

Video Clip: Shmuel HaNaggid

A Jewish Vizier in Muslim Spain

Shmuel HaNaggid had great influence on both the Jewish world and Muslim world. He wrote commentary on the Bible and was an author of Hebrew poetry during the Golden Age of Spain. Also known as ibn Naghrillah, he became vizier of Granada and is the only Jew for whom chapters of Muslim history are dedicated.

Suggested Implementations

Philosophy/Hashkafa

1. Muslim-Jewish relations
2. Leadership

Jewish History

1. Golden Age of Spain
2. Muslim-Jewish relations

Background

Samuel ibn Naghrillah (993-1056) was born in Merida, Spain. He was a Talmudic scholar, linguist, soldier, merchant, diplomat, and perhaps most prominently, a poet. The historian Norman Arthur Stillman, an expert on the meeting points of Jewish and Muslim culture in medieval Spain, argues in his book *The Jews of Arab Lands* that Shmuel HaNaggid was the most politically powerful Jew in Muslim Spain.

He studied Talmud under contemporary, prominent Rabbi Enoch, but in practice was a poor merchant. Ibn Naghrillah moved to Malaga following the Cordoba Civil War in 1013. There he sold spices near the palace of vizier al-Arif of Granada. Due to his fluency in Arabic calligraphy (as well as Hebrew), he was soon summoned to write letters for the servant of the vizier, and was ultimately hired as secretary of the vizier.

Al-Arif valued ibn Naghrillah's opinions and even sought his political counsel. On al-Arif's death he told King Habbus of ibn Naghrillah's aid and advice during his tenure. It was then that the king appointed him to al-Arif's position, making him the highest-ranking Jew in Muslim Spain. This was very rare, as Shmuel lived in an Islamic nation guided by the Pact of Umar, which ruled that, among other restrictions, *dhimmis*, a status that included Jews, couldn't hold high public office. Indeed, as the vizier, he became the highest-ranking Jew in all of the Iberian Peninsula. It was groundbreaking to have a Jew as the top general of the Muslim Granada army, commanding all its soldiers for 17 years.

He is the only Jew for whom chapters of Muslim history are dedicated. There is even a famous expression by an Arab poet that reflects his prominence: "To kiss the hand of ibn Naghrillah is more powerful than kissing the Kaaba."

Following this appointment, Shmuel took the title of "prince," or "naggid," the name by which the Jewish community knows him today (Shmuel HaNaggid). Not only was he a military and political leader, but he was a Jewish scholar and statesman as well.

His status also allowed him to be influential within the Jewish world. Using his newfound wealth, he sponsored the dissemination of books and learning. He funded Rabbi Nissim Ben Yaakov's travels and teachings in Spain. Ibn Naghrillah's daughter even married the son of Rabbi Nissim.

Furthermore, he himself wrote a commentary on the Talmud, although not much of it survived, as with many of the Arabic Jewish scholarly works. He promoted a more all-inclusive, high Torah learning by commissioning many copies of the Talmud. The Naggid established a yeshiva in Granada where brilliant *talmidei hachamim* studied, including the father of Maimonides, Maimon Ben Yosef.

Shmuel HaNaggid was also a poet as he was fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin. He wrote songs of love and war, of praise and friendship, of wine and lust, of contemplation and more. In his book *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, Israeli statesman Abba Eban argues that the Naggid's major contribution to medieval poetry was in interweaving elements from Arabic poetry into biblical Hebrew, thereby creating a new form of Hebrew poetry. Not only did he use Hebrew poetry to describe Spanish battles, the Naggid also introduced an Arabic primer on biblical Hebrew grammar. He had two sons who compiled his songs from the early ages of six and seven.

One of his sons, Joseph, further followed in his footsteps, taking over as vizier of Granada upon Ibn Naghrillah's death. However, having been raised in the lap of luxury he was not as passionate or successful as his father. Still, Shmuel HaNaggid is remembered for his great influence on Muslim Spain. There is legend that the famous Alhambra in Spain is associated with him, further showing his distinguished influence and unparalleled legacy.

Questions for Discussion

1. The diasporic Jew is often depicted as weak and poor. Shmuel HaNaggid was a proud Levite and a proud Jew within a powerful government. If he were living today, what movement would he start or join? Would he stay in the diaspora or move to Israel?
2. Ibn Naghrillah wrote an anti-Islam dissertation on the internal contradictions of the Qur'an. It did not survive, but there are many references to it. His friend, Ibn Hazm, writes about the paper in "Rejoinder of Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm to Ibn Nagrela the Jew, May God Curse Him!". As a leader of the Jews, it was important to show the discrepancies in Islamic thought, but was it necessary to publicize it in Arabic?
3. Usually a *nassi*, or *naggid*, was descendent of King David. Is there significance in his giving himself the title of *naggid* while maintaining his pride in being a Levite? What makes a defined Jewish leader?

Suggested Readings

Shmuel HaNaggid's Poetry: <http://www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org/poets/samuel-hanagid/>

Biography as written by Abraham ibn Daud of Toledo in 1161

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/ha-nagid.asp>

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