

THE IDEA OF ASCETICISM AMONG MEDIEVAL  
JEWISH AND MUSLIM MYSTICS

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## Thesis Abstract

# The Idea of Asceticism Among Medieval Jewish and Muslim Mystics

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This thesis inquires the ways in which the concept of asceticism takes place in Jewish and Islamic mystical traditions. After demonstrating that the notion and practice of asceticism is independent from any religious tradition, its various definitions will be examined in two main levels: the general characteristics of the notion and its emergence and development, as practiced and discussed in Judaic and Islamic traditions. By demonstrating the parallels and contradictions in Muslim and Jewish definitions and practices of asceticism, I aim to put forward the general characteristics of the medieval asceticism in the Mediterranean region during the medieval period. This period is very abundant in terms of vivid ascetic performances and the theurgical and philosophical aspect of asceticism. It was not impossible for the traditions of Judaism and Islam, which shared the same locations, to be in communication with each other. This thesis will conclude that the differences between Jewish mysticism and Islamic Sufism are less than the similarities; a fact that implies a profound and equal mutual influence between two traditions especially in the medieval period. The traditions of Muslim and Jewish asceticism developed in connection with each other, rather than one shaping the other.

## **Introduction**

This study inquires the ways in which the concept of asceticism takes place in Jewish and Islamic mystical traditions. Asceticism was most frequently confused with religious rituals and piety; some even defined it as intense religious practices.<sup>1</sup> This study will first demonstrate that the starting point of the understanding of asceticism is independent from any religious tradition. Its history goes back to the ancient period, when the Greek athletes and warriors used this practice to train their bodies and minds. During the history of religion, the various definition of the concept of asceticism has been identified. Besides finding ways to elaborate on asceticism, these societies adopted it as a lifestyle.

Below I examine the idea of asceticism in two levels. In the first part I delineate the general characteristics of the notion. And in the next part I scrutinize the emergence and development of asceticism as practiced and discussed in Judaic and Islamic traditions by looking into the notion of piety in mystical literature. The differences between Jewish mysticism and Islamic Sufism are less than the similarities, as put by David Ariel who insists on the profound mutual influence between two traditions especially in the medieval period which lasted until the fall of Constantinople in 1453.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, "Upper Class Asceticism: Social Origins of Ascetic Movements and Medieval Saints," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 1 (2003): 5.

<sup>2</sup> David S. Ariel, "The Eastern Dawn of Wisdom: The Problem of the Relation Islamic and Jewish Mysticism in Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval*

By putting the definitions and practices of asceticism in Jewish and Islamic traditions together and demonstrating the parallels and contradictions, I aim to put forward the general characteristics of the medieval asceticism.

### **Part I: Asceticism: Ethics and Rituals**

The idea of asceticism is as old as the history of religion. Asceticism as self-discipline plays an important role in the works that require physical efficiency. From one aspect it is indeed valid that asceticism as a separate practice from that of religion is linked to bodily training and health. In this circumstance the starting point of asceticism is not religion. The other aspect of asceticism is related to religion; it emerges as self-mortification which is expected from an ascetic to demonstrate certain miracles.

The relationship between the concept of asceticism and religious thought points out two distinguished perspectives: First of all, asceticism reflects “voluntary self-discipline.”<sup>3</sup> That asceticism is defined as a rejection of the body constitutes the dualistic assumption. It itself involves contradiction; on the one hand, one strives to discipline his body by accepting its

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*Times*, ed. David R Blumenthal (Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1984), 149-167.

<sup>3</sup> O. Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1924), 3.

existence, on the other hand one destroys his body by negating its demands. With this characteristic, religious asceticism shows a twofold dualism of body and soul, flesh and spirit. The intention of developing one's own soul opens a way to repentance and redemption by practicing a legitimate self-annihilation, asceticism. In this respect, the mysterious presence of suffering is considered as redemption. Elliot Wolfson approves the inevitable affiliation between asceticism and redemption of the soul.<sup>4</sup> Ascetic practices denote the way to inner spirituality and redemption from evil inclinations of the soul. Gikatilla points out that valuable life and the redemption depends on how one strictly observes the Sabbath.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the ethical view of asceticism is explained by suffering which derives a virtue in itself. If the general rule of "people know things by their opposites" applies, sin reminds seeking God, pain and abstinence remind pleasures of hereafter, and fasting takes an ascetic to whole-heartedly embrace the difficulties of living minimum food. As Elliot Wolfson has

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<sup>4</sup> Elliot R Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 364. He also emphasizes redemption as the unification of the male and female aspects of the divine, in his following article; Elliot R Wolfson, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane McAuliffe, Barry D. Waldfish, and Goering (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 92-118. Ibid. The nexus between asceticism and redemption connects one to the access of fear and hope: according to Schimmel; "as Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896 Basra) saw it; fear is a masculine element, hope is a feminine one and the two together engender the deepest realities of faith." Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 127.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 371. Gikatilla was a fourteenth century Spanish Kabbalist and the student of Abraham Abulafia.

put; “the purification is achieved exclusively by means of contact with the impure.”<sup>6</sup> At this point, asceticism “functions as a means of escaping the inherently evil body.”<sup>7</sup> The inner evil inclinations force an aspirant to attain the aim of real and pure *zuhd* (the Arabic word for asceticism.) The evil passions are enunciated as necessary. Beyond the physical suffering, the evil passions of the soul play an important role for the life of *zuhd*. The ascetic, with all these practices, acquires the obedience to the spiritual and moral order but this obtainment transforms into a voluntary activity. Therefore, asceticism exists in every level of man’s moral and religious progression. It “is intimately associated with vital and enthusiastic religion.”<sup>8</sup>

The early ascetics’ purpose was to attain ethical perception. Asceticism gains a moral degree only when it is voluntarily practiced. Starvation is not virtue but deprivation is. Kihnberg quotes the statement of Abu Talib al-Makki about the voluntary poverty: “choosing poverty is *zuhd*.”<sup>9</sup> Poverty reflects a twofold spiritual stage, deprivation of worldly desires and unwillingness of otherworldly pleasures. Early Muslim ascetics practiced *zuhd* by staying away the feeling of pressure and obligation as did the

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<sup>6</sup> Elliot R Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Kihnberg, “What Is Meant by *Zuhd*,” *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985): 35. Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996) was a hadith scholar, Maliki jurist and Sufi mystic who wrote the book “*Qut al-Qulub*.”

contemporary Jewish ascetics. The asceticism that they performed was a voluntarily self-despise. The choice of satisfaction with limited food is an ethical principle especially if one can have more. Controlling the *nafs* (lower self) is to do the opposite of what it wants, such as by only eating less when it wants more.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in Islamic tradition the Qur'an and Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) do not condemn being rich, on the contrary, support it. Therefore, the early pious people of Islam praised wealth because of the acts of charity and benefaction to which they may lead.<sup>11</sup> One can conclude by pointing out the moral aspect of this issue. Abu Bakr (d.634), who was the first caliphate after the Prophet Muhammad, told in a lecture that "there is no benefit from goods which are not spent for the sake of God."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, an ascetic can become over sensitive even feel guilty about having wealth. This understanding goes back to a group of companions of the Prophet called the people of *suffa*.<sup>13</sup> They were the volunteers and

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<sup>10</sup> Carl W Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University of Press, 2004), 137.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Sulami, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa Al-Mutaabbidat as-Sufiyyat*, Fons Vitae ed. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 64. In early Islamic society, philanthropy was an important aspect of women's ascetic performances, according to R. E. Cornell.

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■ Ibn Hanbal is a ninth century Muslim theologian and scholar. He was the founder of the Hanbali School which is one of the four Islamic legal schools.

<sup>13</sup> People of Suffa (*Ashab al-Suffa*) were a group of people who stayed in a room of the mosque of the Prophet. They never missed the lectures of the Prophet Muhammad and they mostly memorized and transmitted them to the next generations. For the popularity of the lack of wealth see examples, al-Kharraz, al-Barraz, al-Nasafi, Yahya b. Mu'adh, Abd al-Karim ibn Hawazin Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism (Al-Risala Al-Qushayriyya Fi ilm Al-Tasawwuf)*, 1st ed. (Reading, U.K: Garnet, 2007), 57-58, 281-282. Qushayri (d. 1072) also highlights al-Qassar's view, "poverty is clothing that brings about contentment (*rida*) if one has realized its true meaning." Ibid., 282.

devotees of piety and poverty, and are considered as the pioneers of Muslim asceticism.

If one identifies asceticism as a religious discipline, the meaning of clinching the various forms of ascetic practice is to reach spiritual perfection. To some extent ascetic practice is beyond religious behavior because “it must involve the voluntary acceptance of a spiritual discipline that is not binding one’s larger religious community.”<sup>14</sup> Wolfson brings another dimension to the understanding of spiritual perfection and sees it as a theological assertion: “spiritual perfection is achieved only after one wins the battle against the forces of evil and darkness.”<sup>15</sup> Asceticism compromises the bond of body, soul and human nature through the way to salvation. As Daniel Frank has put, ascetic ways facilitate the people’s redemption.<sup>16</sup> Hardman quotes the words of F. Homes Dudden: “the body is represented as the enemy of the soul, and the way of perfection is identified with the progressive extirpation of the natural inclinations by means of fasting, celibacy, voluntary poverty and similar exercises of devotion.”<sup>17</sup> The soul is already in the spiritual perfection but the body plays an obstacle

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<sup>14</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Frank, “Karaites Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane McAuliffe, Barry D. Waldfish, and Goering (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51-69.

<sup>17</sup> Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 4. Celibacy as one of the ascetic practices that became popular among the early Muslim ascetics even though Prophet Muhammad supported people to get married. Anna Marie Schimmel quotes Darani who was the ninth century philosopher of Baghdad: “the sweetness of adoration and undisturbed surrender of the heart which the single man can feel the married man can never experience.” Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 36.

between the two. Abraham Maimonides' theory that "the soul's neglect of its own spiritual perfection to its connection with the material body," not only supports this idea but also demonstrates Maimonides' ascetic view of life.<sup>18</sup>

Asceticism can in a very vague and general framework be described in various ways such as self-denial, self mortification, bodily abstinence, the renouncement of pleasures and temptations, and the abandonment of dear people. Ascetics believe that natural inclinations of human soul bring about the negligence of the obedience to God's commandments. In fact, separation from sensual appetites is the medium for the transformation of the carnal body into a spiritual formation. Gabriel Daly does not accept the identification of asceticism as self-hatred: "asceticism has sometimes been presented as a kind of self-hatred as if hatred of oneself could be a virtue."<sup>19</sup> According to Wolfson, the words that define asceticism best are "denial and mortification," because asceticism stands for the obliteration of desires. Ascetics embrace desire as not to desire. Their goal is to negate desire. Moreover, it is "rigorous discipline of body and mind, the adoption of an austere lifestyle."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Abraham Maimonides (d. 1237 C.), in many ways, appears as supportive of the Sufi ideas and life style. At this point Bahya ibn Pakuda and Abraham Maimonides resemble each other. Samuel Rosenblatt states that Bahya has been named the chief exponent of the ethics of the Sufis in medieval Jewish literature.

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Daly, "Prayer and Asceticism," *The Furrow* 22 (1971): 681.

<sup>20</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 296. He underlines that this obliteration points out desire not the body.

Asceticism itself is a desire to attach oneself to present time and space. As Nietzsche states, “asceticism is affirmative of life in the extreme,” when it is expressive of the desire to transform being, not by fleeing into the atemporal, supersensible, noumenal world but by inserting oneself ever more deeply into the crevices of time and fissures in space.<sup>21</sup> There is parallelism between this point and the following sentence of Rufus Jones; “the eternal world is the immanent reality which is the ground and explanation of the temporal world.”<sup>22</sup> The time issue in the early Islamic asceticism is very noteworthy. The early Muslim ascetics have been called as *ibn al-waqt* (the son of the Moment).<sup>23</sup> An ascetic should be naked and free from time and every concern in the presence of God.

Physical purity is the first condition to arrive the spiritual perfection, because cleanness is a signal of inner bliss. Jacob Neusner cites a list in the following order; “physical cleanness leads to purity, purity to separateness, separateness to holiness, holiness to humility, humility to the shunning of sin, the shunning of sin to saintliness, saintliness to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit to the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>24</sup> As Neusner puts, purity itself is not

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43. Wolfson refers to Nietzsche in order to strengthen Nietzsche’s transitory imagination because he highlights that truth has to remain veiled. According to William C. Chittick, Ibn Arabi discusses the same issue by claiming that “the divine wisdom has established the veils.” William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 149.

<sup>22</sup> Rufus Jones, *Studies in mystical religion*, (London: Macmillan and co. limited, 1909), 66.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-Arabi, *Al-Futuh al-Makkiyah*, vol. 2 (Bayrut: Dar Sadir, 1968), 538. In chapter 238: Waqt, Ibn al-‘Arabi advocates that the Sufi should be *sahib al-waqt* -the owner of the time.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 78. Neusner explains

considered as an ascetic exercise but it is one of the pillars of arriving the ideal of asceticism. Separateness from community is a sign of impurity until getting clean. According to Neusner, isolation from the pure things is a punishment. Hence the reason of isolation from society for purifying oneself is a punishment. Bodily ascetic praxis cleanses an aspirant's intellectual units that are entailed for the contemplation of divine imaginations. The parallelism between sin and impurity entails a rite of purification. Moreover, purification, which is concerned with the "ritual preparation for approach" to God, is recognized as self-assimilation.<sup>25</sup> The flesh has no merits then it has to be cleansed and purified. The reverse is also reflects the truth. One purifies oneself through disciplined training of the self, body and soul. Purifying mind from the worldly thoughts is the condition of the proper worship to God. Likewise, purifying the self from desires is required for the discovery of heart's light.<sup>26</sup> An aspirant needs to purify his soul from all the inclination of desires and thoughts of an ordinary human being in order to attain an angelic inspiration. He replaces his heart with the love of divine so that he could attain his beloved.<sup>27</sup>

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the word separateness as *perishut* by underlining that purity produces separateness. Ibid., 79. It seems notable that he does not use the word asceticism (renunciation) instead of separateness -from society, or bodily desires, or worldly temptations- see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 250.

<sup>25</sup> Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Abd al-Wahhab Sharani, *al-Durar wa-al-luma fi bayaan al-sidq fi al-zuhd wa-al-wara*, 1st ed. (Misr al-Jadidah: Darat al-Karaz, 2005), 40. al-Sharani points out the illegitimate foods: "When a *zahid* eats religiously illegitimate foods, his heart becomes death; when he eats dubious foods, his heart becomes weak."

<sup>27</sup> Al-Sulami (d. 1021) narrates a story: "One day Rabi'a (al-'Adawiyya d. 801) saw Rabah kissing a young boy. 'Do you love him?' she asked. 'Yes,' he said. To which she replied, 'I did not imagine that

Scholars who exclude prayer from the practices of asceticism claim that prayer is about faith but asceticism is more than that; for them the accomplishment of asceticism demonstrates the ideal of pietistic performances. Nevertheless the theurgical task of prayer is to unite the different cosmic forces, according to Wolfson.<sup>28</sup> God, for pietists, is transcendent, and the obedience to the transcendent God is to establish God's will on the natural world.<sup>29</sup> The ascetic exercises involve a moral choice that is "the result of the struggle between a human's 'good' and 'evil' inclinations."<sup>30</sup> The necessity of ascetic practices emerges in order to keep the evil inclinations under inspection. Thus, asceticism itself manifests a cosmological typology. Satlow remarks that Plato divided the soul into three parts as irrational which represents bodily desires, rational and spirited. He states that many philosophers indicate the irrational portion of the soul as a hindrance of human good and happiness.<sup>31</sup>

The purpose of controlling the self and bodily desires is to empower the rational part of the

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there was room in your heart to love anything other than God, the Glorious and Almighty!' Rabah was overcome at this and fainted." Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 78. The same point of view is underlined by Schimmel, "Sufism is to possess nothing and to be possessed by nothing." Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 120.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 52.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Satlow, "'And on the Earth You Shall Sleep': "Talmud Torah" and Rabbinic Asceticism," *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 209.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

soul by rigorous training. Ascetic practices let the rational faculty of the soul ascend so that the self can attain the peak of the perfection. Actually, the fight is not between the body and the soul but the good and evil in the soul. The challenge, in the final analysis, is to destroy evil by controlling the bodily pleasures; hence what is demanded is the body with the good reach to divine.<sup>32</sup> The pious man cannot eliminate the evil power and gain a divine influence without training his body and purifying his heart and abandoning the mortal pleasures.

The description of asceticism not only as world-denying and with spiritual characteristics, but also as renunciation of body's desires, fasting, abstinence, isolation and seclusion points out to the dualism within the soul, between the good and evil tendencies. These acts signal the importance of the self (*nafs*) even by reducing its power. In other words the self even when denied is still at the center. Lawrence Wills suggests decentering the self.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, instead of controlling and condemning the self, the moral improvement of the self is praised in order to ascend to the spiritual highness. On the other hand, "according to the ascetic tradition, self discipline was necessary because material pleasures were conceived as corrupting forces. One needs to avoid himself falling under the charms of

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<sup>32</sup> This challenge can be seen in Ben Zion Bokser as he puts: "he must struggle with himself to break his own shell to liberate his own holy sparks." Ben Zion Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 25.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, "Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 903.

worldly satisfaction.”<sup>34</sup> Ascetic practices are physical and mental processes of the progression of the self in relation to divine. At this point, asceticism both as a definition and practice will be better understood by comparing its place in Judaic and Islamic traditions.

## **Part II: The Understanding of Asceticism in Medieval Judaism and Islam**

Rigorous abstention from any form of self-indulgence which is based on the belief that the renunciation of the desires of the flesh and self-mortification can bring man to a high spiritual state.

This very general statement which includes the basic information about the concept of asceticism belongs to Pinchas Hacoen Peli who wrote the asceticism entry in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.<sup>35</sup> Judaism regards asceticism in terms of fearing the sin and attaining the sacred. Additionally, Bahya ibn Pakuda defines asceticism as controlling desires and being patient.<sup>36</sup> The strictness as a lifestyle to attain the spiritual perfection is regarded in Islamic understanding to be the dedication of life to the same goal. Asceticism, according to Christopher Melchert in his entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, refers first

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<sup>34</sup> Nimrod Hurvitz, “Biographies and Mild Asceticism: A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination,” *Studia Islamica* 85 (1997): 54.

<sup>35</sup> Pinchas H Peli, “Asceticism,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., n.d., 545-547.

<sup>36</sup> Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Al-Hidaja ila Fara id Al-Qulub Des Bachja Ibn Josef Ibn Paquda Aus Andalusien Im Arabischen Urtext Zum Ersten Male Nach Der Oxforder Und Pariser Handschrift* ) Bahya ibn Pakuda was an eleventh century Jewish philosopher. His famous work is *Duties of the Heart* written in Arabic. Patience -*sabr*-, in terms of the early Islamic asceticism, takes a significant place as well. In *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, “to be patient before God’s orders is more excellent than fasting and prayer.” Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 124.

to “deliberate austerity as part of life devotion.”<sup>37</sup>

It is highly probable to say that the essence of Islamic Sufi movement based upon early ascetic practices. The early Islamic pious figures cannot be called as Sufis but ascetics or devotees.<sup>38</sup> The equivalent of asceticism in Islamic literature is the word ‘zuhd,’ but this term does not clearly explain asceticism as practiced.<sup>39</sup> In the usage of Arabs *zuhd* is to turn away from wealth and fame.<sup>40</sup> Al-Sharani divided the meaning of *zuhd* into two parts: *zuhd* in the dictionary and technical meaning of *zuhd*. For him, “*zuhd* is the opposite of pleasure.” And he provides the characteristic of an ascetic; “a *zahid* (ascetic) is an individual who abandons the world. He renounces from everything in this world except God. Then he becomes a perfect *zahid*.”<sup>41</sup> In the technical meaning of *zuhd*, al-Sharani

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Melchert, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, three*, ed. Gudrun Kramer et al. (Leiden ;;Boston :: Brill, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 29. He puts a few comparative issues between Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. The noteworthy one is that he resembles Rabia al-Adawiyya of the ninth century to Maria Magdalen. Indeed, Anna Marie Schimmel in her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* notes the impact of the Christian asceticism upon Sufi lifestyle, “Christian ascetics and hermits who inhabited places in Iraq and the mountains of Lebanon are mentioned frequently in Sufi stories -and in pre-Islamic poetry there were already allusions to the light shining forth from the Christian hermit’s cell.”Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Kihnberg, “What Is Meant by Zuhd,” 27.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad ibn Ahmad Qurtubi, *The Secrets of Asceticism: Being the Third Part of Qam Al-Hirsi Bi Al-Zuhdi Wa Al-Qanaah* (Bristol, England: Amal Press, 2008), 25. Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 c.) was a famous jurist, exegete and *muhaddith* of the *Maliki* School, one of the four main judicial schools in Islamic legal law.

<sup>41</sup> Sharani, *al-Durar wa-al-luma fi bayaan al-sidq fi al-zuhd wa-al-wara*, 8-9. Abd al-Wahhab al-Sharani was one of the most distinguished sixteenth century scholars. He wrote many books on mystical, legal and theological subjects. In his works, he criticizes social inequalities and injustice. With this respect his works reflect a social awareness.

quotes Avicenna: “*zuhd* is a renunciation from carnal materials and their felicities.”<sup>42</sup>

*Zuhd* in Islam is all about heart. Early Muslim ascetics (*zuhhad*) generally define asceticism as *love of death*.<sup>43</sup> The approval of the love of death in Jewish ascetic life is expressed by the phrase “dying-of-body” as the true life expects uniting with God.<sup>44</sup> The idea of ‘waiting for the death’ leads the ascetic’s life. His only thought is death and the afterlife which is determined by the performances of this world. Then the quality of the duration in the present world is significant for the ascetic. He concerns what is in his hands for the life to come. The perfect *zahid* does not renunciate from the blessings of the world but his heart should be full of the *love of God*. The love of God is fulfilled by *zuhd* which has two essential components: *rida* and *tawakkul*, (contentment with and submission to God’s will.)<sup>45</sup>

When exploring the traditional Islamic sources, one can easily find various meanings of the concept of *zuhd*. Some of them associate *zuhd* with wisdom.<sup>46</sup> The contemplation of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 9. Avicenna (d. 1037) is a well-known physician and philosopher.

<sup>43</sup> Qurtubi, *The Secrets of Asceticism*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 352.

<sup>45</sup> Kihnberg, “What Is Meant by Zuhd,” 33. Acting as the Qur’an ordered is connected to the word ‘*rida*,’ contentment either in good or bad situations. Moreover, the concept *tawakkul* considered as a complete trust to divine wisdom, reflects a spiritual meaning.

<sup>46</sup> Qurtubi, *The Secrets of Asceticism*, 35. According to Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778 CE), “if the slave does without in this life, Allah entrenches wisdom firmly in his heart, makes his tongue express such wisdom, empowers him to discern the defects of his self, and turns the sickness of his self into the cure of his self.” Bahya’s thought solidifies Sufyan al-Thawri, “*zuhd* is one of the characteristics of

divine essence brings out wisdom of the heart. The goal is to achieve the closeness of God. Similar emphasis on attaining wisdom through asceticism can be observed in Jewish tradition. For instance, Rosenblatt defines Abraham Maimonides' intellectually emphasized view: "the goal has been reached when the heart is divested from aught but God both with respect to desire and will as also with regard to knowledge and gnosis."<sup>47</sup>

The process in both Islamic and Jewish traditions has the same potential but the progress of the way shows differentiation. While Abraham Maimonides highlights the intellectual method, the Sufis prefer ecstatic inclination. And after that, the knowledge that is supposed to be reached is wisdom, which "is required for testing the *nafs* in training the body."<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) who is known as a critique of philosophy emphasizes that his book *Ihya al 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) is about practical, not contemplative knowledge because contemplative knowledge cannot be gained by reading; it is always hidden. The way to achieve this divine knowledge, he stresses, is to follow the procedure of ascetic practices such as Qur'an recitation or devoting oneself to a

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knowledge that human beings with reason need it as they need other sciences and art." Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Al-Hidaja ila Fara id Al-Qulub Des Bachja Ibn Josef Ibn Paquda Aus Andalusien Im Arabischen Urtext Zum Ersten Male Nach Der Oxforder Und Pariser Handschrift Sowie Den Petersburger Fragmenten*, 356.

<sup>47</sup> Abraham Maimonides, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 52.

<sup>48</sup> Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Al-Hidaja ila Fara id Al-Qulub Des Bachja Ibn Josef Ibn Paquda Aus Andalusien Im Arabischen Urtext Zum Ersten Male Nach Der Oxforder Und Pariser Handschrift Sowie Den Petersburger Fragmenten*, 355.

master's orders. For him, spiritual experience is received in isolation.<sup>49</sup> Therefore seclusion from material world and the society, and the purification of the heart and mind from carnal pleasures creates a possibility for one to attain wisdom. The purpose of the night vigils that are performed in isolation can be given as an example.

The dualism between evil and angelic powers in the universe, from the perspective of Jewish medieval point of view, is characterized in the dualism between evil and good inclinations in the soul. At this point, asceticism becomes a problematic and comprehensive system of cosmology and theology. The dualism between flesh and soul takes place in the Judaic understanding of asceticism, because an ascetic can be free to attain the divine life that contacts with God by dual ascetic practices on body and soul. Flesh represents sinfulness, and therefore the evil in flesh has to be eliminated, not the flesh itself as the Hellenistic thought points out. This is the reason why Judaism rejects asceticism that is viewed as physically and spiritually deleterious exercise. Instead of ascetic practices, Judaism advocates the spiritual health that is not against to human nature.<sup>50</sup> Ascetic practices, in Judaism, are to provide spiritual healing. Lawrence Fine accepts that medieval Christian piety more embraces ascetic practices than Jewish piety.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For more see, J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 151. And see Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 109.

<sup>50</sup> See Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*. Diamond, here, points out the superiority of Judaism over Christianity because in Christianity ascetic practices are regarded as pathological withdrawal.

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Fine, trans., *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, the Beginning of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

The Islamic way of understanding of asceticism also denies the annihilation of the body and advocates the training methods to ameliorate the evil part of the flesh. According to al-Zuhri, “*zuhd* was not attained by ascetically mortifying the flesh, but rather by exercising self-restraint away from the dubious things.”<sup>52</sup> Instead of destruction of the existence of human body for its worldly delights, struggling with them is preferred for attaining the divine knowledge.<sup>53</sup> According to Fierro, the nexus between asceticism and theology demonstrates its place in religious field, “the combination of asceticism with an interest in theology, specifically *Mu‘tazili* theology, as was characteristic of certain ‘ulama’ of the ninth century, points to developments relative to religious belief.”<sup>54</sup>

Rabbinic asceticism admits Torah study as an ascetic exercise because it makes one to forget his sinfulness and gives energy and desire to follow other mundane occupations. Satlow, in his article, claims that “talmud torah is a perfect example of asceticism in the

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<sup>52</sup> Qurtubi, *The Secrets of Asceticism*, 26. Al-Zuhri --Muhammad b. Muslim b. ‘Abdallah b. Shihab al-Zuhri from the Qurayshi subtribe of Zuhrih b. Kilab, Abu Bakr (d. 741 CE) was one of the topmost *huffaz* (Qur’an memorizers) and *fuqaha* (jurists) of the followers, and the first one to formally record the Prophetic *hadith*. He used to bring along material (tablets and scrolls) on which he would write down every *hadith* he heard.

<sup>53</sup> John J Curry, *The Transformation of Muslim Mystical Thought in the Ottoman Empire: The Rise of the Halveti Order, 1350-1650* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 173. Curry discusses the types of knowledge which penetrate into the struggle of human being with his carnal passions.

<sup>54</sup> Maribel Fierro, “Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F Jong and Radtke, vol. 29 (Leiden, Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 1999), 174-206.

context of late antiquity.”<sup>55</sup> As David Ariel indicates that “the Kabbalists adopted the normative practices and rituals derived from Torah.”<sup>56</sup> It seems that the starting point of the Kabbalists regarding ascetic practices is what rabbinic asceticism underlines as instrumental asceticism which is based upon a commitment of study Torah. Therefore, the devotion oneself to the Torah study is a type of Jewish ascetic praxis because the goal of Torah study in the region of piety is “to prepare man for the highest achievement.”<sup>57</sup>

The recitation of the Qur’an for Muslim ascetics is as significant as talmud Torah for Jewish ascetics. Karamustafa adds the persistence on the Qur’an recitations into the ascetic piety.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, according to Martin Lings, “the recitation of the Qur’an is the voluntary rite.”<sup>59</sup> In his work, Samuel Rosenblatt elaborates on Abraham Maimonides’ philosophical views, connection with the Sufis, attitudes toward Torah, notes the importance of reciting Torah as an ascetic exercise; “the longing of the soul to return to its heavenly origin with

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<sup>55</sup> Satlow, “And on the Earth You Shall Sleep,” 205.

<sup>56</sup> David S Ariel, *Kabbalah: The Mystic Quest in Judaism* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 120.

<sup>57</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah an Introduction to Judaism.*, 2nd ed. (Encino Calif.: Dickenson Pub. Co., 1974).

<sup>58</sup> “The chief characteristic of zuhd in the tenth century were persistence in prayer, dhikr, Qur’an recitations, emphasis on giving of alms and extended fasting, service to others, cultivation of sermons and public readings, abstention from public manifestation of piety in the form of avoiding public authorities.” Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism The formative period* (Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), 74. Maribel Fierro also lists ascetic practices in addition to the recitation of the Qur’an, “as regards practice, some pious Muslims devoted themselves to the constant recitation of the Qur’an, to prayer and fasting in excess of what was prescribed, and to alms-giving.” Fierro, “Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus.”

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Laude, *Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religions* (Bloomington Ind.: World Wisdom, 2006), 84.

its original source are strengthened and perfected as the soul engages in intellectual occupations such as theoretical studies, and in the training of habits and the disciplines prescribed by the Torah which constitutes its own perfections.”<sup>60</sup> On the same level, that a man reads the Qur’an and performs what is said in the Qur’an is a gateway for him to become a *zahid*.

Meanwhile, there is a controversy about the presence of asceticism originating in early times of Judaism. Satlow touches upon this controversial issue in his article, and concludes that the conflict between Baer and Urbach brings a new horizon to the Jewish asceticism.<sup>61</sup> The influence of Qumran asceticism toward the medieval Jewish ascetic understanding is inevitable,<sup>62</sup> such as the obliteration of evil in the body, and “transformation of the present sin-ridden kind of human existence.”<sup>63</sup> The difference between the annihilation of the body in the Greek philosophy and the abolition of evil in the Jewish asceticism is the emergence of another version of dualism. Indeed, it is also very exciting to see a correspondence between body and nest. If the nest is destroyed, the soul is in exile. According to Zohar,

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<sup>60</sup> Abraham Maimonides, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Satlow, “And on the Earth You Shall Sleep.” Satlow concentrates on the philosophical explanation of talmud Torah as understood by Greco-Roman philosophers. He argues that Torah study is only one of the ascetic practices. Studying Torah is a holy activity. The degree of piety is measured through the repeating the rituals, in this context, Torah study. For more, see Neusner, *The Way of Torah an Introduction to Judaism.*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Qumran Community is thought to be of the Essene sect and responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls.

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Thiering, “The Biblical Source of Qumran Asceticism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 3 (1974): 434.

“the soul is like the bird which leaves the nest.”<sup>64</sup> Jerusalem is destroyed, then the nation is in exile, same as, the body is deprived, then the soul is perished. The existence or destruction of one of both entails the other one’s entity or desolation. Ibn Arabi in a paradoxical statement demonstrates the nexus between the divine wisdom and the human entity. Indeed, while the body is considered as the greatest veil covering the divine wisdom, the existence of the divine knowledge depends on the existence of human being.<sup>65</sup>

The body is a crucial chain for the devotion oneself to the Holy One. “According to the Jews, self-denial is often a symptom of one’s frailty and sinfulness and the dystopian state of Jewish existence,”<sup>66</sup> however, a systematic self-denial is the method of spiritual perfection. On the other hand, it is noted that the ascetic exercises in Judaism contain the voluntarily denouncement from allowed bodily suffering. At this point, one can claim the impossibility of physical reinforcement in Judaism because talmud Torah requires one to fulfill God’s commandments. The perfection of body and soul contains an esoteric significance in order to attain the inner intention of rituals. The reason of all the acts of religious rituals such as reading Torah, prayer and the fulfillment of God’s other commandments, is the preoccupation to submit oneself to divine highness.

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<sup>64</sup> Bracha Sack, “Some Remarks on Rabbi Moses Cordovero’s *Shemu’ah be-’Inyanha-Gilgul*,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 277-287.

<sup>66</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 134.

As Thiering lists, in her article on the Biblical sources of Qumran asceticism, their practices , such as celibacy, fasting, vigils, sobriety of behavior, obedience to superiors, fasting is also remarked as one of the most prominent spiritual practices by medieval Jewish scholars in terms of the signaling rabbinic piety, despite the fact that fasting makes one incapable to study Torah.<sup>67</sup> One can make an argument of the transformation of body, not the annihilation of it. Separation from mundane desires as one of the ascetic exercises destines toward the change of the corporeal body into a spiritual form “whose links are constituted the letters of the name, the anthropomorphic configuration of Torah.”<sup>68</sup> Bahya claims that ascetic behaviors such as renunciation from food, drink, marriage, dress, talk, involve to every human with reason. Fasting and the other ascetic exercises are essential for ethical perfection, for Bahya ibn Pakuda. Judah Halevi also supports Bahya’s thoughts on the fasting performance and claims that fasting with a devoted heart is one of the ways to approach to God.<sup>69</sup> In order to have a devoted heart, it needs to be treated. Al-Khawwas notes the treatment of heart, “a thoughtful reading of the Qur’an, an empty stomach, night vigils, supplications in the early morning and keeping the company of the righteous.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Thiering, “The Biblical Source of Qumran Asceticism.”

<sup>68</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 255.

<sup>69</sup> Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari (Kitab al khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 113. Judah Halevi was one of the prominent Hebrew poets in medieval Spain. He wrote a famous religio-philosophical work named *Kuzari, Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*.

<sup>70</sup> Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism (Al-Risala Al-Qushayriyya Fi ilm Al-Tasawwuf)*, 56.

According to rabbinic ideal of asceticism, worldly suffering is temporary, and suffering of this world evolves into the reward of hereafter. The more renunciation of carnal desires entails the more reward of the next world. Diamond explains this point with rabbis' necessity of putting self-denial in its idealized forms. The idea of renunciation from this world is for amending the other world. The possibility of achieving the other worldly pleasures leads oneself to seeking the inner spirituality.<sup>71</sup> The understanding of asceticism in Judaism as a virtual behavior is retained by Moses Maimonides who asserts Judaism as a subsidizer of social life and mild asceticism.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless Maimonides also considers an ascetic renunciation of worldly pleasures necessary for people who live in a morally and spiritually depraved environment.<sup>73</sup> The social side effects of asceticism are also highlighted by Bahya who asserts asceticism's role in relationship and agreement among people.<sup>74</sup> Here, one can raise a question; where does asceticism stand in achieving social morality?

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<sup>71</sup> Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism*

*The formative period*. Karamustafa in his book sees asceticism as a branch of piety. And he traces its roots back to Muslim Spain of the tenth century.

<sup>72</sup> Elliot R Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 295. Wolfson also expresses that Hasidim cultivate the extreme piety; for kabbalists, ascetic practices as supreme pietistic virtue are beyond the limits of the law. The controversial issue appears between mystics -ascetics- and jurists -halakhah.- .

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>74</sup> Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Al-Hidaja ila Fara id Al-Qulub Des Bachja Ibn Josef Ibn Paquda Aus Andalusien Im Arabischen Urtext Zum Ersten Male Nach Der Oxforder Und Pariser Handschrift Sowie Den Petersburger Fragmenten*, 324. Bahya in the same passage emphasizes the importance of asceticism about the distinguished part in our hearts, creation and faith.

In fact, *zuhd* in Islam is to avoid living in luxury. But this statement does not imply not to live in wealth; on the contrary, it indicates being satisfied with what people have. In a *hadith*, Prophet Muhammad limits the boundaries of *zuhd* in this world as not forbidding to oneself the lawful or in dissipating wealth away. Rather, *zuhd* in this world is not to feel more confident in what is in your hand compared to what is in Allah's hand to desire the reward of a calamity when you are afflicted by it more than you would do if it were to be held back for your sake and deferred.<sup>75</sup> The *hadith* emphasizes the otherworldly reward as a result of the submission of the heart to God. Hasidism's notion of the inner process of spiritualization, as the criticism of the life in luxury demonstrates the connection between the early Muslim pietists and the Hasidim. Rosenblatt quotes Abraham Maimonides; "abstinence begins with being contented with necessities and avoiding luxuries."<sup>76</sup>

Asceticism occasionally emerges as a protest against governments. Hurvitz puts a specific example of Ibn Hanbal's rejection of certain types of food, consumption of which demonstrated the socio-cultural and economic status and affiliations.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, another aspect of renunciation, other than renunciation from carnal pleasures, is renunciation from

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<sup>75</sup> Tirmidhi, "Jami al-Tirmidhi," in *Mawsuat al-Sunnah: al-kutub al-sittah wa-shuruhuha*, vol. 12, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Dar al-Dawah; Tunis: Dar Sahnun; al-Riyad: Tawzi Maktabat al-Warraq, 1992), 571.

For more also see Ibn Majah's *Sunan* and al-Baghawi's *al-Mishkat*.

<sup>76</sup> Abraham Maimonides, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> Hurvitz, "Biographies and Mild Asceticism: A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination." He, in this article, differentiates extreme and mild ascetics. The aim of extreme ascetics is not only the control of physical body but also the union with God.

the auspices of the rulers. Goitein gives examples of such a similarity; “Hasidim were particularly careful in avoiding any contact with government or even Jewish authorities.”<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the scholars who belong to a religious groups and known as ascetic performers were in rivalry to gain the support of the government.<sup>79</sup> Ibn Hanbal disapproved worldly desires and social and moral fractures in pleasure circles. It is palpable that the purpose of the limitation of food is self-control. Additionally, according to Sufi tradition, food is a veil in the God’s path.<sup>80</sup> What Ibn Hanbal practiced was mild asceticism and his denial of the consumption of food over a necessary amount of it also shows his ethical view. Hence, Hurvitz delineates two aspects of mild asceticism: lifestyle and moral degree. The ethical view of asceticism *-zuhd-* in Islamic tradition is always to remember the transitoriness and meaningless of the world. This consideration makes one easily abandon the physical desires of the world. As a lifestyle, in the opposite direction of the *zuhd*, desire takes place.<sup>81</sup> In the early Islamic period the ascetic piety was realized in the Mediterranean region to be a fundamental process for those who sought mystical ascent. The mild ascetic

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<sup>78</sup> S. D Goitein, *Jews and Arabs, Their Contacts Through the Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 149. Goitein claims that the relationship between the early Muslim ascetics (especially in Basra) and the Hasidim could be found in Sufi writing and also Jewish sources. Hasidism was a movement started around 1700 in Eastern Europe by Baal Shem Tov who was a scholar and mystic. Hasidism was criticized for their negligence of the Law.

<sup>79</sup> Fierro, “Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus.” Fierro, M. *Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus*, p. 174-206.

<sup>80</sup> Daphna Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety: Sufis and the Dissemination of Islam in Medieval Palestine*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 2008), 16. Among the early Muslim pietist are Bishr al-Hafi, Sufyan al-Thawri, Ibrahim b. Adham, Abu Yazid al-Bistami, Sari al-Saqati, Dhul-Nun al-Misri and etc.

<sup>81</sup> Qurtubi, *The Secrets of Asceticism*, 25.

stage which created the basis of the ethical aspect of Sufi piety, is summarized by Kihnberg, “the compromise is between the fact that an ascetic lives in a spiritual life and is supposed to annihilate himself and the whole world in which he lives, and the fact that he cannot escape his existence and physical needs in this world.”<sup>82</sup>

Extreme and moderate types of ascetic practices permanently remain in the discussion. The early Islamic ascetics criticized the extreme ascetic performances. From tenth century on, the ethical-mystical movements called Sufism were known as a moderate type of ascetic piety. The early pietists aimed to achieve the closeness of God through devotional and ascetic practices; but with the extension of mystical formation, the goal was outreached to the ascetic ideal. As a matter of fact, the first ascetics were cordially devoted pietists who were insufficient on the critical thinking.<sup>83</sup> The evolution of Sufism into a moderate perspective is based upon the prophetic legacy.<sup>84</sup> The mainstream Sufism espouses the religious attribution and the practical models of the early inner-worldly ascetics. In other words, it is a permanent and complicated form of mild asceticism. The structure of Sufism which embraces asceticism’s religious and behavioral system transformed into ethically equipped piety between Islamic law and the inner reality. At this point, the embodiment of the virtues such as mild asceticism, humility, generosity and altruism are established in the

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<sup>82</sup> Kihnberg, “What Is Meant by Zuhd,” 40.

<sup>83</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Tirmidhi, “Jami al-Tirmidhi.” Kitab al-Zuhd.

spiritual stages with the moral values of the personality of the Prophet. Trimingham states that the reason of the emergence of institutional Sufism, “the legal religion fulfilled a social far more than a spiritual function, and it was the function of the orders to mediate to the ordinary man the inner aspect of Islam.”<sup>85</sup> By that position, Sufism was perceived as an institutional ascetic movement.

According to Wolfson, Maimonides who rejects renunciation making people asocial from the community is in agreement with Halevi who was a twelfth century Jewish intellect.<sup>86</sup> Judah Halevi claims that extreme ascetic practices do not involve in Judaism because those exercises cut off people from the community life. It is the indication of the existence of mild ascetic virtue in Jewish tradition. Therefore, one can summarize the medieval Jewish understanding of asceticism that moderation and self-control are the key words. On the one hand, the body plays an important role because it is the vessel to restore the pure soul. Hence this path pointing out self-perfection could be valid to call “world-affirming asceticism.” On the other hand, the body is the hindrance of attaining the divine knowledge and so, it is the veil of the divine wisdom.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 229.

<sup>86</sup> Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 294. Halevi’s argument is on the same line with that of Abraham Abulafia. Moshe Idel clarifies Abulafia as the defender of “strengthening the intellect.” Abulafia claims extreme ascetic performances to be unnecessary. Moshe Idel, *The mystical experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>87</sup> Ibn al-Arabi, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyah*, 2:553. Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) is considered one of the most famous Sufi theologians and philosophers.

After all, heart is God's place according to Jewish tradition. Abulafia's technique to establish God in one's heart is to cleanse one's body and choose a lonely place where none shall hear his voice.<sup>88</sup> Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg insist that seclusion and isolation are two of the very common ascetic practices in Passover. They emphasize that Cochin Jews in India practiced this ascetic performance as the isolation from non-Jewish people during Passover.<sup>89</sup> Eitan Fishbane states that for an ascetic who meditates in seclusion, extreme form of humility is portrayed as being indifferent to the rebuke or praise bestowed upon him by others.<sup>90</sup> At this point, speculation in solitude appears as an ascetic praxis. Seclusion from community is the only way to embrace the divine meditation: "Seclusion in a separate house is prescribed, and if this be a house in which no noise can be heard, the better."<sup>91</sup> This type of extreme ascetic behaviors is very common among Hasidei 'Ashkenaz.

The negation of physical body for the contemplation of divine is one of the distinctive

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<sup>88</sup> *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997), 78.

<sup>89</sup> Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, "Asceticism and Caste in the Passover Observances of the Cochin Jews," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1989): 63. Cochin Jews are the oldest group of Jews in India. In the sixteenth century European Jews who were exiled from countries settled into India. They met Black Indian Jewish population which their religious observances were very different from that of Sephardic Jews. Hence the Jewish community was distinguished as Black and White Jewish population.

<sup>90</sup> Eitan P Fishbane, *As Light Before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009), 29-30.

<sup>91</sup> *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 89.

elements of the ascetic hermits, and the true ascetic is in search of a transcendence of the physical. The last stage of the transformation of the body occurs in the seclusion. Bahya ibn Pakuda underlines that the seclusion of the pious transpires in two dimensions: one is seclusion from corporeal body and the second one, seclusion from the accompaniment of the others. The purpose of the seclusion is hence “to encounter God in pure isolation and purely spiritual mind.”<sup>92</sup> This is a paradoxical observation. On the one hand, if asceticism is viewed as composed of feelings of an individual, then the spiritual essence of asceticism produces the materialistic approach toward life. He cannot ignore that he lives in this world. On the other hand, the spiritual perfection cannot be obtained without disregarding the corporeal existence. One who has to abandon this world achieves the higher stage of spiritualization. And during the period, *zuhhad* strived to solve this paradox by defining and explaining the concept in various times and descriptions. Therefore, the conciliatory concept ‘mild’ asceticism fits into this situation: fulfilling the basic needs for the existence of the physical body.<sup>93</sup> In the medieval period, ascetic withdrawal from society and devoting oneself to the contemplation of divine in an isolated meditative place were very common exercises. Indeed, the Muslim ascetics’ detestation of worldly delights appears in the retreat from the society. This understanding of seclusion does not mean the complete unawareness from the society, on the contrary, ascetics tended to spread the Islamic pillars

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<sup>92</sup> Fishbane, *As Light Before Dawn*, 260.

<sup>93</sup> Mild asceticism is a practice that an ascetic who controls his emotions and desires does not desert the values of this world in the feeling of the contentment and dependency to God.

and care the poor in the community. One of the vilifications of ascetics is their renunciation of the requirements of Islamic rituals; however they not only perform the divine law but also they internalize it. As Carl Ernst quoted al-Sarraj, “sufism is the mystical intensification of Islamic religious consciousness.”<sup>94</sup> Therefore, the purpose of the seclusion from community appears in escaping from mundane pleasures.<sup>95</sup> The spiritual path to perfection entails an inner-worldly mode of life, for early Muslim ascetics.

In Jewish Mystical Testimonies, the process of spiritualization is described in three ways. The first way of these three methods is vulgar way that is practiced by Muslim ascetics, according to medieval kabbalists. This way only includes reciting the name “Allah,” and it removes all natural forms and images from the soul.<sup>96</sup> In order to maintain the inner meanings of the performance of religious practices, night vigil illustrates an essential part of the early Islamic ascetic lifestyle. It is regarded to perfectly make possible the conversation between the lover and the beloved. Schimmel emphasizes that the most important activity in the night is the Qur’an recitation as conversation with Divine.<sup>97</sup> For example, Abu Dharr Ghifari (d.652) who was known with his rigid ascetic performances,

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<sup>94</sup> Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, 9. Al-Sarraj is the tenth century Sufi and the writer of the *Kitab al-Luma*.

<sup>95</sup> Al-Sulami depicts Lubaba al-Muta’abbida’s (d. unknown) words, “The more I observe self-denial, the more comfortable I become with its practice. Thus when I get tired from human encounter, I find intimacy in the remembrance of God. And when human discourse tires me, I take my rest in dedication to the worship of God and fulfilling His service.” Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 82.

<sup>96</sup> *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> “The ascetic spent his night at prayers recommended in the Qur’an, which gave him time to enjoy blessed conversation with his Lord through prayer.” Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 114.

advises performing one's vigils in the darkness of the night for saving himself from the troubles of the grave, and fasting in a hot day in this world in preparation for the scorching day of judgment, and giving almsgiving for protection from the fear of the formidable day.<sup>98</sup> Regarding the examples, the first ascetics have frequently been characterized as spending nights in permanent prayer, and sustaining continual fast by day.

In the final analysis, one can express the remarkable explanations and attitudes of asceticism in both Judaism and Islam. Beyond the concrete exercises, its cosmological and social implications as the device of a personal ascent cannot be ignored. Not only the connectivity of religious and moral stages, but also the theological description of asceticism extends to a very wide field of study. The perfection of the human soul by the vessels of gnosis and ascetic performances is the essence of the medieval ethical idea.

### **Conclusion**

One who looks at the similarities or differences between Jewish and Islamic traditions on the concept of asceticism notices that these traditions rather than influencing one another, they had grown up together. The connection between Judaism and Islam in this respect

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<sup>98</sup> Ibn Hanbal, *Kitab Al-Zuhd*, 80. He ends his lecture by saying that, "Oh people, this is my advice to you all, and I am the guider of you." (Translation is mine.)

provides us a better understanding of asceticism or *zuhd*.

S. D. Goitein in his book titled *Jews and Arabs* widely touches upon the interaction between Jewish and Islamic cultures. Especially he expresses the great similarity of Hasidim and the early Muslim pietists. Nevertheless, later in the medieval period, the reputation of the moderate ascetic practices and the moral aspect of mild asceticism take over the extreme ascetic understanding. In the formative period of Islam, Jewish and Islamic communities were identical because they grew up together. This connection explains “why the early pietistic Muslim literature contains many sayings found also in the writings of the rabbis.”<sup>99</sup> Ephrat’s statement also corroborates the communication between the two cultures when she narrates a story of a pious man -Abu Dahr Yazid b. Abi Sumayd- in Eilat. According to the story, Abu Dahr who was a famous ascetic of Eilat performed ascetic rituals and frequently wept. When a Jewish woman saw him lamenting, she lamented with him.<sup>100</sup> This example leads one to see the close connection between Muslim pious ascetics and Jewish circles in the Mediterranean region in the medieval period. From

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<sup>99</sup> Goitein, *Jews and Arabs, Their Contacts Through the Ages*, 60. Goitein talks about the impression of Sufi pietistic influences on Judaism; for instance, Sufi patterns in Ibn Gabirol’s poems and Bahya’s famous book *The Duties of the Heart* in 1075 in Arabic reflects Muslim ascetic theology into Judaism.

<sup>100</sup> Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety*, 24. The rest of the story is as follows; when Abu Dahr prayed his night vigil he invoked to God: “Oh God most high, this Jewish woman cried out of mercy for me, even though her religious creed is different from that of mine. Oh God, I seek mercy from you alone.” For more, see Muhammad b. Sa’d’s *Kitab al-Tabaqat* (Leiden: Brill, 1905); Abu al-Faraj b. al-Jawzi’s *Sifat al-Safwa*, 4 volumes (Hyderabad: Da’irat al-Ma’arif al-Uthmaniyya, 1335-57 AH); Ibn Hajar al-’Asqalani’s *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib* (Hyderabad, 1327 AH).

this perspective, the understanding of mild asceticism is one of the common characteristics in both mystical traditions. Moderation and self-control are the crucial actors in Jewish and Islamic ascetic history.

On the other hand, Baldick claims that this interaction between two traditions started in the thirteenth century and “up to the thirteenth century Jews in Muslim countries just imitated Sufi writings.”<sup>101</sup> Ariel also states that the influence of Islamic mysticism upon Jewish mystical traditions goes back to the period before Kabbalah.<sup>102</sup> Kabbalists who especially lived around Jerusalem were inspired by Sufi rituals, such as seclusion and, in Paul Fenton’s use, “solitary devotion.”<sup>103</sup> The isolation of medieval ascetic practitioners from social sphere is based on their critical point of view toward the community. They preferred the withdrawal from society because they were the primary critics of it. The attitude of the aforementioned example of Ibn Hanbal who criticized both the patronage of the state and the worldly temptations was developed within Jewish society as well. Among those movements, German pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries known as Haside ‘Ashkenaz, the ascetic mystics of sixteenth century Safed, the ascetic group within the eighteenth century Hasidim.<sup>104</sup> Asceticism as renunciation from this world *-tark al-dunya-*

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<sup>101</sup> Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Ariel, “The Eastern Dawn of Wisdom: The Problem of the Relation Islamic and Jewish Mysticism in Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times,” 154.

<sup>103</sup> Paul B. Fenton, “Solitary Meditation in Jewish and Islamic Mysticism in the Light of a Recent Archeological Discovery,” *Medieval Encounters* 1, 2 (1995): 271-296.

<sup>104</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 135.

and despising the world is one of the characteristics of the Sufis and the Jewish ascetics who are influenced by the Sufi lifestyle.

Fear signals the abandoning sins. In Judaism, the impetus of asceticism is fear of sin. The solution of fear is expected as the abstinence from mortal pleasures. Moreover, the early ascetics of Islam valued fear more than hope. Fear as a motivation is regarded as a “whip of divine power.”<sup>105</sup> The moderate approach of the medieval period does not imply an absolute retreat from social sphere and family bonds. But the quality of ascetic practices points out the level of ethical perfection, the perfection of the human soul. Halevi in his *Kuzari*, argues the reason of why extreme asceticism should not be practiced: “the ideal of extreme asceticism is not desirable in our day because prophecy is no longer possible.”<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, while the moral and moderate perspective of Jewish mysticism is considered dominant, the extreme asceticism in Judaism should be paid attention as well.

Exercises which are identified as the parts of asceticism, such as the recitation of Torah and Qur’an, fasting, night vigils, and seclusion were popular among the medieval ascetics. The thing that ascetics try to eliminate is not the body itself but the evil character in the soul. However, unless the body is trained, the self *-nafs-*, the evil inclinations in the soul,

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<sup>105</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.*, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Peli, “Asceticism,” 548.

cannot be transformed into an angelic formation. Therefore medieval ascetics preferred the contemplative style to escape the obligations of mortality.

Medieval ascetics belonging to either Islamic canonization or Jewish faith were the advocates of the moderate ascetic lifestyle even if they challenged the authority of state. They practiced asceticism as strengthening the bonds in community. Seclusion was regarded from this angle, as withdrawal from corporeal body.

To sum up, the medieval period is, in terms of vivid ascetic performances and, the theurgical and philosophical aspect of asceticism is a very abundant era. It was not impossible for the traditions of Judaism and Islam, which shared the same locations, to be in communication with each other. Not only the practical feature of asceticism as ethical and plural description in social view but also its theosophical and complex structure does deserve attention.

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