

The Moral Problem in Islam and Its Resolution according to the Philosophy of Rabbi Yéhoua Léon Askénazi (Manitou)

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The philosophy of Rabbi Yéhoua Léon Askénazi (1922–1996), familiarly known as Manitou,¹ exhibits an overtly historio-centric approach, touching on the universal-human, national, and individual historic ethos alike. *Mishnat Hatoladot*,² the leitmotif of his outlook, sketches a cultural portrait of all identities comprising the human race, focusing on the family of nations and particularly on the family of Abraham, from which originated not only the identity of Israel but also its rival identities of Edom and Ishmael, i.e., Christian and Muslim cultures. Islam and Christianity occupy a prominent place in R. Askénazi's philosophy because of their competition with Judaism as a religion and the struggle of cultural identities for primacy.³

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- ¹ For his life story, see: Y. Charvit, "The Algerian Jewish Community and the State of Israel - 5708-5758" in *Testimony: Testimony to Israel, Exile, Immigration, Absorption, Contribution and Integration*, eds. A. Mizrahi, A. and A. Ben-David, A. (Netanya: The Association for the Development of Society and Culture, Documentation and Research, 2001), 78–83 [Hebrew]; idem, "Identity and History: The Cultural Heritage of Rabbi Yéhoua Léon Askénazi," *Peamim Oriental Community Research Quarterly*, 91 (2002): 105–8 [Hebrew].
- ² Charvit, "Identity and History," pp. 105–22 [Hebrew].
- ³ R. Askénazi indicates that the author of the *Torah Temimah*, Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, in explaining the verse "And he said: The Lord came from Sinai, and rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the myriads holy ..." [Deut 33:2], notes that Aramaic, Latin, and Arabic competed with the Holy Tongue as the vehicle bearing the sanctity of prophecy: "Perhaps he so reasoned because the word *veata* [and He came] is essentially Aramaic rather than Hebrew. On this foundation, the *Sifri* posited that when God revealed Himself to give the Torah to Israel, His revelation took place in not one but four languages: '*And he said: The Lord came from Sinai*' - Hebrew; '*and rose from Seir unto them*' - Latin; '*He shined forth from Mount Paran*' - Arabic and '*He came from the myriads holy*' - Aramaic." Among the seventy nations, the Christians and Muslims did not cease struggling against Israel for primacy. Most world nations recognized the authority of Israel to be "the High Priest of Mankind" (as R. Elie Benamozeg of Livorno noted), *but the incitement emanating from Ishmael, Esau and Aram interfered with Israel's bearing leadership of the sanctity of the human race* (emphasis mine - YC; from a lecture by Rabbi Askénazi on the weekly Torah reading *Balak* [Num 22:2 - 25:9]).



R. Askénazi considered interfaith dialogue essential and significant, as it reinforces common monotheistic features, i.e., belief in one God and revelation. He maintained that monotheism is based upon the assumption that Jewish history may not be separated from general human history. He conducted a thorough examination of reciprocal relations among religions, concentrating on the effects of interaction and the Jewish People's sense of responsibility and mission towards humanity.⁴ Islam and Christianity occupy a prominent place in R. Askénazi's philosophy because of the competition they pose for Judaism as a religion and the Jewish People as a nation.

This study examines the reciprocal relations between Islam and Israel during periods of Jewish exile and redemption, as reflected in R. Askénazi's theory. R. Askénazi clarifies repeatedly that the conflict that was so clear and consistent throughout the years of exile may well be solved and settled some time in the future. As an educator and intellectual involved in the Israeli ethos, he sought to explain the essence of the tension, rivalry and hostility between the State of Israel, the Jewish People, Europe, and the United States on the one hand and Islamic states on the other, seeking to uncover their cultural and theological roots. He claimed that political struggles, arguments, delegitimization of Israel, Arab-Israeli wars, and conflicts and ambivalent diplomacy all reflect the basic and fundamental views of those respective cultures. This study examines and analyzes R. Askénazi's historiosophic approach.

A. CHRONICLES: ISLAM AND THE MORAL PROBLEM

My teacher Jacob Gordin told us something that surprised me greatly at the time. Eventually, however, I began to realize how right he was: The rivalry between Ishmael and Israel is more intense than the one between Christianity and Judaism, as Christian Antisemitism prevailed in the Jewish Diaspora, whereas Muslim hatred accompanied the return of Israel to Zion, a far more serious development.⁵

⁴ In July 1990, R. Askénazi was invited to represent the Jewish faith on the establishment of the Temple de l'Universel in Paris, founded by the head of the Sufi order. Representatives of all world religions attended: Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Muslims, and Jews. He composed this prayer: "Our Father, Existence of all existence, Creator of the universe, Master of the world, builder of our homes on the land in which Thy Presence was revealed in the past, Thy children have built this Universal Temple in fulfillment of the commandment 'And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them' [Exod 25:8]. Heaven and earth are filled with Thy voice, yet from the beginning, the echo of Thy glory has distanced itself to accord time and purpose to existence. Return! May Thy absence cease! May it by Thy will that our unity augment Thy truth, as the Prophet Isaiah declared: 'for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' [Isa 56:7]." [this and all succeeding translations from French mine - YC]. L. Y. Askénazi, *La parole et l'écrit, II: Penser la tradition juive d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005; edited by Marcel Goldman), 608-9.

⁵ Lecture from the CD series *Le drame de l'exil* (Jerusalem: Fondation Manitou, 2003).

These remarks open R. Askénazi's lecture entitled "The Drama of Exile: The Edomite and Ishmaelite Exiles." He suggests that Gordin's claim originates in the book *Shaarei Ora*, whose author, Spanish kabbalist R. Yosef Gikatilla (1248–1325), (a disciple of R. Avraham Aboulafia) maintains that the conflict with Ishmael is incorporated within the Edomite exile.⁶

1. *Retroactively Emerging Identity*

Biblical history, claims R. Askénazi, is the beacon of human history, the inspiration for all times. This perspective is his historiosophic explanation of the history of nations and the history of the Jewish People. It leads us on a journey to all manifestations of human culture throughout all generations, as a thorough assessment of Hebrew history demands comprehensive knowledge of all universal cultural creations. R. Askénazi was highly familiar with human cultures and what they produced in the West, the East, and even the Far East. This knowledge did not render him a member of said cultures but was rather instrumental in achieving a more intensive explanation of Hebrew identity based on Hebrew and Jewish sources.⁷

We proceed to examine R. Askénazi's position regarding Islam, the biblical Ishmael, son of Abram—not Abraham, he emphasizes—and Hagar. R. Askénazi recounts the annals of Islam in the context of its rivalry with Israel, a rivalry that bears an ethical character, contrasting with the theological confrontation between Judaism and Christianity.

⁶ This theory conforms with the Maharal's claim that Ishmael is not included among the Four Kingdoms (Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Edom) (*Nezah Israel*, 21, p. 108; *Ner Mizva*, p. 18). "According to the Talmud, Tractate *Avoda Zara* 2b, when the Fourth Kingdom faces final judgment, two voices will be heard: that of Edom/Rome ('We introduced many markets, many bathhouses, much silver and gold') and that of Persia/Islam ('We built many bridges, we conquered many cities, we fought many wars'). Ishmael's universalism accords it character appropriate to the Four Kingdoms. Islam perceives itself as a fundamental restoration of the world's religions from the time of Abraham to Muhammad, the Seal of Prophecy" (L. Y. Askénazi, lecture); "The thaw in relations between the Jews and Islam was enabled by Christian theologians, as Islam's anti-Jewish stance ultimately originates in Christianity" (Askénazi, *La parole et l'écrit*, p. 602).

⁷ R. Askénazi was inspired by the *Annales* School, founded in 1920 by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, which rejected event-oriented historiography, focusing instead on research concerning social and human phenomena. Manitou studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and ethnology and anthropology at the Ecole d'ethnologie et d'anthropologie du Musée de L'Homme, at which two of his most significant teachers were the well-known ethnologists and anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Marcel Jousse (1886–1961). R. Askénazi's varied sources included personal contacts. Even in Algeria, he conducted dialogue with Muslims. He had connections with Muslim mystics in Paris and was a member of the "Brotherhood of the Sons of Abraham." As indicated, he was present at the dedication of the Temple de l'Universel in Paris, founded by the head of the Sufi order.

On departing Ur of the Chaldees, Abram, a descendant of the family of Eber, returns to the land of the Hebrews in fulfillment of a divine command. Abram and Sarai are refugees of the “Ur Holocaust”; Nimrod is the “Hitler” of the Ancient East, who attempts unsuccessfully to cast Abram into the fire (ancient Hebrew: *ur*). The family of the Hebrews survives the Mesopotamian exile but fears it may not be able to maintain its Hebrew identity, the identity of Israel that is destined to take shape in years to come. As Sarai was barren, she adopts a strategy that R. Askénazi suggests is typical of Diaspora Jewry: fructification of the prevailing culture, realizing what a pity it would be to see “Hebrew society” nipped in the bud. Her kindness is boundless, but her self-confidence concomitantly weak. God, indeed, promised issue to Abram, but fulfillment is slow in coming. Perceived reality ultimately triumphs over faith in promises and Sarai asks Abram to fructify the dominant culture of that time, represented by the character of Hagar, daughter of the pharaoh of ancient Egypt. Sarai is attempting to force the hand of reality: she and Abram lacked the patience to await fulfillment of the promise, resulting in the birth of Ishmael. In retrospect, this development gave rise to fierce rivalry with Israel, as manifested in the image of Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, who had been born in the meantime.

2. *The Roots of Rivalry between Israel and Ishmael*

The rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael is rooted in the [Hebrew] name of each.⁸ Ishmael is described as “making sport” [laughing] and, from the moment Sarah sees him doing so, all history changes its appearance:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, making sport. Wherefore she said unto Abraham: “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac” [Gen 21:9-10].

What is it that Sarah saw that made her react so severely? R. Askénazi relies on the *Tosefta* on Tractate *Sotah*, chapter 6, mishna 3, to explain the depth of Ishmael’s immoral approach: R. Akiva explains Ishmael’s laugh as the laugh of idolatry; R. Eliezer as the laugh of fornication; and R. Ishmael as the laugh of bloodshed. R. Shimon Bar Yohai, a disciple of the former three sages, cites his teachers in this *Tosefta* but differs with them in his analysis of the biblical Ishmael’s laugh. Before considering R. Shimon Bar Yohai’s views, R. Askénazi emphasizes that Ishmael is a blatantly immoral personality, as idolatry is a sin between man and God, fornication a matter of human honor (between man and himself), and bloodshed a sin between man and man. “He who laughs at present cannot inherit him who will laugh [Hebrew: *Itzhak* (Isaac)],” says R. Askénazi, explaining Ishmael’s immoral

⁸ L.Y. Askénazi, “La neuvième épreuve d’Abraham: le ‘transfert’ d’Agar et d’Ichmaël, in *Ki Mitsion I, Notes sur la paracha* (Jerusalem: Fondation Manitou & Editions Eliner, 1997), 59-64.



attitude: One who laughs in the present is expressing satisfaction with the current situation and refraining from measures that could rectify its aberrations. “He who laughs last laughs best” is an aphorism suiting the character of Isaac,⁹ as he is destined to apply himself to repairing the flaws of this world. Satisfaction may come only after exerting the necessary moral efforts entailed by such endeavors. There is nothing more immoral than to enjoy this world to the fullest:

Laughter is legitimate for the son of Abraham, for Isaac as well as for Ishmael, as Abraham’s primary testimony is that the world has a Creator and therefore all creation has purpose and hope. Laughter in the present, however, is different, as it expresses satisfaction with a world in which evil and good are intermingled. One should reserve total laughter for the world to come, when good shall triumph. Sarah saw that Ishmael’s “making sport” embodied a religion detached from morality, one that contents itself with the present condition of the world. By contrast, Isaac manifests a religion absolutely identified with morality. This is the messianic message of the prophets of Israel, as taught by the mentors of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai.¹⁰

⁹ This idea is elucidated by R. Askénazi with biblical verses, quotations from the Talmud and kabbalistic traditions: *When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter ...* [Ps 126:1–2]; “R. Yohanan said on behalf of R. Shimon Bar Yohai: It is forbidden for one to fill his mouth with laughter in this world, as it is written *“Then was our mouth filled with laughter ...”* [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot* 31a]; “R. Yona said in R. Zeira’s name: Anyone who goes seven days without dreaming is called wicked, as it is written *“... and he that hath it shall abide satisfied, he shall not be visited with evil”* [Prov 19:23]. This means that one whose conscience does not disturb him for seven days is evil [the Hebrew roots for “satisfied” and “seven” are orthographically identical but pronounced differently] [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot* 14a]; “Abraham’s family had four sons [cf. the Passover Haggadah]: The wise son is Isaac, who was prepared for any sacrifice to realize his purpose; the wicked son is Esau, who makes no effort at all to keep his birthright; the simple son is Jacob, ‘...and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents’ [Gen 25:27] and the one who knows not how to ask is Ishmael, who is identified in the Bible by his consistent silence. All speak in the Bible, even the snake, but Ishmael is silent, perhaps because of his shame over the appellation ‘the son of this bondwoman’ [Gen 21:10] or perhaps because of his inability to express himself orally (L.Y. Askénazi, lecture: L’être père et l’être fils, Dialogue et compréhension [Jerusalem: Fondation Manitou, 2005]).

¹⁰ Askénazi, “La neuvième épreuve d’Abraham,” p. 62. See also: L.Y. Askénazi, “L’Histoire des Engendrements,” in *La parole et l’écrit, I. Penser la tradition juive aujourd’hui* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 356–57; idem, “La descendance d’Abraham: Isaac-Ismaël,” in *La parole et l’écrit, II. Penser la tradition juive aujourd’hui* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005) 201–6; *Les autres Monothéismes: Convergence et Divergences*, pp. 409–83; *Lorsque le roi est présent le serviteur n’est pas libre*, pp. 411–19; idem, “Rencontre judéo-musulmane” in *La parole et l’écrit, II*, pp. 603–9; M. Koginski, *Un Hébreu d’origine juive: Hommage au rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi* (Editions Ormaya; Jerusalem: 1998), 218–19.

In the above-cited *Tosefta* of Tractate *Sotah*, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai is puzzled that Ishmael is “making sport...in the home of the righteous man Abraham,” leading R. Askénazi to interpret the history of Islam as follows: Until Muhammad, Ishmael was outside the “House of Abraham”; this was the period that Islam calls *Jahiliya* (ignorance). In Muhammad’s time, Ishmael returned to the House of Abraham with no theological problems aroused by Islam. Ishmael’s return to the God of Abraham thus takes place in the intra-Islamic moral sphere.

From here on, the words of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai help us to understand the extra-Islamic, political sphere that underscores the intensity of rivalry between Ishmael and Israel: “Sarah’s response that ‘the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son’ shows that Ishmael would quarrel with Isaac over the inheritance, claiming ‘I am the firstborn and I take a double share.’”¹¹ This is the heart of the dispute over the Land of Israel, intensified by the Muslim practice of circumcision, that accords its adherents a foothold in the Land of Israel according to the Zohar.¹²

It is no wonder that Islam has taken hold in the Land of Israel from the seventh century to the twentieth. When the British, who are uncircumcised, seized the Land of Israel, we knew that the struggle against them would be brief.¹³

3. *The Uniqueness of Rivalry with Islam*

Judaism’s rivalry with Islam differs from its rivalry with Christianity. There is no theological conflict with Islam. The conflict is a moral one: “The Muslim mind finds it difficult to think in terms of moral responsibility. Why? God decides everything. To think that man is free is profanation of the sacred.”

¹¹ See Rashi’s commentary on the biblical verse.

¹² “Come and see: Four hundred years stood the [angel] responsible for the sons of Ishmael, beseeching the Holy One, Blessed be He. He said to Him: ‘Does not he who is circumcised have a share in Thy name? He [God] said to him: ‘Yes.’ ‘And Ishmael, who is circumcised, why does not he have a share as does Isaac?’ He said to him: ‘One is circumcised appropriately and properly and one is not. Moreover, these adhere unto Me appropriately for eight days and those are distant from me for several days.’ He [the angel] said: ‘And with all this, will he not have some reward for being circumcised? That is, for the time that Ishmael was born into this world and circumcised, what did the Holy One, Blessed be He do [regarding the claim of the angel responsible for Ishmael]? He distanced the sons of Ishmael from adherence to the Supreme One, gave them a share below in the Holy Land because of their circumcision and the sons of Ishmael are destined to rule the Holy Land for a long time, when it is empty of all, just as their circumcision is empty, incomplete. And they will delay the Children of Israel from returning to their place until the credit of the Sons of Ishmael has been repaid” [Zohar, Exodus, Weekly Torah Reading *Vaera* [Exod 6:2 – 9:35], 32a, Paragraph 201, translated from Aramaic [into Hebrew] by the author of the *Sulam* commentary, Rabbi Yehuda Lev Ashlag).

¹³ Askénazi, *Le drame de l’exil*.



When an intelligent Muslim is influenced by the West, he indeed identifies the moral issue and immediately feels discomfort and certain difficulties with his religion. I was born in a Muslim country and I am very familiar with this problem. To be free is as if to challenge the sovereignty of God. To be Muslim is to be subjugated to absolute Divine will – *maktoub* [it is [all] written], as they say.¹⁴

In Islamic lands, social status, economic class, and the power of the authorities are most important of all:

Although Christianity stole the heavens of Israel [spiritual metaphysics, ethics] from us and Islam the soil of Israel [materialism, the respect inherent in property, in territory¹⁵ and in class¹⁶], we remained on the horizon for a long time. Now, we are again becoming Hebrews, again becoming Israel, in our own land and under our own heavens.¹⁷

B. FROM JEWISH IDENTITY IN ISLAMIC LANDS TO HEBREW IDENTITY
ON THE RETURN TO ZION
THE CORRELATION BETWEEN IDENTITY AND CULTURE¹⁸

When exile in Christian and Islamic lands came to an end and the components of Hebrew identity, which could be revealed only under such “challenging” conditions, became clear, it again became possible to return to Zion and rebuild a pure and refined Hebrew identity:

Ishmael dwells alongside Isaac and Jewish and Islamic theology are indeed parallel. There are no substantive theological conflicts between them... According to the biblical narrative, Ishmael quarrels with Isaac over the Promised Land, the Land of Israel. Contemporary history displays this more clearly; Ishmael does not deny that the Jews are Israel. That conflict is unique to the Christians. Ishmael simply denies the existence of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, thereby determining the nature of coexistence of Ishma-

¹⁴ Askénazi, “La descendance d’Abraham,” p. 204; R. Askénazi tended to differentiate between official Islam and the Sufi order, which he found to be more intense. He complained that French settlers in Algeria belittled Muslim theological terms, expressing their views of concepts such as *maktoub* in a blunt and superficial manner. Sunni Islam indeed decided that there is no free choice—that was a theological decision—but Shiites thought differently.

¹⁵ See M. Schwartz, “War, Peace and Territory as Viewed by Islam,” *Mahanayim*, 1 (On Judaism and Islam), (1992): 212–15 [Hebrew].

¹⁶ This is elucidated by the humiliating *dhimmi* status that Jews and Christians bore in Islamic lands.

¹⁷ So he would say in numerous lectures.

¹⁸ I have already addressed this issue in my article “Identity and History,” pp. 115–17; but I would like to include certain additional aspects concerning Christian and Islamic cultures; J. Garb, “The Chosen Will Become Herds,” *Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* (Carmel: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2005) 16, 41–42, 58, 61, 97–98 [Hebrew].



elites and Israelites over the generations, with the vicissitudes that one suffered in the lands conquered by the other....Indeed, the Jews were persecuted and humiliated severely in Arab lands, contrary to the myth, disseminated as an act of good will, declaring that they lived a secure and tranquil life there....In other words, the quarrel between Israel and the Ishmaelites did not rise heavenward but rather remained on earth...whereas Esau and Jacob are competing for substantive identity; this competition does concern heaven....In Jerusalem, various disputes determined the nature of the Jews' argument with Islam and with Christianity—Ashkenazim, in their struggle with the Christians and, on an entirely different level, Sephardim in their contest with the Islamic nations. This is the origin and deeply rooted source of the difference between the two extremes in the core and spiritual structure of the two tribes. In any event, I would like to clarify that Jacob can celebrate his victory over Ishmael only to the extent that he is truly the son of Isaac. Isaac does assume responsibility for Esau; After all, he is his father. In fact, it is only in Sephardic tradition that Judaism is able to declare its victory over Christian heresy.¹⁹

Moreover, Jewish identity in Christian and Islamic countries took shape differentially because the challenges differed:

Sephardim who remain loyal to themselves achieve more clarity in organizing thought and ritual itself because they encountered no fundamental opposition to their identity. However paradoxical it may seem, the converso phenomenon is more typical of the Ashkenazi world, as it involves a Jewish soul cast in a landscape of Christian opposition, whether religious or secularThe life of the Ashkenazi Jew is more “tragic” in the Greek sense of the term....Indeed, Jewish suffering is common to both [Sephardim and Ashkenazim], but the Ashkenazi variety bears a gloomier hue....Throughout the development of Hebrew culture by Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the true theology remained with the latter. It was as if the Ashkenazi world related to theology as a forbidden zone temporarily allocated to the Christian faith, whereas no such ban existed in a Muslim environment. Effectively, all of us, Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike, understand what we believe in only by virtue of the Sephardic theologians of the Golden Age: Maimonides, Ibn Gvirol and particularly Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, author of the *Kuzari*Yehuda Halevi charted the course to be followed subsequently by the Maharal of Prague and, in our own time, by Rabbi A. I. Kook of Jerusalem, “High Priest” of the revitalized land of the Jews....Differences in ritual and mentality thus...originate in basic relations with Ishmael on the one hand and with Esau on the other. Jacob’s prayer before Esau is not identical to that of Isaac before Ishmael because the specific problems they had to solve do not face the same direction.²⁰

¹⁹ L.Y. Askénazi, “Israel in the Exile of Islam and Christianity,” *Shevet Va’Am*, second series, A(6), (Jerusalem, 1971), 89 [Hebrew].

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 89-90; cf. L.Y. Askénazi lecture: “Ishmael, art et musique, Fondation Manitou,” (Jerusalem, 2005); idem, *Bi-Fnei mi ata omed, Introduction to Prayer*, audio CD (Fondation Manitou, 2005) [Hebrew] “The name Ishmael [Hebrew: God will hear]



C. "AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE END OF DAYS"
THE MONOTHEISTIC FAITHS AT THE END OF THE EXILE OF ISRAEL

1. *The Essence of Conflict Resolution*

Based on an analysis of contemporary events, R. Askénazi believed that all signs attest to the eventual termination of the historic dispute among Israel, Ishmael, and Edom, as the Creator, through Israel, has already bestowed the plan for its resolution upon humankind. Similarly, the human race is likely to realize its common "Abrahamic features," that rise on the foundations of the former conflict:

Judaism is the root of the positivistic religions, i.e., those based on revelation. Its outlook cannot be rooted in a "founder of the religion" but rather in the essence of the Creator's revelation, that discloses the basic truths of the world, of mankind and of its history. The unmediated divine guidance that the Jews call Torah does not come from just any divinity but rather originates with the Creator of the universe Himself and therefore only biblical prophecy can attest to the immanent truth therein and the consequent historical truth. This is the way that Jewish tradition understood its monotheism. The same God who created the universe is the judge of its history, who reveals himself before Israel to disclose the ethical laws of all humanity. This ethical code was not intended to hinder human beings from achieving their historical goals but rather to assist in attaining them. The ethical conception applies to history as a whole and most of all to human history that strives for the ultimate purpose, a quest that characterizes the spiritual world of the Hebrew mind.²¹

bears a feature according Islam knows how to pray. A Sephardic Jew feels comfortable with Ishmael's prayers but not with the prayer of the Christians; the Sephardic synagogue is built differently from the Ashkenazi one because it seeks to avoid resembling a Christian church (Askénazi, *Le drame*); R. Askénazi clarifies this through word play [based on the concluding words of Exod 24:7] "All that the Lord hath spoken will we do and listen." While Esau perceives of himself as complete [the Hebrew word for "done" is an anagram of his name], Ashkenazic Jews say "We will do," whereas Ishmael feels unmediated proximity to God and Sephardic Jews say "We will listen." When a Muslim prays, it is clear that he is praying to one god. Consequently, the Jews feel more in harmony with his prayer, which they consider impeccable. Its melody, spiritual status, simplicity, and non-ceremonial and non-ritualized approach when compared with Christianity impart a sense of comfort to Jews. The Islamic concept of "prayer," however, does not parallel the Jewish one. In Islam, prayer is not a request but an act of praise and acceptance of authority. R. Askénazi noted that the different prayer positions of the respective religions reflect their theological conceptions: Christians kneel, as do kings and high priests, thereby expressing pretension and pride that the Messiah, they claim, has already appeared (they rest on Sunday, the "eighth day"); Muslims prostrate themselves and thus express their total submission to God and the lack of free choice (they rest on Friday); finally, the Jews stand as they pray, because they face the Heavenly Tribunal (they rest on the seventh day, the Sabbath). (L.Y. Askénazi *Sod ha-Ivri*, eds. G. Ben Shmuel and I. Pivko [Jerusalem, 2005] [Hebrew], The story of my life, p. 22, pp. 81-83).

²¹ L.Y. Askénazi, "Le judaïsme et le monde moderne," in *La parole et l'écrit, I*, 487-88.



Moreover, upon the Return to Zion, an authentic Hebrew identity will emerge, the identity of Israel and all imitations thereof will pale forthwith. Christianity will then have to concede the title of “the true Israel,” having assumed certain metaphysical aspects of Hebrew identity, as did Islam, emulating the mother religion that they largely sought to supplant. It is incumbent upon the Jewish spiritual leadership to inform its Christian and Muslim counterparts of the full meaning of Hebrew identity and the nature of the people who embody it.²²

2. *Islam, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac*

R. Askénazi, who was born in an Islamic country, Algeria, was highly familiar with the Islamic faith and aware of the Arab-Israeli conflict whose solution, he claimed, would be achieved once the conflict’s ideological and spiritual roots are uncovered. After focusing on the bone of contention—the Land of Israel—R. Askénazi sought common features likely to facilitate dialogue, which was not an easy task by any means: The silence of Ishmael in the Bible is most evident, as is “the silence of contemporary Islam and its unwillingness to talk to the State of Israel.”²³

The identity of Ishmael originates in blurred Hebrew identity “Isr[a]-El – Ishma-El”; the existential brother is Ishmael; the substantive brother is Esau; Jew and Muslim are close in religiosity, especially in their prayers, but there is a vast abyss between Jew and Christian in terms of their religiosity—but not their moral conscience. When there is peace, the world will be surprised at how close we are to the way of Abraham.²⁴

On the basis of this ideological infrastructure, one may achieve resolution of the conflicts:

When universal cultures—Islam and Christianity—are honest with themselves, they recognize the authenticity of Israel as a sacred kingdom and a divine creation.²⁵

Focusing more sharply on Islam, R. Askénazi believes that the solution to the conflict may be found in the Bible. The Book of Genesis (25:8–18) describes the death of Abraham and Ishmael, in which R. Askénazi per-

²² At a “This is Your Life” celebration in his honor at Binyenei Ha’Ooma in Jerusalem, R. Askénazi was asked by moderator Emanuel Halperin to explain his participation in interfaith conferences. Jokingly, he responded that he did so as an act of “Christian charity,” noting that he believes the Jews are particularly obligated to explain the mystery of Israel’s identity in the Era of Redemption to the Christians. “We Jews are bidden to help Christians find their positive place because their frustration is excessive and the consequences thereof are fraught with danger.”

²³ Askénazi, lecture: “Ishmaël, art et musique.”

²⁴ Askénazi, *Le drame de l’exil*.

²⁵ L.Y. Askénazi, “Rencontre judéo-musulmane,” *La parole et l’écrit, II*, pp. 603–9.



ceives Ishmael's acknowledgment not only of the God of Abraham but also of the God of Isaac.²⁶ In the future, Islam will admit to the ascription of the Land of Israel to the People of Israel and thus also to the purpose of Israel. The events occur in Hebron:

"And Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre" [Gen 25:8-9].

"Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bore unto Abraham ... And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty and seven years; and he expired and died; and was gathered unto his people" [Gen 25:12, 17].

Rashi clarifies something that R. Askénazi underscores in his explanation:

Verse 12 notes that Ishmael is Abraham's son, not Abram's. A simplistic explanation would state that in the meantime, Abram became Abraham, so the biblical text uses only the more recent name. But why did the text stipulate "whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bore unto Abraham"? Moreover, how could Abraham have died "in a good old age" [i.e. happy] if his sons were locked in so fierce a confrontation? In this regard, we cite Rashi's remarks on Verse 9, particularly with reference to Isaac and Ishmael: "Hence Ishmael repented and led Isaac before him. This is the 'good old age' attributed to Abraham." We note that it takes place in Hebron. Ishmael returns from Egypt to participate in the funeral of Abraham in Hebron and admits that Isaac is in his own land, in Hebron. Here, we find the point of reconciliation between Ishmael and Isaac. For this reason, the Bible says that Ishmael "expired," a term referring only to the righteous (Rashi). The Bible emphasizes that Ishmael will be considered the son of Abraham and a righteous man when he repents regarding his attitude toward Isaac, in Hebron. This is recorded in the Torah so that we might realize it and take it into account over the generations, according to the principle that Nahmanides taught us: "The deeds of the fathers are a sign for the sons."²⁷

²⁶ Here as well, R. Askénazi clarifies the concept with a clever Hebrew play on words: "Ishmael - '...his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him ...' (Hebrew: *yado bakol veyad kol bo*) [Gen 16:12]. Abraham is represented by the word *bakol* (cf. Gen 24:1), Isaac by *mikol* (Gen 27:33) and Jacob by *kol* (Gen 33:11). Ishmael has a hand in the God of Abraham (*bakol*) but the hand of Jacob, son of Isaac (*kol*) is against Ishmael (lecture on the Book of Genesis).

²⁷ Y.L. Askénazi, "La fin du conflit Ichmaël-Isaac," in *Ki MiTzion I*, pp. 69-73; idem, "La descendance d'Abraham," pp. 201-6; 409-83.



D. CONCLUSION: JEWISH HUMANISM IN HARMONY WITH UNIVERSAL HUMANISM

R. Askénazi's philosophy is manifestly historio-centric and humanistic, even if anchored in the basic assumption that the Jews were chosen as the theological and moral leaders of all humankind.²⁸ The family of earth that was created in God's image must settle all conflicts originating in each culture's aspiration to assume a position of primacy and leadership. R. Askénazi explained that throughout history, as Christianity and later Islam struggled to assume the mantle of the true religion, they plagiarized elements from the mother religion, Judaism. Each culture bore the standard of the value it lacked and applied itself to its development: Christianity nominally strove for grace and love—the religion of love—and Islam for justice: “Muhammad's Law is by the sword.” At the End of Days, when the Exile of Israel is ended, each culture must return these “stolen goods” and return to its authentic self. Moral cooperation is indeed feasible under Heaven in the eyes of the Creator of humankind:

If Christianity will only learn to be the Diaspora of Israel,²⁹ it will resolve its own identity crisis,³⁰ and if Islam will admit to the Land of Israel, as did its ancestor Ishmael, it will thus rectify the moral flaw inherent in the religion of Islam regarding the extra-Islamic layer, as morality is the embodiment of respect for others. If Islam corrects its moral flaw at the intra-Islamic level, toward others who are near, when Ishmael returns to the God of Abraham, it is likely to correct its extra-Islamic moral flaw, toward more distant others, when it returns to the God of Isaac. In other words, Islam's recognition of Isaac is the completion of its repentance.³¹

²⁸ L.Y. Askénazi, *Misped La-Messiah*, Tome I, eds. E. Simsovic, I. Askénazi, I. Pivko (Fondation Manitou, 2006) [Hebrew]; idem, *Sod ha-Ivri*, eds. G. Ben Shmuel and I. Pivko (Jerusalem, 2005) [Hebrew]; idem, *Sod Lashon Ha-Qodesh*, Tome I, eds. S. Ben Naim, I. Askénazi, I. Pivko (Fondation Manitou, 2007) [Hebrew].

²⁹ Jean Vassal, *Les Eglises, diaspora d'Israël?*, Albin Michel, collections “Présences du judaïsme,” 1993; Charvit Yossef, “From Monologues to Possible Dialogue, Judaism's Attitude towards Christianity According to the Philosophy of R. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi (Manitou),” in *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art, and Literature, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, Volume 17*, eds. D. Golinkin, M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz, F. van der Steen (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 319–36.

³⁰ Askénazi, L. Y., Que dites-vous que je suis. *La parole et l'écrit, II*, pp. 589–94.

³¹ Some efforts in this direction may be attributed to Imam Abdul Hadi Palazzi of Italy, who declares that the Cave of Machpelah and the Land of Israel belong to the Jewish People. He belongs to the Sufi order of Islam and even explains that because he is in Europe, he can allow himself to issue such declarations. Sheikh Abdel-Salaam Manasra, Head of the Qadiri Sufi order in Israel (the oldest Sufi order in the world), is also active in promoting interfaith understanding. The order was founded by Qadiri Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1128), who instituted a way of life that emphasizes introspection, love of knowledge and science and sharing knowledge with adherents of other religions (“the



At the same time, each culture must refrain from devoting itself to the development of one exclusive value, as such efforts would be doomed to failure; instead, each must allow Israel to return to the principle of moral unity:³²

What Israeli-Hebrew identity strives for is success of the Divine Plan and all the values it embodies. This is the principle of unity. It did not succeed in instituting any kind of humanism. Each humanistic school launched a sole value and this is its resounding failure....Hebrew identity must accompany all moral revolutions and it must know when to dissociate itself from them and carry out the independent Hebrew revolution that entails dissemination of unity among all values....Unity of moral values should be accorded priority. Selection of one value that reigns supreme and at times even vitiates other values is one of the long-standing characteristics of idolatry that is manifested today as ideology. Through the unity of Creation, man reaches unity of his values and moral virtues. Moral unity is what we call *qedushah* (holiness) in Hebrew.³³

path of Abraham”). This is undoubtedly a moderate and tolerant approach that emphasizes the essentiality of interfaith dialogue.

³² L.Y. Askénazi, “Révolution,” in *La parole et l’écrit, I*, p. 150.

³³ L.Y. Askénazi, “La notion de sainteté dans la pensée du Rav Kook,” in *La parole et l’écrit, I*, pp. 109–25; Koginski, *Un Hébreu d’origine juive*, pp. 257–58.



