

THE JEWISH BEAUTY AND THE KING: STORY AND HISTORY

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Once upon a time there was a beautiful Jewish maiden in her bloom. One day it so happened that the king of the country saw the maiden, fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. But lo! the maiden refused: how could such an alliance take place, she being of the Jewish faith, and the king of the faith of the people of the land? But the king did not listen to the voice of reason. He granted the maiden forty-eight hours to obey his wishes or to face the consequences.

The Jewish community knew that the king's threat was meant seriously. So they fled their homestead in order to save themselves.

Is this a story of a true event, a historical account, or is it a beautiful and sad folk tale expressing in poetic images the precarious position of an ethno-religious minority living in a foreign country, at the mercy of the country's lords, small or big? If the story is an account of a real event, where and when did this event take place?

Looking through literature, ancient and medieval, and through modern recordings from the oral tradition of various Jewish communities, we soon came up with more and more stories on the same subject: relations between the lord of the land and the fair sex of their Jewish subjects. The story which we just told is a summary of such a tale told by Jews of Kerala State (Malabar Coast, India). In the following we shall discuss three such stories from oral tradition, from three Jewish communities: the so called "Cochin" Jews and the Jews in Iraq and in Yemen.

The story of the Cochin Jews

The Cochin Jews tie the theme closely to their history, as a legend of origin explaining their distribution in various settlements throughout Kerala, in which they resided till their departure for Israel (in the early 1950's). Therefore the legend is popular among them and known to everyone. Let us give here the full legend, as told by the Jews of Kerala, regarding their dispersal from their ancient settlements in and around the town of Cranganore.

The Jews had a small synagogue at Cranganore. When they became prosperous and populous they decided to pull down their old synagogue and erect in its place a large and splendid synagogue. When the new synagogue was being built, Eliavu annabi appeared to them and told them the new synagogue would be destroyed within ninety years. This prophecy was proved true and it happened in the following way:

There was a wealthy Jewish widow known as Kadavath Achi ("the lady of the riverside"), about whom a song is still sung by elderly Jewish women:

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“Paloor kadalariiki
Parthala Kadavath Achi.”

That means: “By the side of the Paloor Bay lived Kadavath Achi.” She had a beautiful daughter. One day the king happened to see her and he wanted her in his harem. But she refused. This affront to his authority enraged the king and he gave the girl forty-eight hours to obey his orders or face the consequences. The community knew that this was not a vain threat. So they fled carrying with them what they could, including the two Tora-scrolls from the synagogue. As they fled, each of them carried a handful of earth from the place of their ancient settlement. It is said that what is known in Cranganore as Joothakkulam (the Jews' Pit) was formed in this manner.

The Jews crossed a small river to the east of Cranganore and reached Thuruthipuram and hid themselves among the reeds. From there they could see their synagogue go up in flames. From their hiding place they dispersed in small groups to Chennamangalam, Parur, Cochin, Multam, Ernakulam, etc., where they lived in comparative obscurity, avoiding Cranganore. Even if they had to go to Cranganore on business, they would not stay there overnight but would hasten away before nightfall.¹

Comment: Although no historical documentation is available, the period of Jewish settlement in Cranganore must have been a long one, as their attachment to the place is great. The residency in Cranganore is remembered to this day; the town is even called “Jerusalem of the East”, and Jews used to put a handful of dust from Cranganore into the graves of their deceased. A similar custom was known among Jews everywhere: dust from Israel, the Holy Land, was placed under the head of the deceased to ensure his being among the first to rise from the dead on the Day of Judgement.

Cranganore, being for centuries the main port of entrance to Kerala and to all of South India, harbored many foreigners, among them a small Jewish community. With the silting of the river mouth, the harbor shifted to Cochin, and with it the population seeking a livelihood. The small Jewish community consisted of permanent settlers and of visiting merchants from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Egypt; in the sixteenth century a group of Jews from Portugal joined the community, seeking refuge from persecution. After the departure from Cranganore the Jews dispersed throughout Kerala; since the sixteenth century the principal community has resided in a town of Cochin and small groups are known to have settled at various times in the small localities surrounding it. In this century the Cochin Jews numbered about four thousand, most of whom moved to Israel.

Eliavu annabi or Elijahu ha-navi is Elijah the Prophet, known from the Biblical record (1 Kings 17-19, 2 Kings 2). Since the early Middle Ages, Elijah was believed not to have died but to be wandering on Earth to help the righteous and punish the wicked. In Moslem tradition Elijah is identified with the Prophet al-Khadir, “the green one” (Koran, Sura 18:59-81).

¹ The story was written down from the narration of Cochin Jews in Cochin, in 1981, by P. M. Jussay. For general information about the Jews of India, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem 1971), s.v. India and Cochin.

The story from Iraq

To the Jews of Iraq the story describes a chance incident, told about a well-known family, which, however prominent, is only a simple family in a single small provincial community. Accordingly, we find the tale to be known just to the members of this one provincial community. The story goes as follows:

Why did the family al-Ghaliz leave [the town of] Ana?

Y.: Tell me the story about the family al-Ghaliz, who lived in Ana and later moved to Baghdad.

G.: The lands of al-Ghaliz and al-Khaig were located next to each other. Joseph al-Ghaliz was living next to the garden which is now known as Bait-al-Ghaliz ("House of al-Ghaliz"). And he was great in the eyes of the authorities and the leader of the Jewish community. And the [whole farm] of al-Khaig was at his disposal and he was tilling the land, and also in al-Kharza and the garden was full of fig trees and vine and date palms and was so thick that one could catch a pigeon in it ².

One day he invited the notables [of the town], that is, really, they invited themselves. He showed them much respect, honored them, and as they were merry-making and passing the time in his guest-room which was all of glass, he [the district governor] looks through the window and the eye of the governor caught the eyes of Farha, daughter of Joseph al-Ghaliz. The governor said to Joseph al-Ghaliz; "I am not leaving this place until you betroth your daughter to me, for I desire her. I want her, or blood will flow! Betroth her to me!" Joseph asked for forty days time [to prepare the wedding].

Joseph brought carpenters to the basement [of his house], that means, to the lower rooms, and was building boats for his family and relatives and for his property and he took them out by the way of the River [Euphrates]. Joseph stayed behind himself, and as the fortieth day approached, he plucked figs and put them on trays³, placed the trays on the carpets, prepared coffee in the lit oven and placed it also in the guest-room. He brought pigeons, half of them he placed beneath the basket as they were and he plucked the feathers from the other half and placed them under another basket. Leaving the house ready for the reception of guests, he mounted his horse and ran away late at night.

The governor⁴ brought with him all the notables of the town, the *kaimakam* (officer) and his assistants, and all the big ones, all of them mounted on horses. When they arrived they found out that "the soil was covered with dust and their goal was far away"⁵. They entered the house and saw the figs on the trays, the coffee ready. When they lifted the baskets, half of the pigeons flew away — those which had their feathers on — and half stayed on the floor — those whose feathers were plucked. Joseph al-Ghaliz wanted to say to

² "...one could catch a pigeon in it": the garden was so full of trees that in the thicket not even a bird as small as a pigeon could stretch out its wings to fly away from the hunter.

³ "He... placed figs on the trays": figs are an expensive entertainment, fit for rich people.

⁴ "Governor": the Ottoman official in charge; what is now Iraq was part of the Ottoman empire from the sixteenth century until World War I.

⁵ "The soil was covered with the dust and their goal was far away": phrase indicating that the one you were expected to meet has moved away. The image is taken from the nomadic way of life, still practised in some parts of Iraq, and well-known from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (see Nicholson 1907).

them: those who have no feathers , that means, who have no means, cannot fly away, meaning run away; those who had feathers could fly away.

When the governor saw that, he sung a lament:
"They went away and left the figs laid out on the trays,
They went away and left the coffee boiling,
They went and the spices are on the carpets,
They went and left the figs on the trays.
Farha came to visit us
And the *kohl*⁶ is on her eyes;
We found none like Farha,
In the whole town there is none like her.
Farha and her sister came to visit us;
She is adorned with gold jewelry.
Let the boats which carry her
Be drowned in the sea and be gone!
How did my eye look into her eye!"

The governor ordered a pursuit, partly in boats by the way of the River and partly by riders on horseback through the desert. They pursued them till Faluga, did not see anybody and turned back to Ana.

Y.: Didn't you hear this story told about the family Ma'atuq? So it is told in books.

G.: No. I have not heard. The old woman who used to tell this story and many other things, and my grandmother Salha did not mention [it] but only about the family of Joseph al-Ghaliz.⁷

Comment: Ana is located in Iraq on the river Euphrates near the Syrian border; it now has about 15,000 inhabitants. In the past the main caravan route from Aleppo to Baghdad went through Ana and the town harbored a relatively large Jewish community. Since the seventeenth century the population started to move out to Syrian towns and to Baghdad. In 1920 the Jewish community numbered 400. Our story describes such a migration of a prominent family, and pictures the — real or imagined — reasons for the move.

The story from Yemen

With the Jews of Yemen the theme passes from the realistic into the realm of the fantastic and at the same time centers on a major figure who symbolizes the Jewish community vs. the Moslem co-territorial majority of the country. The latter is represented by its king. The conflict is solved in a rather dramatic and tragic way. Let us hear the story of the marriage of Sham'a, Mora Shalem Shabazi's daughter:

⁶ "Kohl": antimonial powder for darkening the eyelids.

⁷ The story has been tape-recorded in Israel in 1979 by Y. Avishur, himself born in Ana, Iraq (on Ana, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem 1971), vol. 8:1450, vol. 16:1537). The narrator was Y. Avishur's mother, Gurjia, also born in Ana. The tale was recorded in a Judeo-Arabic dialect of Iraq and translated by Y. Avishur. "Y": recorder; "G": narrator.

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Y. Avishur, H. Jason & P. Jussay, "The Jewish Beauty"

The king of Yemen very much liked Shabazi, who was a great sage. One day he said to Shabazi: "Give me your daughter, I want to marry her to my son."

"But, my lord and king! That is impossible! They are not of the same religion."

"Never mind, I want to have your daughter anyway."

"But, my lord and king! That can never be!"

"What do you mean 'cannot be?! Who are you, anyway?! Do you dare to think yourself holier and purer than me??"

"No, God forbid! I have no such assumptions. But there are three differences between us: circumcision, the Sabath and marriage. Therefore it is impossible."

But the king did not want to hear. When Shabazi saw that he had no way out, he decided to sacrifice his daughter. — It is better for her to die — he thought. Then he went home and prepared everything for the wedding, took his daughter, dressed her in white shrouds instead of a wedding dress, and he himself went with the wedding procession singing dirges for the dead. But he sang them as wedding songs are sung, with a tune so that people should not notice. And the dirges and laments, these he sang with all his heart, as nobody had ever before sung such songs!

Thus the wedding procession walked until the procession of the groom came to meet it. The very moment the two processions met, the bride fell down dead.

"What did you do?!!!" called the king.

"Nothing, o my lord and king! It came from God. Didn't I tell you 'it is impossible for them to marry'? They are children of different religions."

Now the king was very sorry for what he had done. He asked Shabazi's pardon and heaped still more honors upon him.⁸

Comment: The Jewish community in Yemen in this century has been variously estimated to number fifty to a hundred thousand. The legend tells of their arrival in Yemen in the days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as reported in the Bible (1 Kings 9:26-28, 10), i.e., about 10th/9th centuries B.C. During recent centuries the community lived in great poverty and suffered much from persecution. The persecutions are well-known during the seventeenth century, the lifetime of Shalem Shabazi of our story. Today, most of the Jews have left Yemen for Israel.

In the stories Shalem Shabazi bears the title of *mori* (an ancient Aramaic address: "my lord"). The *mori* was the spiritual and religious leader of his community, he administrated the religious law and gave religious instruction to his flock. In Yemen, this was an honorary duty. *Mori* Shalem Shabazi is the hero of many folk legends and novellae, well-known to everybody. He gained fame as the principal Jewish poet in Yemen. His poems, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, completely replaced folk songs among the Jewish men in Yemen (women sing their own songs in Arabic — see Gamelieli, 1979). In many Jewish stories from Yemen Shabazi is pitched against the "king of Yemen", both being believed by the narrators to be expert

⁸ The story has been manually recorded in Israel, in 1958 by H. Jason from Yefet Shvili, born in southern Yemen (1919). His repertoire of tales (over 200) and biography were published in Noy, 1963. The text is here translated by H. Jason; it is filed as manuscript IFA 837 in the Israel's Folktales Archives (Haifa University, Haifa, Israel). A German translation of this tale is published in Noy, 1963, n° 158. For general information about Jews in Yemen, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem 1978) s.v. Yemen. About Sh. Shabazi, see *ibidem*, vol. 14:1205.

magicians. According to what is known about Jewish history in Yemen, it is quite unlikely that Shabazi ever came into the presence of the ruler of Yemen (the imam).

The ruler of Yemen, being the ruler of the entire country, which is surrounded by deserts and sea, Shabazi had nowhere to escape for safety from the ruler's oppression, as the heroes of the above Kerala and Iraqi stories could. The only way of defense for a Jew in Yemen was to resort to magic means, i.e., to seek refuge in fantasy.

Our stories are of two genres: the novellae and the legend⁹. The story from Iraq is a wisdom novella in which the clever hero escapes his oppressor by a ruse. The tale from Kerala is composed from two sections: a sacred legend about the prophecy of the synagogue's destruction and the fulfilment of this prophecy; and a wisdom novella about the persecution of the Jewish community which (in the role of the clever hero) succeeds in escaping from its persecutor.

The story from Yemen is a legend from magic: Shabazi acts upon his own decision and uses his own sacred powers to achieve his goal. He does not pray to ask God to let the girl die, but acts on his own, i.e., he uses his powers of (white) magic (the so-called "practical kabbala"). It is not clear from the text what was the opinion of the girl in the text. If she is supposed to have willingly chosen to die, we have a clear "martyr tale". In a number of versions of the theme of threatened inter-marriage, the attacked would-be partner is explicitly said to have voluntarily chosen to die in order to escape the misalliance; the victim is not necessarily always a woman (see, for instance, the Joseph story in Genesis 39). That gives a clear-cut martyr tale. In our tale the girl does not act; she is more or less treated as an object. Her father acts instead and can be considered a martyr, as it is he who consciously sacrifices his highest value (his child).

A martyr tale may be of the wisdom novella sub-genre: hero demonstrates his high moral qualities by his sacrifice. Or it may be of the sacred legend sub-genre, in cases where the victim is supposed to have attained heavenly bliss by his sacrifice. In our tale the martyr employs means he received from the sacred power to accomplish his sacrifice (this means he is supposed to have earned by his virtuous way of life before the story starts). The use of this means puts our story into the framework of the sacred legend (the legend of "white" magic being a sub-division of the sacred legend). Both

⁹ For the description of the system of genres employed here and for their definitions, see Jason, 1975, chpt. 4; 1977; 1978; bodies of folk tales analysed according to this scheme, see in Jason, 1988 and 1989.

kinds of martyr tale end on basically a pessimistic note. As the Jewish folk tale is usually optimistic, the martyr tale is rarely found; our tale-type is the only instance found to date.¹⁰

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In all versions of the theme the events in the story are supposed to influence in some measure the fate of the whole Jewish community. As to the gentile co-territorial people, the tale-events are not thought to have any influence on their fate. Accordingly, we find that the Jewish people — the narrator's "we" — are pictured in greater detail. We see the whole community acting, its rabbis, prominent families, as well as rank-and-file members. The Jewish characters are identified by names or at least nick-names. The Jewish part of the ill-fated couple is surrounded by the girl's family. In contrast, the Gentile side — the narrator's "they" — is pictured much more sparingly. We find rulers on various levels: king, local notable; the ruler stands alone, his family, retinue or people do not play an active role in the story. The same applies to the description of the ill-fated couple involved. The qualities of the Jewish girl are described: beauty, good and prominent family. The Gentile partner is only designated as ruler and nothing more is said about him, his looks or other qualities; he is not even named, but is anonymous, thus acquiring a symbolic value as the representative of his side, the world of "them".

In the Kerala version the events directly determine the fate of the community: it has to leave its homestead and move to another place, or face persecution. The Yemenite version implies that a refusal by Shabazi to give his daughter to the king will result in the king's molesting the whole Jewish community living in Yemen, Shabazi being the leader. The Iraqi version has a more restricted, local character due to the territory of the involved ruler being restricted to the local level. However, here too, the ruler is all-powerful and able to force his will upon his Jewish subjects. He threatens bloodshed and the respective Jewish family can only avoid giving their daughter to the ruler by abandoning its homestead and flee.

The Kerala and Iraqi versions have a realistic and historical (really, quasi-historical) character. The Yemenite tale has a fabulous character and employs magic, bringing about the Jewish bride's miraculous death, "worked by God". Time and space dimensions are not indicated in this tale. It is

¹⁰ The tale-type of the martyred heroine has no type number yet. For other versions, in which the Jewish would-be-bride dies voluntarily, or even upon her own initiative, see oral and written texts in Elbaz, 1982, n°44, pp. 156-162, from Morocco; in Jason, 1985, n° 19 from East Europe, n°s 20 and 25 from Morocco, n°s 23 and 24 from Iraqi Kurdistan and n° 27 from Yemen (our tale); see also below, note 11.

known that Shabazi lived in the seventeenth century but the narrator does not know of such exact dates. For him Shabazi lived “some time after the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E., by the Romans)” and before “recent times”. The identity of the king involved is never stated, it is the king of Yemen.

The Kerala version is well placed in real geographical space, in localities well known to the narrators and their audience from personal experience. It lacks any relation to time: when did the narrated events happen? Ages ago, or just recently? We are only told that the synagogue stood for ninety years — but in which century? Who is the king involved, when did he reign and how large was his domain? We hear only that his power reached from Cranganore to a certain river, on the other side of which the Jews were safe.

The story from Iraq is well placed in both time and space. Although no written documentation on the family al-Ghaliz has been discovered, the family seems to have existed, as a certain well-known estate is named after them. The temporal framework of which our narrators are aware is the time of the Ottoman rule. This is known to have lasted for several centuries, and elderly people still remember it. That makes the temporal location rather concrete — “sometime during the Ottoman rule” — and not as vague as in the other two stories.

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To return to the question posed at the beginning of our discussion about the historicity of the tales: we may conclude that caution is advisable. While the movement of the population and of specific families from Ana to Baghdad is documented (see Ben Yaaqov, 1979: 94, esp. the notes), the reason for the moves as given in our tale is not documented. While it is a fact that Jews were living in Cranganore once, but moved from there at some point in time, the reason for this move as given in the tale is not documented. The story from Yemen has even no claims to real historicity. Therefore, additional, independent documentary evidence is necessary before we can consider folk tales of this kind as reports of historical events. It seems that, rather than being historical reports, such folk tales reflect general conditions of life of the Jews prior to the establishment of the State of Israel: they were an ethno-religious minority living in small communities, more or less at the mercy of the bigger and more powerful Gentile co-territorial population, always ready to pack and flee for safety. In this context, the basic theme of the stories discussed here seems to be the problems of ethnic identity and group cohesion. These problems are worked out through the question of intermarriage with people from other ethno-religious groups. These “other”

groups being of the country's majority living groups, a marrying into such a group should have been of obvious practical advantage to the minority group. Yet, it is absolutely rejected by our stories, even to the point of preferring death, i.e., the final cessation of individual existence (Judaism does not hold the belief in rebirth). This is the price to be paid to keep up the integrity of the group as a social unit: the group's identity can be maintained when no inter-marriage obscures it.¹¹

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Our tale is, however, not confined to Jewish society. A Druze story follows closely the first part of our story from Iraq: the Ottoman governor of Syria visits the chief of the Druze and chances to see the chief's daughter. He asks for her hand. The reaction of the Druze is diametrically opposed to the reaction of the Jewish family: the Druze are a warlike people and answer with war. They are defeated; the story does not tell what happens to the girl. This story belongs to the genre of epic (see text in Falah and Shenhar, 1978, n° 9; analysis, see Jason, 1985, n° 32).

Another version of the tale comes from South India. Beautiful Kanyaka, daughter of the Komati leader (a caste of traders), is desired by the king, who saw her when visiting the city. The king is of another caste and thus the marriage is polluting. Kanyaka, on her own initiative, escapes marriage by committing suicide: she burns herself and induces all the elders of the caste to follow her into the flames (summary: Rao, 1986: 186-187). The story is a sacred legend about an extremely virtuous girl; her reward is to be thereafter worshipped by the people of her caste as a goddess. The story is versified and sung as part of the caste's religious rituals. It serves as a "charter" (in Malinowski's, 1926, sense) for the Komati caste and is used to enhance the status of the caste in the local hierarchy of castes.

Thus, our story can serve minorities in various social orders and situations to further internal social cohesion of the sub-group which carries it.

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¹¹ For a description of the narrative and semantic patterns and their inversions in this kind of tale, see Jason, 1985. There, 31 Jewish tales are analysed, of them 12 Biblical stories, 6 Hellenistic and midrashic stories, 3 literary variants from the chapbook literature and 10 modern recordings from older literature. The three texts brought here in full are listed as n°s. 27, 30 and 31 in the quoted paper. For a description of Jewish folk and oral literature and its sources, see Jason, 1978 to 1980.

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RESUMO

São discutidas três versões de um conto popular judeu sobre um tirano que exige, para o seu harém, uma donzela judia, originárias da Índia (recolha de P. Jussay), do Iraque (recolha de Y. Avishur) e do Yemen (recolha de H. Jason). A história está difundida: dela se encontram versões desde a Antiguidade até ao passado recente. Os textos não narram acontecimentos com uma realidade histórica específica, mas exprimem, num quadro poético, a opressão sofrida por minorias etno-religiosas sob regimes despóticos.