**'I 'was asked by a clever gentile ':**

**Jewish-Muslim polemic in Morocco in the Early Modern period**

Moroccan Jews was involved in inter-religious polemics as early as the Middle Ages. For instance, at 1179 a debate took place in Ceuta, a port city on the north. The participants were a Genoan citizen named Guglielmo Alfachino and a local Jew named Abraham. Abraham asked questions and Alfachino responded. Abraham was ultimately convinced and with his family traveled to the holy land where they were baptized into the Christianity in the Jordan River (Limor 1991, 35-38).

In the late Fourteenth century a Jew, also from Ceuta, converted to Islam, he changed his name to ʿAbū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-ʾIslāmī and convinced his family to do the same.[[1]](#footnote-1) Sixteen years after his conversion, he wrote a polemical anti-Jewish essay titled 'as-Sayf al-Mamdūd fī Radd ʿalā ʾAḥbār al-Yahūd' (The Outstretched Sword for Refuting the Rabbis of the Jews). In his treatise ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq demonstrates familiarity with and use of Jewish sources as well as originality and independent (Perlmann 1940\41, Lazarus-Yafeh 1990; 'Abd al-Haqq 1998; Alfonso 2010; Mazuz 2016; Mazuz 2017).

Due to the Portuguese conquered of several coastal cities in Morocco in the Fifteenth century, Moroccan Jews continued to be involved in interreligious debate in the late Middle Ages as well. The Portuguese established fortresses along the Atlantic coast, consequently the level of missionary activity in Morocco increased and religious disputations took place between Franciscan monks and the Jews of Fez, Tétouan, and Ceuta (Hirschberg 1965, 322-324; Bashan 1980, 60; Huss 2000, 6-7).[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Jewish-Christian debate in Morocco continued into the Early Modern period. Following the death of Don Sebastian, Portugal’s young king, in the Battle of Alcácer Quibir (al-Qaṣr al-kabīr)in north Morocco in 1578, many of his soldiers were taken captive and imprisoned in Fez’s Jewish quarter (Garcia-Arenal 2009, 6-21). As a result a religious polemic arose between the Jewish residents and the Portuguese Christian captives (Lipiner 1982; Ohana 2018, 132-133). At the first half of the Seventeen century, in three of his public sermons, R. Saul Serero from Fez, challenged and refuted Christian dogma. In one of these cases, Serero was required to debate Christian doctrine in response to a Jewish converso’s claims (Ohana 2018).[[3]](#footnote-3) In the first half of the Eighteenth century, R. Khalifa Ben-Malka from Agadir had a series of interreligious debates with his Christian co-workers, both Catholics and Protestants (Ohana 2024).

The Jewish-Christian debate in Morocco did not remain oral, but were also written down. Estevao Dias, an ex-converso undertook a short journey to Marrakesh in 1581, and there he wrote the first draft of his essay 'Marrakesh Dialogues', completing it in Antwerp two years later. (Wilke 2014). At the same time, after living in Morocco during the first third of the Seventeenth century, John Harrison, an English diplomatic legate, wrote an anti-Jewish essay focused on one of the medieval disputations’ foundational tropes: Had the Messiah already appeared or not? (Garcia-Arenal & Wiegers 2003, 75).

If so, in the Early Modern period, Moroccan Jews continued to take part in the Jewish-Christian polemic, and academic research has paid a lot of attention to this. But were the Moroccan Jews also involved in an interreligious debate with their Muslim neighbors during the aforementioned period? Did a Jewish-Muslim polemic was also exist on Morocco soil in the Early Modern period? So far the academic research has focused on the Muslim-Christian polemic at the period in question.

For instance, Ferrero-Hernandez points to a religious disputation that took place in Marrakesh (c. 1646-1670) between the Franciscan friar Pedro de Alcantara and the *Talbe* (religious scholar) ʿAbdallāh Oropesa. She reveals that notwithstanding the display of kindness, a real confrontation took place between the two interlocutors, confronting their diverse interpretations of Islam and Christianity. Moreover, each wished to attract his opponent toward his own religion, marshalling arguments that he considered enticing and convincing as well as conclusive (Ferrero Henandez 2019).

Wiegers and Garcia-Arenal draw our attention to the request of Marrakech Sultan Mawlay Zaydān as-Saʿdī (r. 1608-1627) from Muhamad Alguazir a Morisco (a descendant of Spanish Muslims who converted under duress to Roman Catholicism), to write an anti-Christian essay. The background to this request was a case where the Moroccan ambassador to the Netherlands, ʾAḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Haytī al-Mārūnī, was questioned regarding the Muslim view of Jesus by Prince Maurice of Orange, a Protestant, and his Catholic brother-in-law, Prince Manuel of Portugal. In his treatise, written in Spanish, Alguazir wished to steer Christians away from their heretical belief in the Trinity and lead them toward a belief in the divine Unity. Alguazir’s treatise was versified by ʾIbrāhīm Ṭaybilī, a Morisco exiled in Tunisia, with the aim of teaching the Spanish-speaking Morisco exiles about the boundaries between Christianity and Islam, and contributing to their re-Islamization, and thus he addressed a different audience than the original one (Wiegers & Garcia-Arenal 2020).

The polemical texts written in the Maghrib by Moriscos constitute a commentary upon and rejection of Catholic dogmas. These texts different from anti-Christian polemical texts written by Muslim on the Iberian Peninsula in earlier time. For example several Morisco authors show an awareness of the religious polemics going between Protestants and Catholic, and they made used of the Protestant arguments in several ways (Cardaillac 1977, 309-312; Wiegers 1995).

Against this rich and lively background of interreligious polemics that took place in Morocco in the Early Modern period between Jews and Christians as well as between Muslims and Christians, the present study seeks to expand the scope towards Jewish-Muslim polemic in the aforementioned period, and to fill the knowledge gap.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**B. The Jewish-Muslim Polemic in Meknes: participants and circumstances**

R. Petahia (פתחיה)Mordechai Berdugo (1764- 1820) from Meknes, is a descendant of the Berdugo family that produced many sages who led the city's Jews from the second half of the Seventeenth century until the Twentieth century, among them the great R. Raphael Berdugo (1747-1821).[[5]](#footnote-5) Petahia Mordechai Berdugo's grandfather is R. Mordechai Berdugo (1715-1762), also known as המרבי"ץ; his father is R. Yekutiel Berdugo (1736-1801); and his brother is R. Yaakov Berdugo (1786- 1841), all three of them served as rabbis and judges in Meknes and authored essays in a variety of fields (Ben-Naim 1931, 70a, 78a, 87b, 104a).

Berdugo himself was one of the sages of the city at the turn of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, he was highly recognized by his Moroccan rabbinic contemporaries, who often consulted him on Halacha matters.[[6]](#footnote-6) Berdugo composed two books: 1. פיתוחי חותם, a commentary to the Babylon Talmud. 2. נופת צופים a responsa. This legal work divided into four parts as is customary in Jewish Halachic literature. The first part 'Orach Chayim' also includes questions that Berdugo was asked, and answered, on non-Halachatic matters like דברי חז"ל. In this subsection Berdugo also described a debate he had with a Muslim scholar.

As well-known interreligious debates between Muslims and Jews (and Christians) were held in Baghdad, as well as in other cities such as Cairo and Ramle during the Middle Ages. Those debates (maǧālis), which can also be referred to as discussion salons, were held in private or in the courts of the local rulers and their viziers. Those debates have clearly established rules and etiquette, likewise the debater were allowed to base their arguments exclusively on arguments of reason, not on their Scripture or religious tradition (Lazarus-Yafeh 1999).

As noted above Berdugo documented and described the debated he participated in among the other Non-Halachic questions he was asked. By doing so he joined a long line of Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages, rabbinic and Karaites alike, who from time to time referred in their various compositions- including response and legal literature, Biblical exegesis, poetry, homilies, and historical and theological or philosophical treatises- to the arguments made by Muslim scholars, such as Se'adyah Ga'on, Daniel al-Qumisi, Salom b. Yeruham, Japheth b. 'Eli, Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, ʿAlī b. Sulaymān, Judah Ha-Levi, Abraham ibn Da'ud, Moses Maimonides, Nathaniel al-Fayyumi, and others. Only a few devoted exclusive treatise on the subject such as Samuel b. Hophni Ga'on, ʾAbū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb b. ʾIsḥāq al-Qirqisānī, Shlomoh ibn Aadret, and Shim'on ben Semah Duran (Bousek 2020; Mazuz 2021, 950-957, 960-963) . At the Early Modern period, Jewish scholars as well addressed in their essays to the Muslim doctrine from time to time, but sometimes behind this interreligious debate stand a specific local historical context, such as the spread of the Sabbatarian movement, as in the case of Joseph Sambari (Jacobs 2007).

The year in which the debate took place is not recorded by Berdugo, however it can be determined that its happen before the year 1801, since at a certain point Berdugo mentioned his father and it is implied from his words that his father was still alive, and since Berdugo's father died in the mentioned year it can be concluded that the debate did not occur later than that.

Unfortunately Berdugo did not mention also the name of his Muslim scholar interlocutor, and he remains anonymous. Berdugo's wording implies that the debate was initiated by the Muslim scholar,'I was asked by clever gentile'. It is very possible that Berdugo would not consider to initiate a religious debate because the Islamic law prescribes capital punishment for those who offend Islam and especially Muhammad. In addition, we should bear in mind that as a Jew Berdugo was granted only limited legal status (dhimmi- non-Muslim monotheists living under Islamic rule).

Moreover, it is most likely that Berdugo was involved in this debate as an adult (it is unlikely that the Muslim scholar would have addressed a young man) and therefore it can be assumed that the debate took place around the difficult events that occurred under the rule of Mawlay al-Yazīd b. Muḥammad (1750-1792). During his short reign (1790- 1792), many Jewish communities, such as Tetouan, Fez, Tafilalt and others, were brutally attacked. The Jewish community in Meknes also suffered greatly from murder, rape and looting. As a result of the disturbances the Jewish community life in the city was shut down for many months. The riots had the greatest impact on Meknes Jews, and its poets, such as David ben Hassin, יעקב אלמליח ,ושלמה חלוואה, wrote many laments describing them ((חזן ואלבאז 1999; שטרית 2017.

Likewise the contemporary poet and mystic pietist of Meknes Sīdī Qaddūr al-ʿAlamī (1741-1850) compose poem which its direct targets are Muslim of Jewish ancestry (Bildiyyin); however at the conclusion of the poem he refers exclusively to Jews, and no longer mentions the Bildiyyin (Stillman 2021).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Yet, Berdugo characterized the Muslim scholar in a very positive way, 'honorable and willing to look for the truth'. In the first part of the debate, the Meknesi scholar raised his arguments and Berdugo responded, in the second part he gave Berdugo the opportunity to make his own arguments against the Muslim faith. Therefore, the current discussion will follow this division.

It is interesting to note that Berdugo mentions only two earlier Jewish sources that dealt with the Jewish-Muslim polemic. The first one is Maimonides' 'Iggereth Teiman' (Epistle to Yemen), although Berdugo refers to only one minor notion, that there are to two types of groups trying to convert Israel, one by force of arms and the other by subtle words (Berdugo 13b). Likewise, he does not refer, at least not directly, to the other cases in which Maimonides faced with the Muslim faith. The second is Shim'on b. Semah Duran's (the Rashbas 1361-1444) 'Magen Avot', regarding the Muslims' lack of knowledge of God's name (as will be explained later). Berdugo does not refer, at least not directly, to the other part of this work 'Queshet u-magen' (Bow and Shield), a dual polemic against Christianity and Islam.

Of course, there is a possibility that the debate described by Berdugo did not took place in reality, and it is only theoretical/literary one. Yet even if so, this theoretical debate still testifies to the need of a Moroccan Jewish scholar to confront the Muslim doctrine, to respond to its claims against Judaism and to challenge several of its principles faith.

**C.** **'I 'was asked by a clever gentile'**

Early Islamic writers made three common arguments against Judaism: 1. The Hebrew Bible was subjected to textual and/or interpretative alteration by the Jews themselves (taḥrīf/ tabdīl). This argument intertwined another one regarding the lack of reliable transmission (tawātur) in the Judaism 2. The Hebrew Bible (and the laws of Judaism) have been abrogated (nasḫ) and replaced by the Qur'an and the laws of Islam. 3. The Hebrew Bible contains references to Muhammad's advent and mission, Muslim polemicists referred to them as 'evidence/signs of prophethood' (ʾaʿlam an-nubuwwa) (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992; Bousek 2020, 19-27; Mazuz 2021, 949-950).

The Qur'an represents almost all of those themes, and later generation of Muslims scholars develop it further and reformulate. Among the medieval Muslim authors whose polemical works had the greatest influence are Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba (d. 1064) and a Jewish convert to Islam from Baghdad, as-Samawāl al-Maġribī (d. 1175). Jewish authors responded to all three mentioned these in varying degrees, but their maim focus was on the question of the abrogation of Mosaic Law by the subsequent revelations of the prophets Jesus and Muhammad.

Often time Muslim polemicists associated with the abrogation (nasḫ) and taḥrīf of the Torah an argument that the people of Israel were no longer the chosen one and that the Muslim had taken their place. They claimed that destruction of the Jewish kingdom, their loss of national sovereignty and political inferiority, which ended in their expulsion from their homeland, are all evidences of God's wrath at his chosen people for refusing to accept the new religion, and a sign of the abrogation of Jewish religion. According to Ibn Ḥazam, for instance, early Muslim victories over the Jewish tribes in Arabia constitute a clear historical proof of God's wish to abrogate Judaism (Bousek, 2020, 45-46). The use of this type of historical argument in religious polemics stemmed from the perception of historical reality as being determined by God.

This kind of argument appeared in the Muslim-Jewish polemic discussed in this study. The Meknesi Muslim scholar open his debate with the historical argument in order to prove the righteousness of the Islamic faith and the irrelevance of the Jewish one. He suggested that Muslims nations' success and prosperity provided validation of the Muslim faith; at the same time, Israel’s existence as a despised minority in exile attests to their error and to God’s subsequent rejection of them.

הלא לכם להאמין לדתינו בראותכם גודל המעלה והמנוחה [...] הרוחה, ההלל והשמחה לכל הנספח ונלוה אלינו. והערים גדולות ובצורות מאד [...] לפרסם דתינו. ומה נאנחה דתכם [...] מלבד גלותכם ודלותכם נבזים ושפלים בעיני העמים [...] שכל זה מודיע ומגלה רצון האל וחפצו אתנו וקצפו וחמתו עליכם (Berdugo 12b)

Historical arguments were not considered particularly powerful (in contrast to exegetical or logical ones) in interreligious polemics in the Middle Ages, since historical reality is open to interpretation, thus both sides interpreted the historical reality in light of their own worldviews (Lasker 1977, 7-9). Indeed, the Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages offered a different interpretation to the lowly existence of the Jews in exile, they did not concur the political inferiority and subjugation of the Jews as a reflection of God forsake them nor their religion. For instance, al-Qirqisānī suggested that the Jewish misfortune resulted from their neglect and violation of God's commandments. Nathanael ibn Fayyumi states that the Jews suffer because they are God's chosen people; as father reproaches his son, so God chastises Israel in order to purify them from their sins. Their very survival despite the persecution is undeniable evidence of God's protection (Bousek 2020, 46-47). In the Early Modern period as well Jewish thinkers, such as, Zechariah al-Dahiri, argued that the exile was a punishment for sins, and that God was punishing Israel as a father punishes his son (Mazuz 2018, 71).

Berdugo, however, takes a different path. In his response he allegedly accepted the validity of the historical argument, and used it to reject the conclusion of his interlocutor. He argued that if we follow the perception that the success of a nation indicates the validation of her religious, then we must admit the Christian religious truth as well – although according to Islam (and Judaism) Christianity is idolatry and pagan worship - since Christian nations are very successful and enjoy great prosperity.

שאם רוב ההצלחה מעידה על אמיתות הדת, הלא בני אדום לדעתיכם הם כופרים ועובדי הצלם, והן הם בהצלחות רבות ועצומות כמפורסם [...] האם יש דעת נפסד ומקולקל ומעופש כזה, ואעפ"ך [ואף על פי כן] הממלכה נכונה בידם. (Berdugo 12b)

This rhetorical device, in which the speaker accepts his opponent’s fundamental assumption for the sake of argument and then tries to convince his opponent that based upon his own assumptions, his arguments are weak, was common in medieval polemical disputations (Talmadge 1981, 16).

At this point, the Muslim scholar accepted the assumption that the Jews were in exile because of their sins, but then he raised a following question: why the exile lasted so long? The Jewish people have been suffering for lots of years, and many died for their religious faith.

הלא כי אלוהים בשמים חנון ורחום הוא. ומדוע היתה רוב ההעלמה ממנו עליכם כ"כ מהשנים. והימים רבים והעצומים, כי אם מקוה מכם ההכנעה והשפלות לפני רוממותו, הלא יש בכם די והותר. והרבה מכם מתו על הדת הנבחרת, והרבה גלו. והרבה הענו ובחרו מות מחיים, ומה יוסיף עוד כוח אנוש לסבול יותר מזה (Berdugo 12b)

Although the above quote is of the Muslim sage, it is not impossible to attribute these same wondering about the continued suffering of the Jewish people to Meknes Jews as well as, and to Berdugo himself. Due to the low living conditions in exile, there were Jews who converted in order to escape the difficult situation that their original religion condemned them to. There were also some Moroccan Jews who converted to Islam hopefully that being part of the majority society would improve their existence (Garcia-Arenal 1987; Fenton 2019).

What is God waiting for, asked the Muslim scholar, to everyone to be righteous? He explained that once he heard from the Jews that the Messiah would only come in a generation where everyone is righteous or wicked. This casual remark teaches us that this was not the first time he had a conversation with Jewish scholars (given the assumption that Berdugo recorded an event that occurred in reality). However he rejected this concept on the grounds that this is impossible. It is not possible that there should not be even one righteous person in the world, and it is not possible that there should not be even one wicked person in the world.

In his response, Berdugo focused on the first part of his interlocutor's argument, and did not address the second part. He did not deny (nor could he deny) the suffering of the Jewish people in this world, rather he reasoned it out. Berdugo explained that Israel has no share and inheritance in this world, and therefore their existence in this world is miserable. However, Israel have a great share in the upcoming world, so God will reward them in that one, which is the world that exists forever (as opposed to this world).

שאלהי עולם ה', אשר שתי העולמות ערוכות לפניו, והשגחתו ומלכותו עליהם משלה, בירר להם [ל]ידידיו העולם הנצחי והקיים, אשר לו ישלוט בו כליון ואבדון. ואנחנו בחיים, לפי שלא ראינו העונג הנצחי והרוחני, נטיח ונתרעם. והוא היודע ועד כי לטוב לנו. עשה לנו את כל זה להטיבנו באחריתנו. (Berdugo 12b)

At this point the Muslim scholar picks up this argument and turns it against his Jewish interlocutor. If Israel has no share in this world so how came that in the past God performed great miracles for the Jewish people? Moreover, the inevitable conclusion is that the Jewish existence in exile is a consequence of the fact that they have no part in this world; If so why do the Jewish people claim that they condemned to exile for their sins? And why do they pray a lot to get out of this, prayers will not help them, since their destiny is to be exile because they do not have part in this world.

אם כדבריך למה עשה לכם כל הגדולות והנוראות בימי קדם והלא אין לכם בעוה"ז עד מדרך כף רגל. ועוד למה אתם אומרים בעונותיכם נמכרתם ונמסרתם לגלות ולדלות, הלא גם כי תרבו תפילה ומעשיכם רצויים בעיניו, כך הוא משפטכם להיות דלים ושפלים באשר אין לכם חלק ונחלה בעולם הזה. (Berdugo 12b)

Berdugo offered three different answers to his colleague's question why God performed miracles for Israel even though they have no part in this world: 1. To deter the Gentiles from harming Israel. 2. To strengthen Israel's spirit and confidence in God in the long exile expected of them. 3. Because God wanted to give Israel the Torah, and it is not appropriate that He give it to a people in a despicable state. As for the conclusion drawn by his interlocutor that the existence of the Jewish people in exile is inevitable because of the decree that they have no part in this world, Berdugo argued that in fact this decree is not final and absolute, since (as any decree) it can be reversed and annulled by virtue of extreme righteousness, 'כי זכות גדולה משנה מזל'. However, due to our sins, the decree remained in effect, and we were not redeemed yet.

If so, replied the Muslim Scholar, You can no longer hope for the coming of the Messiah. To this Berdugo replied that our faith in the coming of the Messiah is extremely strong because מעשה אבות סימן לבנים''. Just as Jacob the patriarch suffered various troubles during his life, from his twin brother Esau, from his father-in-law Laban, from the sale of his favorite son Yosef, and more, but eventually he reached the rest and inheritance at the end of his life in Egypt, so the Jewish people will ultimately be redeemed. In order to strengthen his argument that what happened to the fathers will also happen to their sons, Berdugo interpreted the verses that describe Isaac and his servants re-digging the wells that his father, Abraham the patriarch, had previously dug, and the names he gave them, also following his father (Genesis 26, 18).

The concept of מעשה אבות סימן לבנים was widely accepted among Jewish thinkers and commentators. Nachmanides often use typological interpretation in his commentary on the Bible, and so the mentioned concept was basic one according to him. Nachmanides expanded the typological interpretative found already in חז"ל and concluded that the various events that happened to the patriarchs of the nation will happen to the entire nation as well.[[8]](#footnote-8) Hass argue that the purpose of Nachmanides typological interpretations was primarily polemical, anti-Christian (Hass 2004). Following Nachmanides, many Jewish commentators adopted this this concept, but not necessarily for polemical purpose (Saperstein, 1993\4), among them Moroccan rabbi as well, such as Shaul Serero (1566- 1655) (Ohana 2021, 196-207).

**D. 'What do you claim about our religion?'**

In the second part of the debate the Muslim scholar asked Berdugo what are his arguments about the Muslim religion. Berdugo takes the opportunity, but unlike the first part of the debate which is a dialogue of question and answer, this time Berdogo's response, at least the recorded one, is a monologue at the end of which the debate ends.

Berdugo's argument focuses on the Muslim nasḫ argument- that the Hebrew Bible and the laws of Judaism have been abrogated and replaced by the Qur'an and the laws of Islam- although without naming it.

Early Muslim scholars refer to that doctrine mainly to inner contradictions between different Qur'anic verses or between the Qur'an and the Sunna tradition. The idea was that later revelation or saying is the legally one.[[9]](#footnote-9) In polemical literature the abrogation was used in the same manner against earlier religions, although without denying their divine source. Muslim authors argued that Christianity abrogated earlier Judaism, and that Islam- being the most recent of the three religion, hence containing God's final and valid advent- abrogated the other two (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 35-37).

The Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages faced this argument, defended the eternal validity of the Torah and the concordance between its teaching in the past and present time, using intellectual arguments and verses from the Bible. For instance, Sa'adya Gaon devoted an extensive discussion to this in his Kitāb al-ʾamānāt wa-l-iʿtiqadāt (the Book of Beliefs and Opinions), chapter III.7-10 (Schlossberg 1990, 37-50).[[10]](#footnote-10) Maimonides emphasizes the authenticity and irrevocability of the Torah in the ninth article of his 'Thirteen Principles of the faith'; and in his legal writing he emphasized the full validity of Mosaic Law even in the Messianic era (Mishneh Torah, Hilkot Megillah 2:18, 11:1,3). To strengthen his argument, the seven article speaks highly of Moses' status as a prophet comparing to other prophets and laws; concluding that nobody can come up with a better law that might abrogate Mosaic Law (Lasker 2007; Schlossberg 1990 b, 49-55; Bousek 2014, 50-56).

One of the main arguments put forward by the Jewish scholars in order to rejected the idea of the Torah's abrogation (the two mention above, Jehuda ha-Levi, Abraham ibn Dawud and many others) was the publicly revelation on the Mount Sinai and the public nature of Moses' miracles. Put differently while the two mentioned events took place in front of the eyes of a large crowd, Muhammad prophesied only before a handful of believers (Bousek 2020, 45).

Another argument raised by the Jewish thinkers in that subject was that the notion of abrogation indicates a change in God (bada) intention. For instance, al-Qirqisani considers the idea of bada unacceptable for it argues that God is unknowing (at first He issue a commandment and later find it poor), which cannot be ascribed to Him since He is omnipotent (Bousek 2014, 48).

A similar argument was put forward by Berdugo; although unlike al-Qirqisani he focused on the general doctrine that denies the attribution of any kind of change to God, and not specifically on the attribution of unknowing to Him. Berdugo argued that no change can be attributed to the perfect God (given the fact that the Muslims themselves recognize the divine origin of the Torah), unlike to the imperfect human being who constantly changes his mind.

מה יש לי עוד להאמין בדתך, והיא מתרת מה שאסר עלינו האל, ולא בן אדם הוא ויתנחם, עת לבנות ועת לסתור, בימי קדם רצה וחפץ ביום השבת לקדשו, ומאחרי כן חלל בריתו ישוב וניחם. חלילה מלהאמין זו בדרכיו יתב', כי הוא ודעתו ובחירתו עומדים, לא תשיגהו הנחמה והחרטה, כאשר תשיג ילוד אשה בהיות זמניו ועתיו משתנים מטוב לרע ולהפכו. (Berdugo 13a)

It is worth noting that the Muslim scholars themselves refrained from attributing change to God. The Muʿtazilite Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (d. 1025), and especially the ʾAshʿarite theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) discussed the idea of abrogation, not only in polemical context, but also in theological framework of God's attributes and the difficult problem of the change of what was considered to be good at one time (His commandments in Judaism) into disobedience at later time. In other words, their dilemma was whether to attributing to God a change of mind (bada) or limiting his omnipotence; needless to say, both options are undesirable\impossible. Other Muslims theologians accepted the concept of nasḫ and explained it as part of God's preordained change in history. Meaning, a priori God had preset time limit for the validity of each of the true religions that preceded Islam. Christianity was meant to abrogate Judaism as Islam was destined to abrogate both in due course; thus there was no need to attribute a chance of mind to God (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 38). Or as the historian of religious Muḥammad aš-Šahrastānī (1086-1153) explained it:

Nasḫ is not in actuality a nullification [of God commandments]; it is its fulfillment. The Torah (at-tawrāh) contains general and specific commandments that relate only to specific individuals or eras, and when this previously defined era ends, the validity of such a commandments end as well. This is neither nullification nor a change in God's will (Bousek, ???? 34).

Berdugo did not referred to this solution, it is not clear whether because he did not know it or because it is more convenient not to address it. However, he mentioned another solution that is allegedly proposed by the Muslim scholars. According to them, the Prophet Muhammad was not sent for the Jews, so the commandments that God ordered them are still valid for them (for example, the Sabbath); Muhammad was sent only for the Muslims, and God chose not to ordered them those commandments (for example, the Sabbath). Berdugo rejected this argument using an interpretive argument, i.e., a quote from the Muslim literature itself.

The restrictions imposed by Muslim rulers on their 'Protected People', known usually as the 'Pact of Umar', often prohibit them from studying the Qur'an. However both Jews and Christians, who were well acquainted with Arabic Muslim religious literature, had some knowledge of the Qur'an, part of this may simply derive from what used to be common parlance in medieval Arabic. Jews (and Christians) who used Arabic language often included –consciously or unconsciously- Qur'anic idioms and phrases from the Hadith in speech and writing. Some Jewish authors had more direct knowledge of the Qur'an and quoted the Qur'an explicitly- such as al-Qiarqisani, Jehuda ibn Quraysh, Moses ibn Ezra, Ibn Kammuna and others. Likewise, Qur'anic quotes appeared in translation of al-Ġazzālī’s essays into Hebrew, sometimes very accurately, sometimes with slight omissions, misunderstandings, or changes. The study of the Qur'an served, inter alia, polemical purposes, thus Jews quoted Qur'anic verses in interreligious debates regarding the proper interpretation of Biblical verses. Yet, actual translations of the Qur'an into Hebrew, are rare and late. They are inaccurate and include polemical material about Muhammad. Furthermore, they were made not directly from the Arabic original but from earlier Latin, Italian, and Dutch translations. There exist also transcriptions of Qur'an into Hebrew characters, most of them late, except for several Genizah fragments, which difficult to date (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 143-153).

As mentioned above Berdugo implied that Muslim scholars argued that Muhammad was sent only for the Arabs, he was not sent for Jews, therefore the commandments they commanded are still valid for them (and thus no change attribute to God in regard to his commandment to Israel). Berdugo rejected this argument by quoting from Muslim literature itself, which states that Muhammad was sent to all mankind without discrimination, meaning Muhammad was not sent only to the Arabs, and the Jews are not excluded.

ואם אתם [המוסלמים] אומרים שלנו עדת ישראל בחר את יום השבת, ונביאכם לא שולח כי אם אליכם, ולכם לא רצה האל לתת את יום השבת. הנה מלבד כי לא צדקת בזה, כי הוא [מוחמד] אמר 'לכם שלחני האל, לכל אשר תחת הכפה, הלבנים והשחורים'. (Berdugo 13a)

The quote that Berdugo refers to is a well-known hadith tradition that appears in several verses, the most common one is 'I was sent to red and black', but there are also other extended versions that include the 'white'. Most likely that Berdugo became familiar with that hadith, translated into Hebrew, from rabbinic literature that quoted selected verses and sayings in various contexts, mainly on a polemical background. Shim'on Duran, for example, mentions a similar version of the aforementioned hadith, and as noted before Berdugo knew (at least part of) his work.

It is should be noted and even emphasized, that usually it was the other way around. The Muslim did not argued that Muhammad was sent to the Arabs exclusively, that is, he was not sent to the Jews, as Berdugo implied they argued, but rather that he was sent to the entire human race. On the contrary, it was the Jews who suggested that Muhammad was sent to the Arabs alone, he was not sent to the Jewish people.

Anyhow, Berdugo added, even this argument does not settle the change that attribute to God's behavior. Why did He ordered the Jews certain commandments, which are obviously worthy in his eyes, and did not choose to order them also to the Muslims, the people chosen by him now?!

In the following Berdugo 'overcame' his severe reluctance to attribute change to God, but only if very certain conditions were met: Divine revelation before a wide public (as opposed to just a few).

אם הראנו נביאכם האותות והמופתים, והיה מעמיד עם גדול ורם במעמד הנכבד אשר העמידנו בו משה אדוננו, ואת קול אלוהים חיים מדבר מתוך האש השמיענו, כאשר שמענו באזנינו ובעינינו ראינו, יש לנו להאמין, כי לעובדו ולעשות רצונו אנו חפצים, ומאז לא יקשה בעינינו איך השיגתו החרטה ממה שיעדנו, כי נתלה בידיעתו ולמי עמד בסודו.(Berdugo 13a)

As mentioned above, the Jewish scholars did emphasize the public nature of the divine revelation at Mount Sinai, however it is not clear how according to Berdugo another divine revelation, even to a wide public, in which God annulment his previous commandments and deliver new ones, is supposed to solve the theological difficulty of attributing a change to God.

The last argument Berdugo asserted is that God has not revealed his name to Muslims. The name by which Muslims call God 'Allah' is a general one. Berdugo noted that his father drew his attention to Shim'on Duran's words on the subject. This casual remark can lead us to one of two conclusions: either Berdugo prepared himself for the debate and therefore consulted his father, or they discussed the issue without any connection to the current debate. Berdugo mentioned Duran linguistic observation that name 'Allah' reflects the Muslim ignorance of God's name.

מה חפץ יש לי באומה אשר לא נגלה אליה שם האל, ולא הודיע שמו עליה. כי מה שאתם קוראים לו 'אללאה' הכוונה אלוה, ומה שם האלוה, הרי לא נודע אליכם [...] ומשם הרשב"ץ בספר מגן אבות שמעתי מאבא מארי נר"ו, שהישמעלי'[ם] באשר לא נודע להם שמו יתברך, קראוהו ע"ש ספק ומבוכה. כי מלת אל משמשת בכל הדברים העומדים בלשון ישמעאל [...] ומלת 'אללאה' נאמרת על הספק, כשתמה אדם על הדבר המופלא ממנו יאמר לאה לאה, וכן קראו הישמעלי[ם] שמו 'אל לאה', כלומר אותו הנעלם ולא ידענו שמו. (Berdugo 13b)[[11]](#footnote-11)

According to Berdugo, at this point the debate ended, and his Muslim interlocutor went his way 'בפנים צהובות ולב חמרמר. That is, outwardly he expressed joy at having come out of the debate with the upper hand, but deep in his heart he realized that he defeated. The way in which Berdugo designed the second part of the debate, his long monologue, in which the response of his Muslim scholar was not mentioned, so that the last word in the debate is Bardugo's, is a literary technique that manipulates the reader to a conclusion that Berdugo indeed won this debate.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Of course, it is not surprising that Berdugo believes that he is the one who won the debate, and most likely the Muslim scholar was also sure that he was the one who won. In any case, the political reality in Morocco at that time (the end of the Eighteenth century) only allows for the victory of the Muslim scholar, and therefore also according to Berdugo this is the reaction of his interlocutor to the outside world, but to his horror, he also admitted that this was not the case. In this Jewish victory, even if it was not recognized on the surface, Berdugo sent an encouraging and comforting message to his Jewish readers who were sighing under the burden of the exile.

**E. Summary**

The early modern period in Morocco is characterized by many inter-religious debates and much academic research has been devoted to this. However, the comprehensive study on the subject did not paid attention to the Jewish-Muslim polemic in Morocco in the aforementioned period. The present study fill this gap, by drawing attention to a debate that took place in Meknes at the end of the eighteenth century.

At the center of this polemic was one of the three claims that were usually discussed in Jewish-Muslim polemics since the Middle Ages: the Hebrew Bible and the laws of Judaism have been abrogated (nasḫ) and replaced by the Qur'an and the laws of Islam, as a result, the allegation that the people of Israel were no longer the chosen one and that the Muslim had taken their place also came up. The other two claims (taḥrīf/ tabdīl and ʾaʿlam an-nubuwwa) were not mentioned, or at least were not documented. Thus the current study expands the comprehensive research about the Jewish-Muslim polemic to a geographical area - North Africa - that has not yet been discussed in this context.

It turns out that both the Muslim scholar (who remains anonymous) and Berdogo were well versed in the common arguments. Thus the present study sheds new light on the intellectual history of Jews and Muslims in Morocco at the end of the early modern period. However, further academic research is required in order to discover similar debates, earlier or later in time, so that we can draw more extensive and well-founded conclusions about the religious issues that occupied both Muslim and Jewish scholars in Morocco and the relevant literature that was available to them.

The debate was initiated by the Muslim scholar, it seems that at that time a Moroccan Jew would not risk initiating such a debate. However, Berdugo's documentation does not imply a threatening atmosphere, but rather a sincere one. Thus, the current study sheds new light on Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco in the period in question. However, once again, the academic research is required to reveal additional cases in order to draw more comprehensive conclusions, which go beyond the scope of a one-time case, although an exceptional case also carries its own value.

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**Abstract**

The early modern period in Morocco is characterized by many inter-religious debates and much academic research has been devoted to this. However, the comprehensive study on the subject did not paid attention to the Jewish-Muslim polemic in Morocco in the aforementioned period. Therefore the present study seeks to fill this gap, by drawing attention to a debate that took place in Meknes at the end of the eighteenth century between a Muslim scholar (who remains anonymous) and R. Petahia Mordechai Berdugo who document the debate.

At the center of this polemic was one of the three claims that were usually discussed in Jewish-Muslim polemics since the Middle Ages: the Hebrew Bible and the laws of Judaism have been abrogated (nasḫ) and replaced by the Qur'an and the laws of Islam; and the two scholars demonstrate proficiency in the prevailing arguments. The debate was initiated by the Muslim scholar, yet Berdugo's documentation does not imply a threatening atmosphere, but rather a sincere one.

Thus the current study expands the research discourse on the Jewish-Muslim polemic to the North African space, as well as sheds new light on Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco in the early modern period and on their intellectual history.

1. Conversions of Jews (and others) to Islam were recently discussed in the comprehensive (Hurvitz, Sahner, Simonsohn & Yarbrough 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the Jewish communities in Moroccan cities under Portuguese rule, see: da-Silva Tavim 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is noteworthy that, during the Seventeenth century, some Moroccan Jews immigrated to the Iberian Peninsula and converted to Christianity, See: da-Silva Tavim 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In June 2019 a conference was held in New York entitled "Uncommon Commonalities: Jews and Muslims in Morocco". Following the conference, a wide-ranging book was published that includes many articles discussing the various ties that existed between Jews and Muslims in Morocco (Chetrit, Gerber & Arussy, 2021). However, none of the articles discuss the Jewish-Muslim polemic in Morocco. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chosen by the sultan Mawlay ʾIsmāʿʾīl as his new capital in 1672, Meknes reached the height of its renown in the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth centuries. It did not take long until the local Jewish community competed for the 'title' of the center of Jewish learning in Morocco, with the Jewish community of Fez, which until then had held that 'title', and some would argue that Meknes actually replaced Faz. A comprehensive study of the history of the Jewish community has not yet been conducted (See for now, Guigui 1980) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Joshua Berdugo (1878-1953), the chief rabbi of Meknes, and later of Morocco, described him thus: "שמו נודע בשערים המצוינים בהלכה, וכולם הלכו לאורו, ברוב בקיאותו וחריפותו [...] וכל בני דורו מריצים אליו אגרותיהם לדרוש ולתור בחכמה אשר חלק לו ה' מכל בני גילו, הוא בניצבין ומצודתו פרושה בכל ערי המערב". נופת צופים, הקדמה. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stillman pointed on one important distinction between Qaddūr's pome and much of the anti-Bildi-literature. Qaddūr accuses them that not only they share the bad traits of their Jewish ancestors, but they are also disloyalty to Islam and continuing Jewish observances; which is not the case in the usual polemics against them. Most of the opposition came from the Shurafa' elite, who discriminated against them due to their base origin. In an exceptional case Mūḥammad Ibn Zikrī (d. 1731), a descendant of Jews who converted to Islam, compose a polemical treatise in defence of the Judeo-Muslim community of Fez which was object of discrimination. Fenton argued that this work should be seen as a chapter in the extended struggle for egalitarianism in Islam and radical critique of Muslim intolerance. This debate imported into Morocco from al-Andalus in defence of the honour of the non-Arabs against the racial presumption of the Arabs, obsessed with his genealogical superiority (Ibn Zikri 2016, 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Funkenstein argued that Nachmanides extensive use of this interpretive technique is evidence of the influence of the Christian world on him (Funkenstein 1993 ,98-120). Goodman rejects such an influence and holds that the Nachmanides developed his method from Jewish sources only (Goodman 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Muslim scholars developed a sophisticated system based on linguistic, historical, legal and theological considerations through which they determined which verse had been revealed at a later date and therefore is the binding one. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lasker, on the other hand, argue that Christians were the main target audience of Se'adyah on this issue (Lasker1994). Recently Bousek suggested that he does not target his argument at one specific group, but at all those (Bousek, 2014, 37-43). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Duran's original discussion revolves around the various names that philosophers, Jews, Greeks, Romans and Muslims call God: והם [הפילוסופים] אינם יודעים שם לזה הנמצא, אלא שקוראים לו 'מחוייב המציאות' או 'סבת הסיבות ועלה אחת'. [...] והמדברים (=תאולוגים) יברחו מזה השם, ויאמרו כי באמרו עלה יתחייב מציאות העלול וזה מביא אל אמונת הקדמות (=קדמות העולם), על כן יקראהו 'פועל'. [...]. ובין הפילוסוף ובין המדברים לא ידעו לאל יתברך שם, ולא נקרא העם 'יודעי אלוהיו' כי אם ישראל שיודעים אמתת מציאותו מהוראת שמו הנקרא יהו"ה. [...]. והישמעלים קורים אותו אללה, והיא מלה ארמית תרגום 'אלוה'. והוא לקוח ממנו. ואינו שם עצם מיוחד לשם יתברך, אבל השם המיוחד אללה, ו'אל' הוא במקום ה"א הידיעה, ישאר שם המיוחד 'לה', ואין לו משמעות כלל. ושמעתי כי בלשונם 'לה' בה"א הוא לשון מבוכה, כי מי שהוא נבוך אומרים לו 'להא', כלומר נבוך ומבוכה, וכוונתם לקרוא האל בשם זה הוא שאין להם ידיעה בידיעת מהותו כי אם במבוכה". שמעון דוראן, מגן אבות, ירושלים תשס"ז, חלק ראשון פרק א', 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Already Zechariah al-Dahiri designed a 'Jewish victory' in an interreligious polemic through manipulation of the narrative structure (Tanenbaum 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)