*Nabih Bashir - Summary of Previous Research*

My research interest in medieval Judeo-Arabic culture developed out of an extended journey into the roots of religious identities within contemporary Israel, with a multidisciplinary approach towards social sciences and humanities disciplines.

In my examination of contemporary Jewish society in Israel, I focused on the emergence of two contemporary religious-political movements. First, I published a monograph on the *Shas* ultra-Orthodox movement in Israel. This movement was seen as a distinctly modern *Mizrahi* responseto the supposed cultural hegemony of the Western Jews in Israel and the concurrent neglect of *Mizrahi* modes of religiosity, while in reality it was very much rooted in the Western Jewish modes of religiosity. In another monograph, *Historia Sacra: Returning to the Sacred History – Ultra-Orthodox Jews and Zionism*, I analyzed the emergence of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twenty-first century, focusing in particular on the nationalist and Zionist ultra-Orthodox communities (Israelis have labeled members of these communites, in its most recent iteration, as *hardal*). Using Weberian socio-cultural methodology, I concluded that the dialectal interaction between ultra-Orthodox Jews and Zionism led certain influential ultra-Orthodox Jewish thinkers to adopt, fuse, and reconstruct Zionist ideology using traditional Jewish vocabulary and content. In turn, the recent growth of the *hardal* movement has led to increasingly pervasive religious content within Zionist ideology and greater attention to the Jewish religious identity and goals of the State of Israel.

My discovery of the increasing emphasis on Jewish identity within contemporary Israeli writings has motivated me to explore the numerous attempts made by pre-modern sources in dealing with Jewish identity. I began with traditional sources followed by an examination of Judah Halevi's *The Kuzari*, the most frequently cited medieval source in both academic and non- academic writings on modern Jewish identity in Israel. Given the contemporary, almost exclusive, focus on *Kuzari*’s ideology of Jewish "chosenness" (election), I was surprised to discover the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical richness of this text, and the difficulty in understanding its main arguments outside of its medieval Islamicate context. For example, one of Halevi's main arguments regarding Israel’s chosenness can be evaluated within the context of medieval Sunni/Shi'a debates regarding the necessary qualities of prophets. Other possible contexts include examining the medieval polemical context between the Arabs and the Persians regarding the “superior” people, or – alternatively – as a Jewish response to the basic claim of Christianity. Later on comes the attempt, within Islam, to confiscate the divine chosenness of the people of Israel. Halevi’s emphasize on the idea of Israel as God’s chosen people is primordial, permanent, eternal, and inherited exclusively within the Israelis only, therefore it cannot be transmitted to other individuals, peoples, or religions. Therefore, as we can see, the entire issue under discussion is closely related to its context. However, Halevi incorporated key Islamic notions while simultaenously situating these ideas within the Jewish tradition by using *midrashic* and other references. When the *Kuzari* was translated into Hebrew and uprooted from its natural environment, the transmission of its ideas was understood in very different ways. The resulting annotated edition of the *Kuzari*, transliterated from Arabic, is my modest contribution towards highlighting this richness by situating the ideas, language, and symbolism of the book in the multi-vocal cultural environment of medieval Islamic civilization and Judeo-Arabic culture. My forays into Jewish identity thus evolved more and more into a direct interest in medieval Jewish intellectual history in the Islamicate world.

My dissertation, on tenth century Jewish rationalist conceptions of angels, developed out of a growing interest in one of Halevi's predecessors and main influences, Saadia Gaon (d. 942), the Rabbinite head of the Jewish academy in Baghdad. While Saadia Gaon's contributions to Jewish thought are widely recognized, the scope of his extraordinary philosophical, intellectual, and cultural abilities has yet to be fully understood. By situating Saadia Gaon's writings in the fertile intellectual environment of his time, my study illuminates the *symbiotic* nature of medieval shared Islamicate culture, to use S. D. Goitein's term, i.e. a mutually beneficial relationship between surrounding cultures and the Jewish communities, and emphasizing one of the most exciting humanist Jewish approaches.

In parallel, the study demonstrates Saadia Gaon's enormous contribution towards re-shaping the Jewish religion of his time, which was oriented primarily to the Talmud and midrashic literature, and lacked the articulated philosophical and theological principles that were critical for many of his contemporary Jewish intellectuals.

In the anti-anthropomorphic intellectual ferment of tenth century Baghdad, Jewish rationalist thinkers wrestled with the concept of angels. Tenth century Baghdad was considered a flourishing metropolis enriched by diverse cultures, languages, religions, sects, and intellectual schools. Public debates and polemical writings, which brought these diverse traditions into conversation, were widespread throughout the Mediterranean in general and in Baghdad in particular. In debates and polemics, philosophy and speculative argumentation served as a common ground on which each group could base its arguments.

My dissertation proceeded first with an historical examination of the traditional Jewish sources, and an examination of the Islamic and Christian intellectual environments, revealing and clarifying the different intellectual sources that influenced Saadia Gaon. Then I examined his exegetical treatment of problematic scriptural passages related to angels, followed by an analysis of Saadia’s philosophical writings on the relationship between angels and God on the one hand and between angels and human beings on the other.

During my research on Saadia Gaon, I discovered a close proximity between Christian traditions of exposition, particularly the Syriac exegetical works that would have surrounded Saadia Gaon in Baghdad, and contemporary Jewish exegeses, including those of Saadia Gaon himself. This proximity is also reflected in both the methods and strategies of the expositions as well as the aims underpinning these expositions, which would empower community members via the presentation of humanistic exegeses of the Bible and also repel any attraction to Islam. The most outstanding example is that of the Syrian theologian and commentator, Moshe Bar Kepha, who lived in northern Iraq (d. 903).

One of the main arguments of this study is that Saadia Gaon regarded human beings as the exclusive goal of creation, believing that angels were created mainly to serve human beings in their worldly life. We can find some elements of Saadia's perspective dispersed – and not in any systematic way – in older Jewish midrashim, and more systematically in *Twenty Chapters,* the only extant book of ninth century Jewish scholar Dawud Ibn Marwan Al-Muqammas from the Fertile Crescent region. Other rich sources for this study are the Syriac and Antioch exegeses, such as those of Al-Muqammas' contemporary Moshe Bar Kepha. By examining the exegesis of Bar Kepha, we discover the deep affinity between Bar Kepha and Saadia Gaon. Saadia's revolutionarily humanistic perspective is the prism through which he not only interpreted the biblical text, but also constituted the image and status of the human being in the created world.

My findings led me to write and publish an article on this important subject: “A Reexamination of Saadya Gaon’s Dictum ‘Humankind is more sublime than Angels,’” published in *Ginzei Qedem* (no. 14, 2018, pp. 9-54, Hebrew). It should be noted that an English version of this article will be soon submitted for publication in one of the leading journals of the field.

Based on a newly discovered Geniza fragment (TS.AS.168.38), the article argues that Saadia’s conception of man as superior to angels constitutes his argument that man is the final and absolute purpose of the created world. We cannot fully understand his argument without taking into consideration his revolutionarily humanistic perspective, therefore, much effort must be invested in exposing Saadia's humanistic overall approach.

It is important to note that almost all later Jewish exegetes, other than Maimonides, have restricted the meaning of the word "human being" exclusively to the Israelis, based on the Talmudic dictum (attributed to the great sage [R. Shimon Bar Yohai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_bar_Yochai" \o "https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_bar_Yochai)) that "You (Israelis) are called Adam/human-being [in the Bible, according to Num. 19:14], while the non-Jews are not called Adam/human-being” (*Yevamot* 61a; *Bava Metzia* 114b; *Keritut* 6b), saying that gentiles (*goyim*, or non-Jews) are considered as “beasts in human shape,” as much of the exegetes asserted (e.g. *[Tosafot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tosafot" \o "https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tosafot)*, Avodah Zarah 3a; R. Isaac Arama, Mahral of Prague and many others).

Early authorities are not the only ones who have not succeeded in penetrating the innermost levels of Saadia's conception of angels. Modern scholars and Jewish enlightenment intellectuals, such as Samuel David Luzzatto, Jacob Gutmann, Jacob Mann, and Simon Rabidovitz, have all failed as well.