

Sura and Pumbedita

by [Stephen Schechter](#) (February 2019)



Talmudists School, Samuel Hirszenberg

As soon as I came across those names in a book about the history of the Jews, I was entranced. Sura and Pumbedita, I murmured to myself, imagining them as fabled and gabled as that Ur whence Abraham ventured forth. Here his progeny had returned some fifteen centuries later, two temples destroyed, Jerusalem laid waste, the land conquered and the covenant reformulated into a millennium of Torah study.

The yeshivot of Sura and Pumbedita yielded the Babylonian Talmud and, for hundreds of years afterwards, generations of scholars pored over the writings of sages and issued edicts to govern the lives of those Jews who had stayed and flourished in the Babylonian exile after the first temple had been destroyed. Parthian, Persian and then Islamic were the empires that succeeded the Babylonian, but the Jews persisted under all of them, the longing for Zion lost in song while the tapestry of life wove its way into a library of riches.

I had not known about Sura and Pumbedita until I came across them in that book, not known much about the Jewish culture of the East, the Near East I should say, being myself a scion of Ashkenaz. But clearly it had been there, radiating outward to the Jewish Diaspora following the fall of Rome, the *gaons* of Sura and Pumbedita predating those of Vilna by a thousand years and their *exilarchs* predating the *nagids* of Spain by hundreds. Now I had a link to fill in the gaps of Jewish history in my mind, and with it a whole dictionary of onomatopoeia about which to wonder and in which to wander.

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I could add it to the Oriental note which a poet two generations before mine called up from the streets of our city, he, too, a descendant of the East that belonged to Europe, sonorous and dark and vital in a different way from the spicebox I imagined Babylonia to be. But the mix would still belong to a past I do not want to revive nor even glorify, only reclaim for a future that would be something else other than words; the question lingers—what if there are

only words, magical pairs like Sura and Pumbedita conjuring up novels and happiness?

That poet two generations before me wrote early on of his childhood, of Shakespeare, of the lore of Talmud and Tanach, the Hebrew Bible acronym, and mixed it all up with the raucous life of his city's streets and the Old World names and habits of his people that are also my people. *Legend of Lebanon* can be found not far from *Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger* in his *Collected Poems* which I stumbled across in a second-hand bookstore on the other side of the continent from the city in which we both grew up. His trajectory was not so different from mine. Poems that snatched up memories of what stirred the young heart yielded to caustic commentary on social misery and from there moved on to anguish and howl at the destruction of European Jewry.

Then, when all was the quiet of ashes, he returned to the age-old themes, wiser, softer, but the words as resplendent as ever, for he was a wordsmith as polished as the Irish master he wrote about, the man who turned a book into the playbook of the English alphabet, as if words were the only river that could carry the burden of human congress. After which the poet retreated into silence and never spoke again.

I often wondered why he stopped talking, he who was so enamored with words. One day I met one of his sons, a charming lively man who could no more explain his father's lengthy silence than he could not fail to lament it. One sensed it still hung in the air, mysterious, a modern take on the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. But perhaps not.

Now, as I too toy with the call to silence given how the world has turned, I begin to understand. A half century since the Jewish state emerged victorious from a war that threatened its doom, the same old Europe that shipped its Jews to the death camps now casts Israel to her Muslim enemies with nary a thought. The literati throughout the western world join in, whitewashing the thugs that would finish the job and commending them for it. And since the Jews are, as usual, the canary in the western coal mine, the same literati have reserved a similar fate for all that made their spoiled lives possible. All they see is social misery socially engineered, each gain in freedom denounced as illusory, the velvet veil of iron-hearted oppression, a rhetoric they take to bed as some kind of sexual elixir. Out of these words which they have turned into bricks they build their modern tower of Babel, and into their masonic kilns they would throw not only the Old and New Testaments, but the Jews and Christians who still read and worship them. It is enough to make one stop talking altogether.

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I picture the yeshivot of Sura and Pumbedita, once the Talmud had been sealed, as somewhat crabbed places, devoted to endless exegesis, though I can well imagine that disputes within the Jewish community wound up on their desks for adjudication. Crabbed refers to the endless poring over texts with no time set aside for the modern education of the age, which would have included mathematics, astronomy, perhaps even philosophy and poetry.

Crabbed also conjures up a constricted existence, scholars vying for places in the front rows of the month-long teach-ins

held twice a year at the academies, the candidates bolstered by contributions from the older and wealthier families of the community. Innovation must have proceeded very slowly, dissent even less so as the community wielded over its members the very effective power of excommunication. But still I picture to myself the other side of the coin: the slow building up of wealth and power over many generations, within them joy cascading like a waterfall over festivals and sabbaths, weddings and bar-mitzvahs that came and went with the seasons, Torah scrolls fashioned like an ark, vestments sequinned with gold trimming, dishes piled up with eastern succulence, lamb, saffron, raisins, consumed to the ululating voices of women equally eloquent in mourning.

There is a novel there waiting to be written, but novels are the literary coin of the modern world, rummaging in the sacrifices of history for material to entertain today's readers and quietly urge them to reflection.

On what shall we reflect? On multiculturalism, for starters. Which means first and foremost that people who worship different gods can inhabit the same political space equally and in peace. This only happens in modern societies, once there is separation between church and state. Getting there is not easy. A reformation of the established religion usually has to occur, often accompanied by religious wars. Vast swaths of inhabited lands even today do not accept these principles. Hence their suppression of religious minorities at home and their expansion of hostility abroad. Islamic lands are the most notable sinners in this regard, though not the only ones.

The doctrine of multiculturalism in part presumes that people who come from intolerant societies to tolerant ones will share

the expectations of the latter. Not so. It would of course be nice if they did. If the writings of I.B. Singer and Graham Greene and Salman Rushdie reflected the way Jews and Christians and Muslims peacefully cohabit, each content to distil the gold from their texts and the histories they inspired because a corollary of a reformation is critical reflection on the reformed religion. But that is not yet accepted practice in what Muslims call the world of Islam, and so it is not accepted practice among so many of the Muslim immigrants to the lands where it is. The no-go Muslim zones of Europe—lands of theocracy in the infidel democracies—are ample testimony to that. So was the expulsion of 850,000 Jews from Arab Muslim lands when the State of Israel was established in 1948. Yet the literati of the western world continue to act as though the Muslims can do no wrong, as though they are but victims of western colonialism, first Christian, then Jewish, and the domes of Muslim mosques are the metaphors of rapture when measured against the cold poverty and cramped rigor of rapidly disappearing church and synagogue. It is a grace these literati extend to many a contemporary dictatorship, while they beat the corpses of their own past to a merciless pulp, Sura and Pubmedita included, though the latter may be given a bit of a pass for their second-class citizenship under an erstwhile caliphate.

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Which brings us to the main course, namely the God problem in modern society and the twisted relationship the secular priests of its high culture have with religion. It is not enough for them to entertain a critical relationship to religion under the scrutiny of philology and philosophy. Instead they go for the jugular, insisting not only that

religion be shunned, but that God Himself be declared dead, proof perfect of the final victory of the Enlightenment they feel they embody.

The Bible is the least politically correct text and, perhaps, therefore one of the wisest. Not for the God of the Hebrews the delirium of utopia, but simply an admonition to take care of the poor for they shall always be among us. And equally, beware of multiculturalism when the people who dwell among you share not your God and His precepts, for they shall corrode and pollute your society. Throw them therefore out of your neighborhood, tear down their groves, destroy their cities, lest they cause you to perish from your land. Let them worship their gods to whom they sacrifice their children if they wish, but in lands far from your own. Good foreign policy advice then and now, which even the Jews have forgotten.

Of course, once reform has been let loose upon the world the entire community of the faithful joins in. Each is now free to choose which precepts to follow and which to ignore, a liberty of which I avail myself. I do not observe kashrut, but I do celebrate the Sabbath after sundown on Fridays. I have sex with men, though I do consider homosexuality a sin. I do not go to synagogue most Saturdays because the rabbis irritate me, but I do recite prayers in the morning. Most of all, I read and reread the Torah, write about it, reinterpret it, delight in it, and cherish all those people who observed *halacha* throughout the ages so that the Jewish connection is still alive for me.

I never answer the question about whether I believe in God, but I do talk to Him; and the books He has written continue to inspire me to worship. I wonder what will happen to humanity

when people finally decide God is dead, because it is difficult to converse with and worship an abstract entity like society, in whose image I am not in the least fashioned. At best, I can conceive of it by observing how it works, but none of its texts sends me into raptures about the pathos of human existence. It may be that people have not yet learned how to observe it properly, but so far the minions who claim to know something about it just fill the empyrean with chatter.

As for the spectacle of society's vicars on earth, there are not enough analysts to go around to make them, or it, worthy of rapture. I do, however, admire my favorite sociologist Luhmann's texts, which invariably bring a smile to my lips and the shimmer of irony to my cranial synapses not unlike the one Andrew Marvell employed to