

Zbyněk Tarant

Interview with Professor Meir Bar-Asher

I would first like to ask about your childhood and your background. You were born in Morocco. Do you have any early memories from there?

Yes, I was born in Morocco, but my family emigrated to Israel when I was just six months old. I was the eighth of nine siblings and the last to be born in Morocco. My younger sister, who sadly passed away four years ago, was born in Israel. Although I had no first-hand experience of living in Morocco, I did have a distinctively Israeli-Moroccan childhood. By that I mean both the Moroccan heritage that came with us in our daily family life, and the Moroccan dialect I grew up with. When my family came to Israel, we lived in the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Musrara – just a ten-minute walk from the Old City’s Damascus Gate – which at the time housed immigrant Jewish families, most of them (about 70 per cent) from North Africa, and mainly from Morocco; about 20 per cent had come from Iraq and smaller groups from Eastern Europe, especially Romania and Poland. So I found myself chatting with the other children in the Moroccan dialect because, like me, they were all from immigrant families whose Hebrew was “under construction” and rather basic. Our Hebrew was very much influenced – in terms of syntax and vocabulary – by the Arabic we spoke. To this day my mother still speaks a hybrid language consisting of our native Moroccan dialect and the Hebrew we gradually acquired in Israel.

What made a child of Moroccan Jews study Arabic and Shiite Islam?

In addition to the Moroccan aspect of my childhood, there was something else that had a determining effect on my life. This was the fact that the Jerusalem neighbourhood I lived in, Musrara, was located on the border between Israel and the kingdom of Jordan. After Israel's 1948 War of Independence, Musrara had found itself divided in two: the western part of the neighbourhood was Israeli, while the eastern part was under Jordanian rule. I was twelve years old when all of a sudden, at the end of the '67 war between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries, the borders opened. It was like the Berlin Wall coming down. All at once, we saw the other half of our own neighbourhood. As a curious youngster I was enormously interested in getting to know the other culture. Wanting to know the other has always been a part of my nature, but I think it is also the result of my upbringing. My father used to tell me that in Morocco he was always keen to learn about his Muslim neighbours and had close contact with them, discussing religion and many other issues. This encouraged my own curiosity and I was very keen to master the Arabic language. My native Arabic dialect was a good basis to start from, giving me the foundations of vocabulary and structure. The advantage I had was rather like that of a Yiddish-speaker who wants to learn German, or someone fluent in Slovak or Czech who wants to learn Russian. Since Arabic was not on the high school curriculum – it would only be added a few years later – I had to study on my own after school. I used to devote endless hours to this and gradually became thoroughly immersed in the Arabic language. I love it immensely.

You were talking about schools and learning. Did you have teachers who influenced your development and whom you would like to mention?

Before I talk about teachers, I would like to mention those who first helped me to make progress in Arabic, mainly the Palestinian dialect of Jerusalem. As a teenager I would regularly walk across to the eastern, Arabic-speaking part of the city, wanting to make new acquaintances. I had some very good friends among the Palestinian Arabs of East Jerusalem. I don't remember all their names, but there are two who come to mind: Sham'un Abu Anton, an Arab Christian, and Nader Sa'id Muna. The latter was about my age, maybe a year older. We spent a lot of time together and this significantly contributed to my command of colloquial Arabic. (In the winter of 1973, a few months after I last saw him, I found out quite by chance that Nader had been killed in an explosion in a Ramallah cemetery, in the West Bank. The details remained unknown to me until, on meeting a mutual acquaintance, I discovered that Nader had been recruited into the PLO a short time after starting university in Jordan, having failed to gain admission to Israel's Technion. After undergoing some arms training he had been sent to the West Bank and had been killed in an accident during the preparation of explosives. The circumstances of his death did not blur the memories I still

have of a wonderful friendship during our high school years, each of us in a different part of the city and in the school system of two different countries).

A few years later, when I started my studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I met some of Israel's leading Arabists. The Department of Arabic at the Hebrew University was – and still is – considered one of the best in the world. Its faculty had some extraordinary scholars, most of them immigrants from various European countries. Some had arrived long before the State's founding in 1948. These luminaries included such figures as Professor Joshua Blau, now 92 years old and still very active in his research – one of the seminal, outstanding scholars, with an international reputation in the field of Arabic years at the department of Arabic. Professor Blau is of Hungarian origin; he studied in Budapest and later on in Vienna. Others Professors whom I have had the honour to study with are Yohanan Friedmann, originally from Slovakia, who was my teacher for classical Arabic and Pessah Shinar to whom I owe a great deal. Professor Shinar who was born in Latvia is an expert in the Islam of North Africa. Professor Shinar (now 98 years old) is a true polyglot, with a perfect mastery of many languages, both classical – such as Greek, Latin, Arabic and Persian – and modern. His Arabic is impeccable and he inspired me greatly. In addition there are two outstanding teachers to whom I am indebted. One is Professor Haggai Ben-Shammai who is currently President of the Society for Judeo-Arabic Studies. He is a world expert on what is called Judeo-Arabic culture, which I will explain in a moment. His specific expertise is medieval Jewish thought and biblical exegesis; he has also contributed extensively to the study of Muslim theology and Quranic exegesis. I spoke on the subject of Judeo-Arabic culture during my lecture at the University of West Bohemia earlier this month. Judeo-Arabic is a language that has been used by Jews for more than a millennium, ever since the 9th century, and several great works by eminent Jewish scholars were composed in Judeo-Arabic, such as *The Book on Beliefs and Opinions* by Saadia Gaon, the 10th-century theologian, Bible translator and exegete; *The Book of Kuzari* by Yehuda Halevi, and *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides. Professor Ben-Shammai is one of the leading scholars on the Cairo Geniza, the famous collection of old Jewish manuscripts found in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo. I regard him as one of my most inspiring teachers. Later, when I was his vice-director at the Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish History in the East, we became very close friends. The other great scholar who inspired me immensely is Professor Etan Kohlberg, one of the leading authorities in the field of Shiite studies. I was initially working on Muslim philosophy and my MA thesis was concerned with the ethics of Abu Bakr al-Razi (late 9th-early 10th century), the renowned physician and philosopher. After completing the thesis under the supervision of Professor Shlomo Pines, I eventually decided to switch to the study of Shiism. My desire to work with Professor Kohlberg, who deeply impressed me during a course I took with him while still a BA student, played a major role in my decision. Under his supervision, I wrote my PhD dissertation on Shiite Quranic exegesis. A revised version of my dissertation (*Scripture and*

Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism) was published in 1999 by Brill, Leiden, and Magnes Publishing House, Jerusalem. These are the professors to whom I am especially grateful, for their wisdom and erudition, but also for their warmth and kindness.

Is it hard to deal with Muslim topics, to teach them and talk about them on the campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem?

These are subjects I often speak on – at colloquiums, in courses organised for high-school teachers, and in many other frameworks. I do my best to be as accurate as possible, that is, to present the texts I deal with exactly as they are, with no attempt to embellish or denigrate them. However these texts do sometimes affect their readers. For example, when you see what the Quran says about the Jews, you cannot remain indifferent. Frequently, Quranic statements regarding the Jews are used as a source of inspiration for radical Muslim documents such as the Covenant of Hamas. These sources are very much alive in the hearts of believers. I try my best to keep a balanced attitude in presenting these materials. When my students comment: “What Islam says about the other is really terrible”, I remind them that it should be seen in perspective and compared with our own culture. If we look at our own scriptures, we see that they also contain all kinds of statements concerning the other. Some of them are moderate and peaceful, but some awful things can be quoted from the Bible or the Talmud. We should not read them out of context. If we use them to influence our lives in a negative way, it is terrible. But we can also use the material to improve our human attitude towards the other, and then it can be something positive.

What I really liked about your lectures is that they were so open-minded. It was very nice to hear lectures by an Israeli professor that were truly fair to the Muslims, even though there are so many appalling things going on.

Thank you. It is indeed very rewarding for me when I finish a lecture and someone whom I appreciate, like you, offers such a comment. Before coming here, I delivered a parallel series of lectures in Stockholm. There were many students from Eastern Europe – Moldavia, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and also from Germany. Two of these students were Shiite Muslims from Azerbaijan and one of them said something astonishing. He told me: “I feel very uncomfortable with surah 9 in the Quran. I would recommend that Muslims remove it from the scriptures.” I told him: “Nothing should be removed from the Quran. One should deal with the material as it is. Don’t feel embarrassed. I can show you things in the Bible that we should likewise feel uncomfortable with, as when the Israelites are commanded to exterminate the people of Canaan.” These are things I can’t identify with, but still they are there. I take them in their context, but I don’t want them to influence my attitude towards the other. So, I don’t think anyone has to eliminate surah 9.

What do you think a Jewish scholar can tell Muslims about their own traditions? You have already mentioned some responses you received from Muslims. Have you experienced

other instances of interesting feedback from Shiite Muslims who attended your lectures or read your works?

Some chapters of my book on Shiite exegesis have been translated into Persian and published in Iran. I have had feedback from a number of Iranian scholars and students who wrote to me from Qom, Mashhad and Tehran, always via Yahoo! and other anonymous e-mail addresses, and they asked me questions and expressed their appreciation of my work. It is not only me – an entire book by Professor Etan Kohlberg on Ibn Tawus, an eminent 13th-century Shiite scholar, has been translated into Persian. From time to time, I also receive very warm and encouraging responses from people directly. I can share one example with you. A few months ago, I delivered a lecture on the Quran at the National Library in Jerusalem, one of a series of lectures held there. Among those invited was an Imam from Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa mosque, which as you know is one of the holiest shrines in Islam. I was surprised to learn he was coming, and said I would not believe it until I saw him. But he did indeed appear and performed an excellent recitation of the Quran, exactly as he does in the mosque, before an audience of some two hundred people. Then I delivered my paper on the Quran. When I had finished, he came and embraced me, and said: “You have done a very respectful service not only to scholarship, but also to Islam.” When I asked him what he meant, he replied: “You did not hide anything, everything was said, but you did it in a very respectful way towards us Muslims.”

That’s a really encouraging experience. I expect you have Muslim students as well – what is their response to your work?

I have many Muslim students in my courses, especially for the introduction to Islamic civilization. At the very beginning, when they first come to the university and hear a Jew speaking about Islam, the Quran and the Hadith, they are very suspicious. “This Jewish guy, what is he going to tell us about our religion? How is he going to distort it?” Then the course proceeds and after three or four sessions the students have complete confidence in us. Why? First of all, they discover that my colleagues and I are reliable scholars, and that everything we say is based on the texts, well presented and well analysed, with a lot of respect for the material. Even when we deal with delicate or problematic issues, we do our best to present things properly. The attitude of the students gradually changes due to this personal contact. When you have a semester course of twenty-eight meetings, you can build your argumentation gradually. If you are honest in your attitude, people will feel that you are doing your job correctly and in good faith.

You have already mentioned one of your most important works, on the Shiite exegesis of the Quran. Can you tell us something about it? To what extent is the Shiite reading of scriptures different from the Sunni reading?

I had always been curious to know more about Shiite Islam and its attitude to Sunni Islam. Since the Quran plays a major role in the life of both groups and has been at the

centre of the polemics between them, I decided to study the question thoroughly and chose it as the topic of my PhD dissertation. There were significant shifts in the attitude of Shiite Islam to the Quran throughout the history of Shiism. At the very beginning and up to the 10th century, the attitude was very critical. Shiites accused their Sunni rivals of falsifying the Quran, in much the same way as Islam claimed Jews and Christians were guilty of the distortion (*tahrif*) of their holy scriptures. Here we can see a continuous trend running through Islamic history: at first Islam conducted polemics against other religions, but later part of these debates turned into an inter-Islam conflict. Shiites claimed that the text of the Quran was not identical to the text originally revealed to Muhammad, and that the Sunnis had been motivated by their anti-Ali attitude to remove verses which, it was claimed, mentioned Ali and his merits, and made him and his descendants the sole legitimate heirs to Muhammad. In their own exegesis, the Shiites enumerated several places in which the “original” Quran was said to differ from the present version. However, in the later stages of its history Shiism moderated its views on this and on other topics following certain socio-political changes in Shiite history. We cannot go into detail here, but to put it simply, Shiism began to assume a key position in the political arena. This happened notably in the 10th century, which came to be known among scholars as the “Shiite century.” Shiism had become prominent in various parts of the Muslim world and was about to achieve complete dominance, but then the situation changed again and power reverted to the Sunnis. In the meantime, however, there had been a substantial moderation in the attitude of the Shia towards the Sunna, and Shiites did not voice their opinions openly. Shiism developed the doctrine of *taqiyya*, a term that can be roughly rendered as “precautionary dissimulation”, whereby the Shiite believer is advised – at times it is even considered a religious commandment – to conceal his true beliefs and to share them only with members of his group. There are just a few legal questions on which one finds a divergence between Shiite and Sunni views, but we do not have time to go into the details.

There are many instances when the Quran speaks to or about the Jews. How should a Jew read and understand these sections? In some of them the language is very harsh...

It's true, some of them do speak very harshly, as in the verses we have already mentioned – dealing with the *jizya* (poll tax) and the way it should be collected from the Jews – or the verse that states: “wretchedness has been decreed on them [i.e. the Jews]”, and many others... these are very difficult verses to come to terms with. When I speak to Jewish audiences who often feel offended by such Quranic statements, I explain that polemics, in the Middle Ages and to a certain extent also in later periods, was a tool for expressing your attitude towards the other. Life did not always follow the text. In spite of the fact that there were very severe attitudes expressed in the scriptures, we know that at certain periods and in certain places, there were good,

even excellent relationships between Jews and Muslims. Does that mean the Muslims were not aware of these texts? No, they were certainly aware of them, but they opted to overlook some of them. I often tell my students: you will see that when the Muslim authorities are asked how to deal with the Jews and Christians, even though they know everything that is written in the Quran, their answer depends on the political circumstances of the day. Of course, if we want to improve matters, it's not the texts that we should change – we cannot change them. But if we bring about changes in the political arena, our human attitude towards the other may change, and his towards us. Then we will be able either to overlook the problematic passages or to interpret them in more favourable ways. Just to give to you an example: when President Anwar Sadat was preparing to sign the peace treaty with Israel, he of course wanted to receive a *fatwa* (a religious opinion or decree) on this from a religious authority at al-Azhar University, the religious heart of Sunni Islam. Many religious experts opposed the peace process and cited verses from the Quran supporting their views. However, the mufti of al-Azhar found other relevant verses as well as post-Quranic sources to support Sadat's desire to achieve peace with Israel. So I think that sometimes one can take advantage of the fact that there are divergences. The Quran – like the scriptures of other religions – does not always speak with one voice. It gives religious authorities an opportunity to find a way between these contradictory statements and to emphasize the one that is relevant to the situation.

Is there any difference between the Shiites and the Sunnis in their reading of these polemic verses about the Jews?

I would say that, generally speaking, the attitude of the two groups is more or less similar, being based on the same texts. Both share the Quran and the Hadith, and despite their criticism of the Quran, the Shiites nevertheless accept its integrity. So opinions are much the same, except on some issues where there are divergences. During my seminar in Plzen, we discussed the question of the Shiite attitude towards the other: Jew, Christian or Zoroastrian. It is less lenient and more radical than that of Sunni Islam. This is based on the interpretation of a key verse in the Quran, surah 9 (which, as we have noted, has some very harsh statements on Jews and Christians), verse 28: "Verily, the polytheists are impure". The question is whether Jews and Christians are also polytheist, *mushrikūn*. The prevalent attitude among the Shiites, in contrast to the Sunnis, is that Jews and Christians are included in the definition of *mushrikūn* and are therefore, according to this verse, unclean. This has serious practical implications, more severe than in Sunni Islam. It is forbidden to marry Jewish and Christian women, and you cannot eat anything that has been cooked by them or the meat of an animal slaughtered by them, even if they pronounced the name of God while slaughtering it. But to be absolutely fair, even in Shiism there are exceptions. Some leading authorities are critical of these Shiite attitudes and say they should be

rejected. In my lectures, I gave the example of the recently deceased Husayn Fadlallah, a great leader of the Shia community and a source of inspiration for Hizbullah, especially in Lebanon, who was critical of this radical interpretation. Also, as I mentioned in my paper, it is the Shiites, and not the Sunnis, who have an altogether unexpected and rather exceptional attitude towards the Children of Israel: they see the biblical Israelites as their prototypes, and wherever the Quran mentions the Children of Israel this is taken as a reference to the Shiites.

I think some compassion may spring from the fact that the Shiites probably know what it means to be a religious minority.

Absolutely. The Shiites, like the Jews, have been a persecuted minority for most of their history. But in the history of the Jews there were also episodes when they managed to break free from oppression and enjoy some freedom, as with the exodus from Egypt, or the period of the return from Babylonian exile – such examples have indeed been used by the Shiites as a source of inspiration.

For my last question I would like to ask about your plans for the future. Do you have some ideas for further research?

I have just finished a book with my friend and colleague Professor Aryeh Kofsky from the University of Haifa in Israel. It is a critical edition of a theological treatise by the 11th-century Nusayri theologian Abu I-Qasim al-Tabarani. The book is due out soon, from Peeters publishing house in Belgium. After this, I would very much like to write a book on the Shiite exegesis of the Quran, following on my previous book on the same subject. This time my plan is to cover Shiite groups other than the Twelvers, the focus of my previous study. Apart from that, I of course have many commitments to my university. When I return to Israel after my sabbatical in Europe and Morocco, I will again have to take on the position of department head and there will be other responsibilities awaiting me.

Professor Bar-Asher, thank you very much for this interview.