

# I Can Hear These Books Sing

By Geoffrey Clarfield

**A Review of Jewish-“Muslim Interaction in Books-The Medieval and Early Modern Periods”**

*Exhibition and catalogue by Nadav Sharon and Blair Kuntz at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, May 20-August 8, 2025.*



During a time when so much of the humanities and social sciences have gone irrevocably woke, it is with surprise, delight, and satisfaction that I write a short, positive review of this remarkable exhibit and catalogue.

The exhibit comprises an array of pages from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian books from the medieval and early modern periods. It adheres to the old-fashioned aesthetic values of Toronto. It is subtle and restrained, well thought out, well-lit and conspicuously lacking any contemporary ideological angle. The catalogue and bibliography are academic but written for an intelligent layperson.

The exhibited pages from these manuscripts are set out in a circle and so you can do as many perambulations as you want, until you have absorbed the nature of these fabulously beautiful and well-crafted books, mostly from a time when they were copied and illustrated by hand.

There are forty-three pages all told on display spread across ten categories-Holy Books, Religious Law, Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, Medicine and Science, Islamic and Jewish Mysticism, Religious Law, Islamic Sufi Poetry, Other Connections and finally Christians on Jews and Muslims.

Each one is a story in and of itself, but they all reflect a time when most Jews lived in Islamic countries and the civilization of Islam was in the process of absorbing and transforming its Jewish and Christian narrative roots, while at the same time, adopting and expanding upon the scientific and philosophical culture of pagan Hellenistic science.

We, the inhabitants of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, live in a world of excess information, constant advertising, film, TV, and urban industrial noise. And so what I would like to do in this short piece is to evoke some of the soundscape of these books, the people who produced them and those who read them or, as was as often the case, those who heard them sung or recited.

Let us remember that most of these manuscripts were produced for preindustrial dwellers of cities, towns, or villages. The sounds they lived with were mostly those of a medieval city-the criers who plied the streets and lanes, the pack animals, the runners and carriers of food, marching soldiers, loud talk in the markets and the selective silence of mosque and synagogue with their chants, hymns, and silent meditations.

In the Islamic case we would have heard the prayers and chants in large mosques and sufi meeting halls as well as the calls to prayer from the minarets, and in the Jewish case sung and spoken prayers and para liturgical performances conducted in

smaller synagogues and yeshivas (Jewish houses of study).

In those days, the sound of the human voice either sung or recited was even more intense, as it could not be recorded or reproduced by any technical machine.

So let me take just four examples and show you how they might have sounded to their readers.

(Image#1) I will begin in newly reconquered Christian Spain in the former Moorish stronghold of Toledo in December 1307, where this book was made, and we see its abstract colophon (that looks like a folk rendering of a Moroccan carpet) for the Torah, the Prophets, and Writings. The scribe's name was Yoseph Ben Yehudah ben Mervis who created this book for his patron, Mosheh Ben Yosef Yehudah ha Nasi.

By 1492, any and all of their descendants had either been forcefully converted to Catholicism by the decree of King Ferdinand and Isabella or expelled from Spain without possessions.

Some of their descendants found refuge in Morocco and the Ottoman Empire and brought their liturgy from Spain to their Spanish speaking synagogues in North Africa. The book featured here ended up in Iraq during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was collected by the famous Sassoon family who brought it on the market (They also saved many original manuscripts of the great Jewish poets of medieval Spain such as Yehuda Ha Levi). This manuscript had wandered and survived for more than half a millennium!

Here is a sample of this associated liturgy recorded by the American novelist and essayist Paul Bowles, during a visit to a synagogue in Meknes, Morocco in the mid-1950s.

(Image #6) The religious law of Islam, the Shariah and its scribal interpreters have usually declared secular music,

singing and dance to be unethical or blasphemous. This trend continues to this day.

However, the elaborate chant of the Koran by specially trained reciters is considered not to be song or music as such but what we would call chant, and thus like the Gregorian Chant of the Catholic church it is acceptable to orthodox Muslim religious authorities.

On page six of the catalogue we see a beautiful calligraphic rendering of two Koranic chapters, Surah al Fatihat and Surat al-Baqarah from 1715/16. The Arabic Koranic verses are rendered in black with Persian below in red.

These verses are still chanted by the students of the Al Azhar mosque university in Cairo. They have been recorded, put on vinyl, cassette, CD and DVD, and now can be found all over the internet.

Until recently each region of the Islamic world had its own version of chanting which is related to the musical modes of classical Arabic, Persian and Turkish music (the system of Maqam) but today the Egyptian ones are out competing other styles.

Nevertheless, the chanting of the Koran must be imagined taking place in a mosque or madrasa (religious college) while worshippers and young students of religion listen attentively as they internalize a form of monophonic and ornamented chanting whose roots go back to the priests of the Ziggurat temples of Sumer and Babylon. Here is a sample of the Fatihat:

(Image#20) Yehuda Ha Levi was one of medieval Jewish Spain's greatest philosophers and poets. His book, The Kuzari is one of the first philosophical defenses of Judaism against the theological onslaught of medieval Christian and Muslim authorities. This version of the Kuzari was published and printed by a press in Venice in 1547.

The Kuzari, although “fictional” or “imaginative” was based on a letter that Yehuda Ha Levi read from a report on the existence of a contemporaneous independent Jewish Turkic Kingdom east of Byzantium-The Khazars. That kingdom did exist and for a while the upper classes of the Turkic rulers adhered to Judaism.

This is the kind of book that the great Renaissance Italian composer Salomone Rossi may have read while he was a court musician to the Princes of Gonzaga in Mantua, and where he wrote his Songs of Solomon whose scores were published and printed in Venice as well. Rossi believed he was a direct descendant of the Jews that the Romans brought to Rome after the destruction of the Temple.

Here is just one example of his compositional mastery:

(Image#28) Let us feast our eyes on a colorful illustration of a poem from a manuscript in 16<sup>th</sup> century Persia, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Britain became a world power with dominion over what is now India and Pakistan, British scholars and adventurers began to take a deep interest in the culture of the Islamic world.

One such literary adventurer was the English poet Edward Fitzgerald 1809-1883. He translated the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam into English, and it became a best seller in Britain and America. It is unclear whether it is one of a myriad expressions of mystical Islam or Sufism or, is a subtle meditation on life in the manner of ancient Romans and Greeks.

Nevertheless it brought Islamic mysticism to the attention of Westerners, Sufism, and its poetry and eventually music. For almost two centuries it has remained in print in the English language.

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam where the member of the

order follows the example of his mystical leader or Sheikh, whose rituals and stories help the adherent become one with God through meditation. In the mountains of Kurdistan or Morocco adherents participate in rituals that show a near supernatural ability to withstand self-inflicted wounds from glass or metal, that the adherents self-administer while in trance.

Of course there are highly intellectualized and nonviolent Sufi orders, such as the famous whirling dervishes of Rumi (Mevleviyya) whose shrine is alive and well in central Anatolia.

Here is a recording from one of their ceremonies:

As there are Synagogues in Toronto and Montreal that keep the liturgy of Moorish Spain alive today so there are branches of Sufi sects like the Mevleviyya who also meet in cities like Toronto or Montreal. The rituals associated with the books displayed in this exhibit are still the lifeblood of some of Canada's contemporary communities of faith. It is a living tradition.

One could find a musical accompaniment to all and every page that is on display in this marvelous exhibit. I encourage others to do so. I have only shared a few of them for when I look at these pages, "I can hear these books sing."

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