ship Aurora at a time of great concern about the spread of the plague elicits many of the tensions that continued to pollute relations between East and West:

The contrast between what appeared to be London's immunity from the plague and the state of health in the East was most glaring even though European and Muslim notions about medicine were not as far apart at the turn of the nineteenth century as most Western Europeans believed. Although the British had no idea about the bacterial causes of the bubonic plague (the correlation between rats and fleas in the dissemination of the epidemic was only made at the turn of the twentieth century), the orderly fashion in which the problem was dealt with at home seemed to the British to underscore the disparity between the West and the Orient, or in this case Barbary. To the British, the spread of the epidemic was due to the negligence of the native population and their total lack of understanding about the way the contagion spread; for some, their level of civilization was the chief cause of pestilence.

The world that Meir Macnin entered at the start of the 19th century was one where Jews and Arabs were seen equally as part of the same barbarity. Semites both, they were seen as loathsome caricatures who had little ethical character and were out to exploit their Christian neighbors. In spite of this, the British, like their European peers, continued to do business with the Arab south, as had been done for many centuries. But the tide was now turning and Europe was developing a greater civilization than that of the Arabs who had once dominated the continent of the North. This dominance was apparent to the Arabs as well, facilitating the need for people like Macnin:

The sultan was also well aware of events to the east. In the year before the plague, Napoleon had invaded Egypt, causing alarm throughout the Islamic world. Ripples of fear undoubtedly shook the Muslim state of Morocco. The sultan of Turkey wrote an appeal to the Moroccan sultan to come to the aid of Egypt and the defense of Islam. Mediterranean commerce was also hampered, not only by the departure of European merchants during the plague and the resulting cessation of trade, but by the consequences of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe as well. Morocco had not been so isolated in decades and the foreign threat loomed large.

It was into this context that Meir Macnin was thrust. Macnin began at this time to trade using the Makhzan's money and credit. It is at this point that Macnin's situation becomes quite complicated and the evidence that Schroeter marshals is both illuminating as well as maddeningly incomplete. The Makhzan demands that Macnin purchase items such as ships for it, yet we are not completely privy as readers to the full financial scheme that

enabled the commercial transactions. It is unclear how Macnin would obtain the money to purchase things on behalf of the Makhzan and how then that money would be paid back.

This confusion will cut to the very heart of Macnin's financial controversies as we shall see below. At this first stage of Macnin's dealings, there is already trouble and tension with the Makhzan:

The governor of Essaouira had advanced money to Macnin and sent him to London. From there, Meir had dispatched cargoes to his brother, Shlomo, and to Essaouira's leading merchant Haim Guedella. The governor, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Sadiq, the qadi, the customs officials, and Shlomo Macnin were summoned to Marrakesh and arrested during the sultan's visit to the area from Marrakesh. Shlomo Macnin was also apparently released shortly thereafter. Some half a million dollars of Makhzan funds were missing, used by the governor for commerce through the two Macnin brothers.

It is apparent that the new economic system being developed in the Moroccan-European trade was very fluid and elastic. With a lack of financial controls and oversight, it would appear to be quite easy to embezzle funds earmarked for public use for personal gain. And it was this breach in the system that was exploited by the Macnins, Jews, as well as the governor of Essaouira, a Muslim. The misappropriation of funds was not limited to any specific ethnic or religious group in Morocco, or any other country for that matter.

But the financial system remained a tempting lure to Meir Macnin who then seemed to spend virtually the whole of his entire adult life pinching funds from the government and various creditors to establish his fragile empire. Macnin continues to be hounded by creditors and lawyers for the better part of his career as a businessman and speculator. But like other great swindlers, Macnin is able to keep on living the high life and enter into the upper echelons of society.

One of the most fascinating parts of the story told by Schroeter is that of the emergence of a new Sephardi class in London. At a time of great reform and change in British society, many Sephardim were able to assimilate into the highest ranks of British society (it should be remembered that the family of British Prime Minister Benjamin D'Israeli came from this echelon of Jews) quite easily. Schroeter even writes about a play of the English playwright Richard Cumberland which seems to have Macninian overtones. Cumberland's play, *The Jew of Mogadore*, was thought by the British consul in Tangier to have a character based on Macnin himself.

The Jewish community in London had been formed by Sephardim who continued to represent its own interests in the 19th century:

London, the center of commerce during the Napoleonic Wars, was linked to the Mediterranean network of Jewish traders, and the Sephardi community of London was closely connected to Livorno. Sir Moses Montefiore, the most prominent member of

England's Jewish elite in the nineteenth century, came from a Livornese family that moved to London in 1744 and made its fortune in the English-Italian trade. The Montefiores kept close connections with Livorno, where Moses was born in 1784. The rabbinical leadership of the Spanish and Portugese community of London also often came from Livorno. Such was the case with Raphael Meldola, appointed rabbi in 1805; and with his predecessors Rabbi David Nieto (appointed in 1700 and remaining until his death in 1728) and the latter's son Isaac Nieto.

The relations between London, North Africa and Livorno were cemented through the rabbinical classes (it is to be remembered that the most important Sephardi rabbi of the 19th century, Elijah Benamozegh, whose family ran a very important publishing house printing many of the most important rabbinical works of the Sephardic rabbis of the East, was born in Livorno to a family of Moroccan extraction) which provided the social and religious framework which lay the foundation of Sephardi cultural and social life.

The emergence of a multicultural London was a new reality for the changing times:

The vicinity of the Bevis Marks Synagogue was a polyglot district. On this semineutral ground of international commerce, Moroccan Jews and Muslims mixed with Christians. Muslim merchants, upon arriving in London, resided with Jews. Take for example, the case of al- Hajj 'Abd al-Salam Buhillal from Tangier. The Buhillals were among the most prominent merchant families from Fez, whose mercantile interests stretched from Timbuktu to Europe.

The very fact that Muslims, upon their arrival to England, would settle into the Jewish district again is a very strange fact given the supposed antipathies that are thought to have existed between the groups.

Meir Macnin thus blended in with his coreligionists and transplanted countrymen in London and continued to transact both his own business and the business of the Moroccan crown.

Schroeter then enters into a lengthy examination of the status of merchants like Macnin under the system imposed by the Makhzan:

Being a royal merchant was prestigious and profitable, but also meant a degree of servitude to the sultan. The tujjar [merchants] were vulnerable, subject to unpredictable commercial actions by the sultan. Since they traded on the credit of the Makhzan they could not operate as free agents, and were often ordered arbitrarily by the government to undertake specific commissions. Since all the tujjar were indebted to the sultan, their goods and properties were subject to confiscation, something which occurred with relative frequency, especially since the sultan himself had limited liquid capital.

Again, as has been consistent throughout *The Sultan's Jew*, Schroeter constantly emphasizes the mean underbelly of the system by isolating the Jewish condition in

relation to the overall condition of the rest of the Moroccan Muslim populace. We are never presented with any comparative demographic and economic figures of the Jewish and Muslim communities (permitting us to see Macnin's own status within a specifically Moroccan context) which would allow us to see how those communities functioned at this time. While it is clear from the start that there is an institutional inequality built into a system that is affirmedly **in**egalitarian according to modern standards, we are never informed how the Jewish community was able to continue to flourish in a cultural and social sense. The use of Macnin as emblematic of a debased Jewish condition is thus difficult to confirm.

The most important cause celebre in the Macnin biography is his relationship with the British creditor Robert Burchall who died trying to recover a huge debt that Macnin owed him. The story of Macnin and Burchall is a bit hazy as Schroeter presents it:

The British at this stage began pressing Macnin to pay off a debt he owed for the brig that he had built and armed for the sultan in 1808. Some 10,256 pounds of an account dating from 1809 remained unpaid… Payment was finally remitted for the brig by Judah Guedalla and David Macnin in early 1817, through the assistance of a British creditor, Robert Burchall, who some ten years later was still attempting to recover his money.

The question of this debt, which loomed quite large in Meir Macnin's second stay in London (1826-1831), is itself a very tangled web. According to the evidence Schroeter presents, the debt originally accrued from the account of the sultan, for whom Macnin was acquiring the ship. The loose system of finances and the limited documentation that Schroeter has obtained does not really help us in truly getting to the bottom of this matter. Did Macnin receive the funds from the Makhzan and misappropriate them, or was the sultan merely using Macnin and sticking him with the bill for the ship?

The question of Burchall cuts to the very ambiguity at the heart of the entangled and complicated relationship that grew between the merchant and the sultan: It was, as Schroeter has already pointed out, this very ambiguity that made the relationship so one-sided and desirable to the Makhzan. The sultan controlled a network of merchants (Schroeter highlights the Jews, but it is not made clear how Muslims fit into the scheme) and continued to extract every last bit of money and influence from them that he could. These merchants were sent into various commercial districts, in Europe and elsewhere, and were empowered to make deals on behalf of the sultan. These deals, in classic despotic fashion, were to favor the Makhzan rather than the merchant.

But the merchant class understood that they could acquire huge fortunes by manipulating the system, as it seems Meir Macnin did. Having access to markets and capital turned these merchants greedy and venal. This seemed to be understood by the Makhzan as a natural part of the system. And in the current political climate, the arrangement would seem to have made a good deal of sense: The Arab world had lost its pre-eminence in the wake of European expansionism and technological advances. The Arab world had controlled trade and technology and science throughout the Middle Ages, but at the start

of the modern period, it found itself in a huge hole. The manipulation of the system by the Arab sultans and their protégés seemed to make sense.

A man like Meir Macnin was thus emblematic of the newly weakened state of the Arab world. Rather than seeing Macnin as the epitome of a swindler and taking him as a model of Muslim-Jewish relations, Macnin's case should be seen as the tragic fall of a once-mighty civilization that had previously been able to balance tribal identity and a more universal way of understanding the social relations between men and cultures with relative success.

Thus we see that by the end of Macnin's life he was hounded by creditors and debts. As he returns to England on behalf of the new sultan Mawlay Sulayman, he is both a hero and a scab: He is a richly successful and well-respected member of the Moroccan Jewish community (including its branch in London) while remaining an object of scorn and Orientalist derision in England and in the overall European community.

Macnin, though, has played by the rules and obtained the privilege, imparted by the Makhzan, of a Moroccan diplomat, a man who has been honored by his country to represent its interests. As a diplomat of the crown it would be quite impossible to subject him to the standard ways of recovering debt.

There is no question that Meir Macnin played fast and loose with money – his own and that of others. The system of ethics which applied in a newly-Enlightened Europe, a continent increasingly conforming to legal and political norms as articulated by the Rights of Man, had clearly not applied to the Arab world; a world sunk in the mire of European Imperialism, a world of legal capitulations which permitted a breach of the shari'a system of law which had up until the 18th century been the law under which the Muslim state ran, a world in which the traditional norms which had once anchored the only successful multi-ethnic state the world had known were fast disappearing.

In its place was a wholly new system which had developed a sophisticated conception of the Rights of Man, but still permitted all sorts of inequities. The Islamic system continued, paradoxically, even under this strain, to accept the nature of difference and the respect for that particularism even while the system was being gutted.

But as Schroeter skillfully points out, the multi-cultural haven which Islam created in the Middle Ages, was being undermined from all sides. As relates to Macnin and the Jewish merchant community, the new system imposed by the Europeans offered a new form of protection that was far more attractive at this point in time than that of the dhimmi which had hitherto permitted the Jews a greater status than they once had in bigoted, Christian Europe:

Thus, the means by which Jews could escape dhimmi status were not the legal changes implemented by the Moroccan state, but rather, becoming subjects or citizens of foreign powers, or protégés of foreign nations represented in Morocco. Jews who had formerly

been employed by the sharifian state as a way to limit foreign influence now became agents of foreign penetration when Morocco was forced to liberalize trade under European pressure. Yet the reasons that many Jews invested their political futures in Europe affected the very nature of the relationship between Jews and the 'Alawid state. As imperialism undermined the legitimacy of the Islamic polity, Jews in growing numbers repudiated the dhimma pact offered by the state and sought the protection of a foreign power.

This historic miscalculation by the Arab state led to its virtual disintegration. The new protégés, Jews and others, undermined states such as Morocco from within. It is therefore highly ironic that Moroccan Jews left their protection as dhimmis under Islamic law and became protected protégés of the Imperial powers through the new system of capitulations.

As the mercantile class increasingly integrated into the emergent European system, buoyed by the Imperial expansion, the Arabs were left with a shell of a society as it had once been. Traditionalism was attacked, in both its positive and negative aspects. Arab Statist-Nationalism, once it began to develop along the lines of the European model, began to reject its traditional stance on minorities, minorities who were now seen as "European" and not "Arab," and adopted a standard of xenophobia that mirrored the less wholesome aspects of the whole Rights of Man schema. This rejection is an outgrowth of European Imperialism rather than an innate part of Muslim culture; the Moroccans and other Arabs began to adopt new concepts of ethnic identity along Western lines.

We are thus brought back in a circular fashion to our original dilemma, the manner in which Sephardic Jewish history is articulated and to what ends it is important in understanding our current historical dilemmas.

The story of Meir Macnin, tangled and garbled though it may be, filled with Orientalist racism and Levantine misconceptions, displays a Sephardic culture that was being strangled from both ends: Europe saw the Jews (and Zionism in this sense was simply fulfilling this aspect of European Imperialism) as a fifth column in their lands of birth while the Arabs, who had done little to ameliorate the condition of its minorities in light of the new standards of European modernity (a condition that had once been humane was now retrograde), began abandoning their concern for pluralism and multi-ethnic coexistence.

This enigmatic turn in Levantine history opened the door to its misuse by parties of all stripes. German-Jewish scholars posited the existence of a utopian "Golden Age" in medieval Islamic civilization in contrast to the ethnic chauvinism posited by the Napoleonic codes which forced Jews to cede their historic culture and religion. On the other hand, the growth of Statist-Zionism during the course of the early part of the 20th century, provided the Zionist historians with a pressing need to demonize Arabs – what better way to do that than to trace the trajectory of Arab hatred of Jews.

While *The Sultan's Jew* does a good deal to illuminate this historical trajectory, it too falls prey to many of the dilemmas that we have pointed out. Part of it is due to the nature of the evidence that Schroeter has at his disposal; so much of the story is told from the European point of view, predicated on the Orientalist voice, serving to almost utterly obliterate the natives' point of view. We never get to hear Meir Macnin's own voice, but hear all too clearly the voices of his enemies resonate throughout this book. The footnotes tend to find their sources almost exclusively in the archives of the British and French.

In this sense there is little that can be done – the story must be told out of the available sources. But, to the reader's disadvantage, Schroeter does little to try and contextualize the story by presenting any comparative information that would permit his reader to see Meir Macnin and his class from the point of view of those native Jews and Muslims who were his contemporaries.

Without this information, the idea that Moroccan Jews were one of the most tenacious of the Arab Jewish communities against emigration after the establishment of the state of Israel, is largely inexplicable: Moroccan Jews, contrary to Schroeter's implications, continued in broad terms to remain a part of Arab culture and true to their traditions as Sephardim. Until today, Moroccan Jews have remained part of the orbit of the Moroccan world: Witness the case of Andre Azoulay, a Jewish economic advisor to the Moroccan government.

And finally, we must deal with the thorniest issue that clouds all of Arab Jewish history: the role of Zionism. Zionism could always muster an argument out of European anti-Semitism and racism, but could it make the argument that the world into which it was trying to settle, the world of the Muslim Middle East, was equally disdainful of Jews and Judaism?

For many years this part of the Zionist argument was limited to attacks on the Sephardim and their native culture. It was thought that Sephardim were "primitives" who lacked the rudiments of Western culture, the authoritative world culture and the culture from which Zionism took its lead. But the general sense of Jewish life under Islam continued to be seen, rightly, as far more benign than Jewish life in Christian Europe, a continent that had once been seen as inferior to that of the Arab-Muslim world.

But in the wake of scholars like Bernard Lewis, a fresh chasm was torn in our understanding of the Sephardic Jewish world. A new nomenclature of Jewish Orientalism was developed and expounded in the wake of the Cold War, a war that saw the Arab world on the wrong side of the East-West divide, and a new cadre of politically well-connected scholars, many of whom developed under the rubric of Neo-Conservatism, emerged. They began to dissect the older works, such as those of Goitein and his school, and divorce the study of Sephardic Jewish history from that of Arab-Muslim history as a whole.

Rather than treat Maimonides and Se'adya Ga'on and the repository of the Cairo Genizah within the larger continuum of Arab-Muslim culture, these scholars, most prominently Moshe Gil in his epic *A History of Palestine*, a useful but dangerous book, sought to bolster the views of Ben-Zion Dinur and his ultra-nationalist school of Zionist historiography – which now unfortunately commands the field of Jewish history, a history that now exists in painful isolation from the larger trajectory of world history. The merging of the Zionist school and the Orientalist school takes place between the covers of *The Sultan's Jew*, a book which illuminates in great detail only one part of its story.

Daniel Schroeter, a scholar with a great command of the academic tools required to interpret this very complex period, has written a deeply disappointing study which conceals perhaps as much as it illuminates. While we should be deeply concerned to be sure that the full and complete record of the Sephardic past is illuminated by scholarship, there is a sense of disingenuousness in a work that does not begin to account for the deep emotional and existential ties that Moroccan Jews have for their former homeland.

To make the argument, as Schroeter does, that Ammiel Alcalay's attempt to recontextualize Sephardic history from within a Sephardic nativist trajectory is simply an "idealistic 'counterhistory,'" is to disparage the notion of a deeper way to understand this history. Alcalay's attempt to reclaim Sephardic history from the Zionists and Imperialists does not seek to misrepresent the past, but to allow the past its own elasticity.

Insultingly, Schroeter proclaims the following regarding Alcalay's project:

In this idealistic "counterhistory," the same "Levantine" culture that was so disparaged by Israel's Ashkenazi establishment suggests the possibility of peaceful coexistence in a postnational world; interconfessional tensions and conflict are minimized, and medieval and modern history are compressed into a single, essentialized Levantine world.

I would argue that precisely the opposite is true: With the adoption by the Jewish Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis of a superior and elitist Western civilization, a civilization that statically represents a dramatic and absolute counterpoint to a failed and debased Arab civilization, the complex and deeply fractured civilization as represented by a liminal figure such as Meir Macnin as articulated by Schroeter, is itself truly the product of an essentialized and typological view of history, rather than the attempt to integrate the various strands of varying histories into something that would unify rather than fracture the many cultures of the Levantine world.

While it is true that Alcalay's attempt to deflect the intractable issues involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict might be open to debate, the idea that Sephardic history not be open to reclamation by its own denizens is utterly absurd. It is ludicrous for a Moroccan Jew to have to prove anything to validate his own historical experience. To cite a very pertinent example from the Ashkenazi standpoint, I would point out the unifying nativist insights generated by Yaffa Eliach's landmark *There Once Was a World*, a book that, in a

manner similar to Alcalay, but from a different methodological perspective, seeks to write a "counter-history," a history that would reassert the glory of an Eastern European-Jewish world outside the detritus of its racist past, a history that would narrate its story from the native perspective rather than from the perspective of the conqueror.

Thus, it is important for us come to a more balanced understanding of the world of the Sephardim. With all its faults, *The Sultan's Jew* provides us with a good deal of valuable information about a period of which very little has been written. Cultural figures are illuminated and the manner in which Moroccan Jewry evolved in the 19th century is examined. But the ultimate question of Sephardic Jewry, however, is not resolved in this book: How is it that Jews functioned in the Arab world and were able to produce a civilization that has had a beneficent impact on not only Jewish civilization, but on the culture of the West as well; What is the import, ultimately, of Sephardic Jewish history? Schroeter, in the book's introduction, promises that this book is the first stage of a larger project being undertaken with Joseph Chetrit of Haifa University. Let us hope that the subsequent stages of the project do more to develop a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the subject.

David Shasha

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