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Ben Gidley | “Cousin Trouble: Jewish and Muslim Ideas of the Other”

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Judaism and Islam are in many ways the closest of cousins. Sharing a rigorously monotheistic faith as articulated by a shared canon of prophets in related Semitic tongues, tracing their common origins to the patriarch Abraham, their destinies have been inextricably intertwined. In dispersal in western countries such as Britain or France, Jews and Muslims have together occupied the ambiguous position of being constructed as both “ethnic communities” and “faith communities” at odds with their normatively Christian wider societies; both have suffered forms of racism and persecution, been accused of dual loyalties, condemned for refusing to integrate, stereotyped as terrorists.

The kinship of Judaism and Islam is most concisely evoked (and it has become clichéd to do so) in the ~~bear~~near-homonymy of the Hebrew and Arabic words for peace: shalom and salaam. And yet, today more than ever, Jews and Muslims live largely in a state of enmity, characterised by mutual distrust. Hearing more about each other than perhaps ever before, it seems that Jews and Muslims might *know* less about each other than at any time in their histories. There is widespread Islamophobia amongst Jews, widespread antisemitism amongst Muslims. Arguably, though, it is not each other that they fear, but the *idea* of the other. How do these ideas form? This article looks at this question, focusing especially on the Jewish idea – or, rather, ideas – of Islam.

Intertwining lives and the catastrophe of partition

A century ago, a significant proportion of the global Jewish population lived amongst Muslims, either in Muslim lands under Muslim governance or side by side under British or French colonial rule. Around a third of a million lived in Turkey, and another third of a million in North Africa. There were also sizeable communities in Persia, one of the oldest sites of Jewish life, in the Arabian peninsula (including the ancient community of Yemen), in Kurdistan, and in the mountains of central Asia. In British India, Jews tended to live in either Christian or Muslim areas; cities like Karachi and Peshawar had thriving synagogues and Jewish associations.

Ottoman cities like Salonika and Sarajevo had long been key Jewish cultural centres. In Baghdad, Jews lived lives densely interwoven with Muslims and Christians in the city’s complex multiethnic tapestry. In many of these lands, the Jews spoke Judeo-Arabic languages, forms of Arabic written in Hebrew script and containing Hebrew and Aramaic words; in others, they spoke Ladino, the ancient Spanish brought into exile when Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 and spread across the Middle East.

In these contexts, the Jewish idea of Muslims and the Muslim idea of Jews were of course mediated by inherited prejudices, religious traditions and colonial narratives, but these ideas were also shaped by day to day, face to face experience. In Baghdad or Cairo, Jews and Muslims were tenants in the same buildings, business partners, friends; in other contexts, such as Yemen, a strict division of occupations kept Muslim and Jewish communities in symbiotic relationships with each other.

Now – after the turbulence of the twentieth century, and especially the nationalism catastrophically exported from Europe to these lands – the map looks very different. Apart from Israel, whose six million Jewish inhabitants live surrounded by predominantly Islamic countries, there are only a handful of places where Jews and Muslims see each other every day, in the flesh as opposed to on the television. Where eight of the eighteen largest Jewish populations in 1900 had been in majority Muslim countries, today there are none. There are still tens of thousands of Jews in Iran, in Turkey and in Uzbekistan, but most Jewish populations across the Middle East and South Asia have dwindled to four figure numbers or less.

In the former imperial metropolises – inner and outer city districts of Paris where Jews and Muslims of Maghrebi descent share the same spaces, or neighbourhoods like London’s Redbridge where the socially mobile children of Ashkenazi and Bangladeshi immigrants have moved from the old East End – newer modes of living together have been forged, sometimes peaceful, sometimes tense. The scholar Sami Zubaida suggests that it is in London and Paris rather than in the Middle East where Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism most authentically survives, but the politics of Israel/Palestine overshadows Jewish/Muslim relations just as powerfully here as closer to the conflict zone.

The pull of Zionism and the push of increasingly ethnically exclusive anti-colonial nationalisms, often accompanied by antisemitic riots, led to a massive transfer of the Jewish population from countries like Iraq and Algeria to the new-born Israeli state after 1948. In Pakistan, for example, a community of a couple of thousand departed between independence and 1953, leaving just 500. All in all, around 800,000 Jews were made refugees in that period across the region.

Some commentators have called this “the Jewish Nakba”, taking the Arabic word for catastrophe used by Palestinians to refer to their dispossession when the state was founded. The term is controversial, arguably offensive; by taking the name of another people’s trauma, it denies the singularity of each. But it names the way in which the ethnically exclusive nation-state was a catastrophe both for the masses of people caught on the wrong side of the new borders and for the cosmopolitan idea that we might simply live together in casual, quotidian conviviality across lines of difference. Thinking of the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Arab lands as the other side of the coin of the Palestinian Nakba (instead of heroic narratives of emerging nascent statehood or tragic narratives of victimhood) also connects Jewish history to some of the other catastrophes of that post-war, post-Holocaust moment – notably the Partition of British India along religious lines.

If Jews in the last half century have been living in the shadow of ~~the loss of~~ that catastrophe, how are the older times, when Jews and Muslims shared spaces differently, remembered? Broadly speaking, Jews commemorate this history in one of two ways, mapping roughly on to (and over-determined by) attitudes to Israel/Palestine today.

Convivencia and the golden age

One roseate view sees the lost world of Jews in Muslim lands as characterised by tolerance, vibrant cultural creativity and generous intercultural sharing. The ur-text in this mythology is al-Andalus, Moorish Spain, the period long seen as a golden age of Jewish culture, which brought to an end by the Christian Reconquista and the subsequent Catholic Inquisition and expulsion of both Jews and Muslims. Just as some Palestinian families displaced in the Nakba have carried the keys to their lost homes for six decades, some Sephardic families (“Sephardic” refers to the branch of the Jewish people dispersed from Seferad, Spain, after 1492) have handed down keys to Spanish doors over six centuries. The key term used in describing that golden age is *convivencia*, living together.

Now, Jewish tourists flock to Cordoba and Granada to see where the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides discussed Aristotle with his Muslim and Christian friends, to visit the lovingly restored Moorish synagogues, and to dine at the expensive restaurants serving the fusion food of Umayyad Andalucía. Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* of 2003 was a popular academic text on the Spanish golden age, contrasting the pluralism of Islamic rule to the intolerance of medieval Christendom. Although Menocal is not Jewish, her book was well received and widely reviewed in Jewish periodicals, just one example of the nostalgia for Islamic al-Andalus that has become a stock in trade of the Jewish public sphere. The beautiful Jewish cookbooks of Cairo-born Claudia Roden have put the hybrid foods of Islamic lands back on the fashionable Jewish table; the haunting music

of Yasmin Levy has made the Andalucian Jewish golden age vividly alive for Israeli and diaspora Jews; and Joann Sfar's graphic novel, *The Rabbi's Cat*, has captured North African Jewish *convivencia* in gorgeous colour.

This narrative dramatises the contrast of the pluralism and tolerance of Muslim rule with the genocidal intolerance of Christendom (it was the Ottoman sultan who welcomed the Jews who fled the Spanish terror). Thus it aligns its liberal Jewish narrators with ~~the~~ Europe's ~~an~~ underdog, compensating for any association with an Israeli state seen as an extrusion of Western imperialism. Similarly, statements by the fashionably iconoclastic intellectual Slavoj Žižek about the Balkans, contrasting Islamic tolerance to Christian intolerance, are widely circulated among anti-Zionist Jewish commentators; Žižek has suggested that the Jewish/Islamic symbiosis was so powerful historically that it makes more sense to talk of a Judeo-Muslim civilisation than of a Judeo-Christian one.

Most recently, Jewish writers have recast the pre-1948 Jewish Middle East in the same roseate light as al-Andalus. This started in the 1990s with the scholarly and political interventions of Sephardic writers like Ella Shohat, Smadar Lavie and Ammiel Alcaly, who reclaimed an identity as "Arab Jews", who participated in a shared, multi-ethnic Arabic-speaking Levantine culture, erased in Israel by a Zionism that was hegemonically European. (Although some anti-Zionists, such as Moshe Machover, have argued that this move, stressing Zionism's Jewish victims, sidelines the suffering of Zionism's "real", and really Arab, victims.)

These writers have challenged the standard Zionist historiography of Israel's heroic rescues (with codenames like Operation Magic Carpet for Yemen, and Operation Ezra and Nehemiah for Iraq) that supposedly redeemed the scattered Jews' proto-Zionist longing for return. The new identity politics instead stresses the erasure of the rich Middle Eastern Jewish culture in Israel and the racism faced by Jewish Arabs at the hands of a European Zionist elite.

In the last few years, this *convivencia* narrative has been popularised by a wave of books and CDs celebrating and commemorating Jewish life in cities like Baghdad and Cairo, in overwhelmingly celebratory terms. One in three Baghdadis in 1941 were Jews, mostly seeing themselves as Iraqi and Arab at least as much as Jewish. Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*, published in 2003, recalls the lost world of Iraqi Jewry, and located the Jewish community in Baghdad as very much an Arab community. As reviewer Adam Schatz put it, it is "an elegy for an experiment in coexistence, rather than a Zionist parable about its impossibility".

Similarly, Violette Shamash's 2008 *Memories of Eden* is the memoir of a member of the Baghdadi Jewish elite who recalls what she calls her native land as literally a paradise, spiced with the smells of the river Tigris which flowed past her father's palace, the smell of the apricot trees in the garden and the kebabs grilling on the wood oven. For Shamash, an antisemitism imported from abroad and wholly alien to Iraqi culture brought about the demise of this paradise: "All the communities lived together peaceably, teasing each other good-naturedly and without inhibition about their religion, [until] the poison of Arab nationalism and Nazism entered the bloodstream." Shamash's book, not written with any anti-Zionist agenda, subverts standard Israeli histories of the Middle East narrative, and has been praised by anti-Zionist Jews such as Baghdad-born historian Avi Shlaim.

Nissim Rejwen's memoir, *The Last Jews of Baghdad*, published in 2004, told a similarly nostalgic story. Rejwen came from a lower middle class family, but through his work as a journalist and bookseller became part of the Iraqi intelligentsia. Shamash's family had left Iraq before the creation of the state of Israel, but Rejwen stayed to the last possible moment: after a series of anti-Jewish edicts from 1948 to 1950, the Kingdom of Iraq announced that Jews had a year to renounce their

Iraqi citizenship and leave. Rejwen landed in Tel Aviv in 1951. His escape was part of the Israeli state's Operation Ezra and Nehemiah, but his account stresses the ill-treatment of the Iraqi migrants, their material and cultural impoverishment in their new Israeli exile – and thus upsets the Zionist narrative of the in-gathering of the exiles by the new Jewish state.

The British journalist Rachel Shabi has probably produced the most politicised version of the *convivencia* narrative in her book *Not the Enemy*. Shabi has claimed that recovering “the long, vibrant experience of Jewish life in the Arab world” is “deeply unfashionable”, a claim belied by the popularity of the books and CDs I've mentioned here. Shabi's intent in recovering this memory is, as she puts it, “a way of seeking templates for how to make things right again.” That is, historical Islamic *convivencia* might be a model for pluralism today, and if Israel could re-connect with its Middle Eastern self it could have different relations with its neighbours.

One problem, though, with the Jewish philo-Islamic narrative is that it collapses together 1400 years of Muslim history into a monolithic story. The pogroms in 1940s Iraq obviously do not reflect the essential character of Islam, but they did not come out of nowhere, as some of the memoirs suggest. The roseate history of Jews under Islam only works if it edits out the times and places when Muslim rulers were less than tolerant of their Jewish subjects; as with all historical narratives, it requires a systematic forgetting of some things in order to remember others, even if in this case the forgetting is benign and forgiving.

Dhimmitude and the lachrymose account

In flattening Islamic history, the Jewish philo-Islamic narrative exactly mirrors a second Jewish narrative, a narrative which has little space for forgiving. This has been named (by historians such as Mark Cohen) the “neo-lachrymose” conception of Jewish history, a term which nods to Salo Baron, a great twentieth century Jewish historian and sociologist. Baron complained of the tendency among Jewish scholars to focus on European Jewry's history of discrimination, persecution and pogroms – instead of on the ordinary lives Jews led between the attacks: the everyday instances of survival, creativity, joy, interaction and integration. The “lachrymose story” Baron identified was often used ideologically to argue for the need for a Jewish state, as the only relief from Christendom's apparently congenital antisemitism. A similar lachrymose story has more recently emerged about the Islamic world, and again this has been harnessed ideologically by pro-Israeli hawks.

In the last decade, several groups representing Jewish refugees from Muslim lands have stepped onto the public stage in the Jewish community. The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, the Association of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (Harif), and Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA) have agitated for Jewish dispossession in Muslim lands – and Muslim antisemitism – to be remembered and redressed. A series of Israeli, French and American films about the exile of Jews from these lands, such as *The Forgotten Refugees* and *The Silent Exodus* (both 2004) and *The Last Jews of Libya* (2007) have been widely circulated in Jewish communities and screened at human rights events.

Although their position has challenged one of the key myths of modern Zionism – that Jewish migrants to Israel were willing, drawn by the pull of Zionism – the history of persecution these organisations and films stress fits in well with another of Zionism's myths, that antisemitism is an eternal affliction, only countered by a Jewish state. The movement emphasises justice for Jewish refugees, and insists that their experience mirrors that of Palestinian refugees.

One author who played a key role in formulating the neo-lachrymose counter-narrative is Bat Ye'or. In her writings on the Middle East, she coined the term “Eurabia” and popularised the neologism “dhimmitude”. A Jewish refugee from Egypt to Israel, she has described the pogroms of the 1948

period as part of both an age-old subordination of dhimmi Jews by Muslims, and a deliberate strategy of rising political Islam. Her work shows the intersection of the neo-lachrymose narrative and a clash-of-civilisations worldview, and the global “counter-Jihad” movement has widely disseminated the concept of “dhimmitude”.

In the neo-lachrymose counter-narrative, a prominent role is given to the Farhud, a violent anti-Jewish pogrom which took place in Iraq in 1941 after the fall of the short-lived Arab nationalist government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, and carried out by Rashid Ali’s supporters. The Jews were scapegoated for supporting the British who intervened against Rashid Ali’s coup; the coup government had been both antisemitic and closely linked to Nazi Germany. The commonly accepted death toll is close to 200, with many more injured, although recent accounts have suggested higher casualty figures.

The neo-lachrymose narrative of the Jews of Arab lands sees the Farhud as significant for two reasons. First, it preceded the creation of the state of Israel and thus cannot be seen as an “anti-Zionist” backlash but only as a purely antisemitic incident, thus indicting Arab nationalism as inherently anti-Jewish. Second, it establishes a connection between Arab antisemitism and Hitler’s Holocaust.

This latter connection is even stronger in another story which features prominently in the neo-lachrymose narrative, that of Rashid Ali’s backer, Haj Amin al-Husseini. This Palestinian cleric, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem from the 1920s to the 1940s, was influential in the development of Palestinian nationalism but he also became closely connected with Hitler and the Nazis during the Second World War. The Mufti’s role in collaborating with the Nazis has been given considerable attention in the Jewish media, as evidence for the nexus between Islamism, Arab nationalism and vicious antisemitism. The most extreme accounts go so far as to claim he suggested the Final Solution to Hitler.

Islamophobia, antisemitism and ideas of the other

These two ways of seeing the Jewish past in Muslim lands are in a sense both true – but, in denying large elements of the truth, both are also false. Jewish-Muslim relations, like Jewish-Christian or Muslim-Hindu relations, have varied enormously across the great sweep of time and space in which Jews and Muslims have lived together. An honest history of our interactions would reveal the systematic exclusion and denigration of dhimmi minorities under some Muslim rulers – *and* the relative prevalence of tolerance and pluralism compared to many Christian polities. It would commemorate the golden age of Jewish life in the Caliphate of Cordoba – but it would also recall the pogroms that periodically rocked Muslim Spain after 1090, and that Maimonides himself eventually fled. It would remember the Jewish worshippers killed in Hebron by Muslim militants in the riots of 1929 – *and* the many more saved by Muslim neighbours. It would recall Arab nationalist complicity in the Nazi Holocaust – *and* the “righteous gentiles” of the Muslim world, from Albania to Morocco, who saved Jewish lives amidst the genocide, and the half million Muslim soldiers of the Indian army who fought against the Nazis in World War II. As Roi Ben-Yehuda has written, “The history of *convivencia*, or coexistence, teaches us that while some history is worth repeating, we can only ignore the dark side of Jewish-Muslim coexistence at our own peril.”

The two ways of seeing the Jewish past in Muslim lands appear incommensurate because they almost always, in the heat generated by the Israel/Palestine question, immediately invoke two different ways of seeing the Muslim other. For example, although there is considerable evidence for the Grand Mufti’s Judeophobia, historian James Renton has argued that “this has been used to delegitimise his whole career and the cause of the Palestinian Arabs in general”, showing how the politics of Israel/Palestine today are projected back onto the Muslim-Jewish past in unhelpful ways.

In the UK, the heat generated by Israel/Palestine is intense: a pair of peace activists, one Palestinian and one Jewish Israeli, who toured British universities together in 2009 to advocate for peace, said that UK campuses seemed almost more polarised than Israeli/Palestinian society – the Israeli, for example, said “Here in Britain the pro-Palestinian students are more hostile than the people I meet in the West Bank.” The last couple of years, since Israel’s Operation Cast Lead offensive in Gaza, several joint Muslim-Jewish events – such as a performance of the Sheshbesh Arab-Jewish Ensemble at a networking evening for Arab and Jewish business leaders – have been cancelled after pressure from activists of one or the other side.

In this context, the Western Jews who commemorate an idealised, nostalgia-soaked, cosmopolitan past often do so (and this is most explicit with activists like Rachel Shabi) to place a stake on the future: Jewish/Muslim co-existence is not only possible but the historical norm, and thus a just peace in the Middle East is within reach – with Zionism as the main obstacle to it. On the other hand, those who document a lachrymose past of constant Islamic Jew-hatred are also making a claim on the future: the Jewish people, and its tiny state, Israel, must gird their loins and secure themselves against the might and mass of global Islam.

And the two incommensurate ways of seeing the Muslim other, the roseate and the lachrymose, in turn all too often determine two incommensurate (and equally wrong-headed) attitudes towards antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Those who hold to the roseate view of Muslim-Jewish relations tend to downplay contemporary antisemitism. They locate antisemitism in a Christian past (contrasted negatively to the Muslim past), minimise Muslim antisemitism, and emphasise Islamophobia as today’s most pressing prejudice.

Last August, for example, the *Guardian’s* Comment is Free carried an article by an American-Israeli journalist, Mya Guarnieri, entitled “Islamophobia: the new antisemitism”, concluding: “In the past, there was antisemitism, roiling just below the surface. Now, there is Islamophobia.” Israeli historian Shlomo Sand made the same point, in an article entitled “From Judaeophobia to Islamophobia” in the *Jewish Quarterly*. Across the Atlantic, Daniel Luban wrote an article in the Jewish magazine *The Tablet* entitled “The New Anti-Semitism: Recent attacks on Islam in the United States echo old slurs against Jews”, noting that “The problem for the ADL is that there simply isn’t much anti-Semitism of consequence in the United States these days.... At the same time, many of the tropes of classic anti-Semitism have been revived and given new force on the American right [but] their targets are not Jews but Muslims.”

More sophisticated accounts of Islamophobia as the new antisemitism have been developed by Jewish academics such as Matti Bunzl, who argues antisemitism is largely “obsolete” while Islamophobia is a phenomenon of the now. Antisemitism, he suggests, was a creature of the age of the nation-state; Jews were the paradigmatic other of nations. Today, in the new Europe, he claims, we are in a post-national moment, and it is Islam that is demonised as the paradigmatic other for Europe as a whole. Jews, he says, “no longer figure as the principal Other but as the veritable embodiment of the postnational order”.

The emergence since the 1990s of Islam-hating “Euronationalism”, the pan-European far right ideology directed mainly at migrants and Muslims, provides some evidence for this argument, especially as some Euronationalists have appeared to eschew Jew-hatred and embrace Israel. Further evidence comes from the more recent development of a disparate counter-Jihad movement

(from the English Defence League and Geert Wilders to the terrorist Anders Breivik), with motifs drawn from the Crusades and the Habsburg defeat of the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna.

However, the Islamophobia-as-new-antisemitism argument is flawed conceptually and weak empirically. Conceptually, as Muslim scholar Addelwahab El-Affendi has observed, Hannah Arendt, the great theorist of totalitarianism, argued that antisemitism intensified at the time of the *decline* of the nation-state, and that Nazism was in some senses post-national. And the rise of supra-national Europe has not called the death knell for the nation-state, which is as strong as ever. Empirically, some of the most vicious Islamophobes across Europe are also highly Eurosceptic and not Euronationalists, while the pro-Israel and non-antisemitic posturing of right-wing parties is often skin deep and merely rhetorical.

Further, by relegating antisemitism to the past, it denies the very real contemporary manifestations of antisemitism, including both discursive and violent physical manifestations. The annual monitoring by the Community Security Trust provides ample evidence for the persistence of antisemitism, sometimes alongside and inextricable from anti-Muslim racism, sometimes perpetrated by Muslims – and indeed provides some evidence for a rise in antisemitic incidents since Bunzl set out his argument at the start of the century.

The narrative of Islamophobia replacing antisemitism also promotes a kind of zero sum approach to different racisms, a perverse calculus by which racisms are measured against each other, the intensity of one necessarily diminishing the value of the other. As the scholar Christine Achinger has written, “To shy away from noting differences for fear of establishing hierarchy between different forms of hatred and exclusion, though, does not further the anti-racist cause, but damages our ability to understand and confront either of them.” Belittling antisemitism as a mark of respect for the victims of Islamophobia is not much better than one-upmanship amongst victims as a policy for anti-racists. And, as sociologist Veronique Atglas has suggested, the way in which Islamophobia and antisemitism are always placed side by side in this victimhood competition positions the British state as a neutral arbiter – and Muslims and Jews as always outside the British state and British society, petitioning it for recognition of our grievances.

Beyond Islamophilia and Islamophobia

In fact, hatred against Muslims and hatred against Jews are often expressed *together*, by racists who see both minorities as closely connected or even as two sides of the same coin. You can see examples of this in one recent Community Security Trust annual report on antisemitic incidents, such as some neo-Nazi literature distributed in East London which concluded: “JEWS AND MUSLIMS OUT OF REDBRIDGE”. This suggests a potential Muslim interest in combating antisemitism and Jewish interest in combating Islamophobia. This in turn points to a need for an anti-racist politics of alliance between Jews and Muslims.

If we want to combat anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racism *together*, we need to attend to the commonalities and continuities between them, as well as the contrasts and specificities which make each of them distinct and in some senses unique.

There is some evidence too that being honest about histories of antisemitism, without falling into the paranoid hysteria of the neo-lachrymose school, might generate more meaningful interfaith dialogue than sugar-coating the story of Jewish-Muslim relations. The blog Point of No Return, which tells the story of the Middle East’s Jewish refugees, has had its highest numbers of comments on posts about the death of the Jewish community in Pakistan – and the comments have overwhelmingly come from Pakistani Muslims coming to terms with the antisemitism in their country’s history. Similarly, Shmuel Moreh’s memoirs of Jewish life in Iraq in the 1940s paint a far

less rosy picture of Muslim-Jewish relations than the others mentioned above, emphasising the violence of the Farhud, but their publication in Arabic in the Saudi-funded on-line magazine *Elaph* has generated huge numbers of comments from Arab readers, describing a mix of shame and nostalgia. The kinds of relationships created in these moments are surely more meaningful than those created when anti-Zionist Jewish writers reproduce comfortable clichés of co-existence.

This complex reality requires a complex politics. We need to stop competing in the victimhood stakes and recognise that both racisms are important and dangerous. We need to attend to Islamophobia in the Jewish community *and* to antisemitism in the Muslim community. And we need to be vigilant about the blurry line between taking sides on Israel/Palestine and taking up antisemitic or Islamophobic themes. Once Jews and Muslims recognise they have a common stake in fighting both racisms then we can begin to build a world free of antisemitism *and* Islamophobia.

Even as the Israel/Palestine conflict continues to corrode Jewish/Muslim relations, there are some small reasons for hope. A report commissioned by Alif-Aleph UK, which promotes grassroots Jewish-Muslim dialogue, concluded that the “commonly held assumption that Muslims and Jews in Britain have no contact with each other, know little about each other and fear or even hate each other [is wrong]. Dialogue is happening between Muslims and Jews at every level, all around Britain... Mutual respect usually develops quickly when Muslims and Jews come together to address common issues.”

Without glossing over the difficulties, especially prejudice and the fear of extremism, on both sides, the report showed that Jews and Muslims were highly motivated to come together, for a variety of reasons: a concern with anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish prejudice, a desire for Middle East peace, a shared sense of being part of a religious minority, a sense of the essential commonality of the Abrahamic faiths. There are also pragmatic concerns, such as combating legislation that threatens halal and kosher slaughter. Or, perhaps more mundanely, shared issues facing East End market stalls have led the Bengali Traders Association and the Jewish Traders Association to work together.

And these lead to countless grassroots initiatives, way below the radar of the mainstream media, from dialogue groups to exchange visits, joint seminars on religious texts to student campaigns for campus prayer rooms, interfaith football teams to joint cookbook projects. They even exist in the most religiously conservative communities, such as around Stamford Hill in Northeast London, home to many ultra-orthodox Jews, where regular co-operation between elders on shared local concerns belies the image of closed, parallel communities of distrust. There is a long way to go – much interfaith work is done by religious leaders and not lay community members; it often focuses on theological dialogue rather than building this worldly solidarity – but the journey has started.

Earlier in this article, I noted that going beyond our monochrome ideas of the other towards an honest account of Jewish-Muslim relations would recall that the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides thrived in Islamic Cordoba – but also that he was forced to flee his home under the harsh rule of the ultra-conservative Muwahhidun. However, as the Iraqi Jew Sasson Somekh has noted, “in the end, he found comfort and glory in another Muslim city, Cairo, where he flourished and became the leader of his people and the friend of Muslim rulers and writers like Al-Qadi al-Fadil, a writer and poet who was the confidant of the ruler Saladin.” I believe that Jews and Muslims alike need to develop a better sense of the complexity and contradictions involved in our evolving story, to acknowledge both the shadows and the light. As the Israeli novelist Amos Oz says, justice demands that we remember while forgiveness demands that we forget. Real dialogue and meaningful alliances require both to be kept in play.