*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. It is informed by a multidisciplinary approach drawing on disciplines in both social sciences and the humanities.

In my examination of contemporary Jewish society in Israel, I focused on the emergence of two contemporary religio-political movements. First, I published a monograph on the *Shas* ultra-Orthodox movement in Israel. This movement emerged as a distinctly modern *Mizrahi* phenomenon, ostensibly responding to the cultural hegemony of Western Jews in Israel and the attendant neglect of *Mizrahi* modes of religiosity. In reality, however, the movement was very much rooted in 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 these communities, in their most recent iteration, *Hardal*, a Hebrew acronym for Ultra-Orthodox Religious Zionist). Using Weberian socio-cultural methodology, I argued 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* segment 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 realization 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 and canonical authoritative sources, as well as an examination of Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*, the most frequently cited medieval source in both academic and non-academic writings on modern Jewish identity in Israel. Given the almost exclusive focus on the *Kuzari*’s ideology of Jewish “chosenness” (election) in contemporary discourse, I was surprised to discover the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical richness of this text, and the impossibility of correctly 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’ite debates regarding the necessary qualities of prophets. It can also be understood against the backdrop of medieval polemics between Arabs and Persians regarding the “superior” people. Alternatively, it can be contextualized as a Jewish response to the foundational claims of Christianity or, later, to the Islamic attempt to coopt the divine chosenness of the people of Israel. Halevi emphasizes that the status of the People of Israel as God’s chosen people is primordial, permanent, eternal, and inherited exclusively among Jews – 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. Halevi, however, incorporated key Islamic ideas, which he situated within the Jewish tradition by using *midrashic* and other references. When the *Kuzari* was translated from Judeo-Arabic into Hebrew and thus uprooted from its natural environment, its newly transmitted ideas came to be understood in very different ways. My own modest contribution has been an annotated, transliterated edition of the *Kuzari* in literary Arabic. This edition helps to highlight the book’s richness by situating its ideas, language, and symbolism within the multi-vocal cultural environment of medieval Islamic civilization in general and Judeo-Arabic culture in particular. My foray into Jewish identity thus evolved more and more into a direct interest in medieval Jewish intellectual history in the Islamicate world.

My PhD dissertation, on the tenth-century Jewish rationalist conceptions of angels, developed out of a growing interest in one of Halevi’s predecessors and main sources of influences, Saadia Gaon (d. 942), the head of the Rabbanite academy in Baghdad. While Saadia Gaon’s contributions to Jewish thought are widely recognized, the scope of his extraordinary philosophical, intellectual, and cultural world is yet to be fully appreciated. By situating Saadia Gaon’s writings in the fertile intellectual environment of his time, my study illuminated the *symbiotic* nature of the relationship between Jewish communities and surrounding cultures within a shared medieval Islamicate cultural environment, to use S. D. Goitein’s term. At the same time, it shed light on one of the most exciting humanist Jewish approaches.

In parallel, the study demonstrated Saadia Gaon’s enormous contribution to the re-shaping of the Jewish religion in his time. Previously, Judaism was anchored primarily in 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 from an historical examination of the traditional Jewish sources, as well as of the Islamic and Christian intellectual environments, revealing and clarifying the different intellectual sources that influenced Saadia Gaon. I then examined his exegetical treatment of problematic scriptural passages relating 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 affinity between Christian traditions of exposition, particularly the Syriac exegetical works that must have surrounded Saadia Gaon in Baghdad, and contemporaneous Jewish exegeses, including those of Saadia Gaon himself. This affinity is reflected in the methods and strategies of the expositions, as well as their underpinning aims, namely, to empower community members via the presentation of humanistic exegeses of the Bible, and to 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, and that he believed angels were created mainly to serve human beings in their worldly life. We can find some elements of Saadia’s perspective dispersed, unsystematically, in older Jewish *Midrashim*, and more methodically in *Twenty Chapters,* the only extant book of the ninth-century Jewish scholar Dawud Ibn Marwan Al-Muqammas. Other sources for this study were the Syriac and Antioch exegetes, 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 subject: “A Reexamination of Saadya Gaon’s Dictum ‘Humankind is more sublime than Angels,’” published recently in *Ginzei Qedem* (no. 14, 2018, pp. 9-54, Hebrew). An English version of this article will be soon submitted for publication in one of the leading journals in 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 complements 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. Early authorities are not the only ones who did not succeed 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, also failed in this endeavor.

It is important to note that almost all later Jewish exegetes, with the important exception of Maimonides and some of his followers, applied the descriptor “human being” exclusively to Jews, based on the Talmudic dictum (attributed to [R. Shimon Bar Yohai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_bar_Yochai)) that “You (Israelites) are called [in the Bible] Adam/human-being [according to Num. 19:14], while the non-Jews are not called [in the Bible] Adam/human-being” (*Yevamot* 61a; *Bava Metzia* 114b; *Keritut* 6b). According to this view, gentiles (*goyim*, or non-Jews) are considered as “beasts in human shape,” as many of the exegetes asserted (e.g. [*Tosafot*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tosafot), Avodah Zarah 3a; R. Isaac Arama, Mahral of Prague and many others).