
Reviewed by David B. Levy, Lander College for Women, Ruth Hasten Library, NYC

**Introduction**

Sharon Vance’s book is an important scholarly contribution to the subjects of Jewish-Muslim relations, gender dynamics in North African Jewish communities, and the history of Jews in North Africa. Vance examines and compares the written apocryphal narratives produced and circulated after the execution of a Moroccan Jewish martyr named Sol Hatchuel in 1834, revealing the afterlife of Sol’s case and its ensuing hagiographic accounts in the multidimensional historical contexts. The book is based on Vance’s dissertation on the topic in the discipline of folklore. The historical approach of Vance raises the historiographical question of methods used to reconstruct the past and attempts to separate apocryphal posthumous narratives from the realm of myth. Vance examines the different accounts that followed Sol’s death to explore the “who, what, where, when, and why” of this Jewish woman born in Tangier who, after allegedly converting to Islam was sentenced to execution in Fez by the Moroccan state for remaining true to Judaism, defying the wishes of the Sultan, and refusing to accept Islam. Vance analyzes and compares the versions in European languages, Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic that differ in details relating to Sol's martyrdom, to arrive at the big picture and question historical studies’ own methods to seek a plausible “truth” in this historiographical record. Like New Testament scholars who deal with the differences in the synoptic texts, and the afterlife of an executed alleged saint, Vance’s study raises questions about the relationship between apocryphal myth and historical fact. Sol’s grave in Fez, which is a pilgrimage site, is believed to effect mystical cures and fosters the reinterpreted memory of a prominent female saint in Moroccan Jewish hagiographic accounts. As Oren Kasansky succinctly notes: “The variations upon her narrative reflect particular eschatological, polemical and political projects, each in turn linked with particular kinds of authors (rabbinic, diplomatic, literary), and with particular languages (French, Spanish, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic), genres (liturgical, poetic, journalistic) and national-imperial contexts (Moroccan, Ottoman, European).”

**Gender Issues at the Center of the Books’ Content**

The book, *The Martyrdom of a Moroccan Jewish Saint*, raises many gender issues whereby sexual politics is imbedded in religious politics. Kasansky found fault with Vance not devoting enough attention to gender issues:
Given the topic at hand and the author's self-proclaimed interests, one might have expected gender to be more central to Vance's ongoing analysis. While the author situates her case in the context of pilgrimage practices more generally, she does not attend significantly to the gendered facets of these ritual events or to the ways in which Sol's hagiographic reinventions interact with the otherwise male-dominated Moroccan Jewish hagiographic corpus. In the few instances where gender does rise to the analytical surface, Vance's reflections point in interesting directions. Hebrew-language versions of the narrative, which serve as a vehicle for rabbinic discourse, emphasize decidedly feminine aspects of Sol's piety by focusing on her heroic efforts to protect her virginal status. At the same time, the authority of Sol's position is established in masculine terms, insofar as her voice is expressed in rabbinic style, replete with erudite Bible quotations. In the Salonikan version of the narrative, Sol is not the only martyr to appear: A young rabbinic student sacrifices himself in a final attempt to prevent the execution from being carried out. Vance speculates that this novel motif may reflect broader modernizing efforts that militated against the longstanding feminization of Jews in Europe and the Muslim Mediterranean. The insertion of a brave Jewish agent into the story, Vance argues, represents the Jewish man as a potential soldier and stalwart citizen of a modern Ottoman state.

Even in light of Kasansky’s identification of the key place of gender in Vance’s study, Vance’s book is particularly relevant for issues of women in Judaism because the issue of gender discourse is interconnected with religious polemics on a number of levels. At the symbolic level, relations between God and Israel are seen as a monogamous heterosexual marriage, and Sol's discourse in the texts about her life reinforces this conception through her polemical rejection of both Islam and Muslim suitors who assume that they can "acquire" Sol as a “prize with a price.” The Muslim misogynistic customs of that time and place attempt to reduce her to a "thing" as noted where in one account she is "deposited” at the door of the harem. There she was bathed given clothes and jewels and hennaed after which she was dressed in seductive silk then delivered to the Sultan, who asked her name. When she told him he replied that her name was in fact Fatma because this was his favorite name and the name of Muhammad's daughter. In all accounts of her martyrdom, there is the insinuation of great covetousness on the part of the lecherous Muslim gazers “enchanted” by her beauty and "how this beauty incited the envy of the Muslim neighbors... It is a sin they said that such a pearl should be in the possession of the Jews, and it would be a crime to leave them such a jewel, or flower unplucked etc." (31) Because of this “ravishing beauty,” Sol was carried off to the palace of Fez and “presented to the Sultan's son as a gift.” (31) In various poems, we encounter verses such as, “Let’s send her as a gift to the sultan who is captivated by her beauty” (171).

Because Sol "defies the Sultan's wishes" of "having her for himself or his son," she is executed and the myth that after the brutal execution the Sultan was stricken with paralysis until he was taken to her grave
and asked for forgiveness" is clearly apocryphal. The Sultan is Sol's would be suitor and then proposes his son to marry her, and it is her refusal of them both that is an affront to the Sultan’s pride by which he lets her be executed for "refusing to convert." (96)

Many of the accounts play on Sol's "infatuating" beauty making allusion to biblical verses as when we read, "the maiden was very beautiful a diadem of glory" (Isaiah 28:5) and a graceful mountain goat (Proverbs 5:19-20). Thus, Sol's deed of refusing the Sultan and her subsequent martyrdom are compared to the divine crown of glory, keter. She is the crowning jewel and pride of her people. Sol could not be bribed with all the silks of the Muslim empire to convert and submit to becoming a Muslim wife in his harem, even though she was shown "gold and silver and silk etc." She defied the Sultan and his executioner by twice saying to them, "There is nothing like our God and the true prophet is Moses our Rabbi peace be upon him, and I won't change my religion, or become his wife." (103) Such violations are not only violations of the Pact of Umar ("Jews must show deference to the Muslims") but an affirmation of the rights of Jewish women to follow their own choice, will, and desires, rather than have them subverted by powerful men. Her tombstone inscription affirms that she maintained her virginity dying as a "pure virgin maiden (betullah)" and is a sanctified martyr for God in the glorious city of Fez.

This saint’s defiance is also in the area of religious politics whereby she inverts the Islamic shahada in favor of a Jewish catechism: "There is no one like our God, and Moses is his prophet!" This woman is described on numerous accounts of refusing to be "taken" as "booty" by the Muslim leaders who coveted her exquisite beauty, and refused the dhimmi status of submitting and being subservient and deprecating to Islamic authority. In some accounts, she died like Rabbi Akiva with the shema on her lips. Her courageous refusal to be humiliated becomes a religious and gender issue. The Muslim sultan who was infatuated with her beauty and wanted her for himself or his son in fact tried to bribe her with material luxury but she refused and died as a martyr—a martyrdom that was chosen and embraced with devotion and sanctification.4

Many of the poems Sol presumably cited sound like learned rabbinic texts as if she were a male rabbi. Vance writes, “In these texts Sol is given dialogue that transforms her into a learned male and restrictions regarding teaching daughters Torah are disregarded. This begs the question of the nature of the Jewish daughter’s education in Morocco. Accounts from both Tangier and Fez emphasize the home basis of this education and the role played by the mother and the other female relatives in the household (159).” While Jewish girls were taught the dietary laws of kashrut, and other home based rituals like the lighting of the Shabbat candles, and the laws of niddah, (female purity), they were at an educational disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Girls in Morocco were often taught sewing but the study of rabbinic
texts was reserved for the select few men. Vance notes that men wrote all the accounts. However, women also told Sol’s story and passed on their versions down the generations. Most of these were part of an oral tradition. But there have also been published accounts of her story in the past few decades by Nehama Consuelo Nahmoud, Yaelle Azagoury, and Ruth Knaffo Setton. These women’s accounts all point to the unprecedented importance of Sol in the collective memory of the Sephardic community and her valorization as a role model from whom moral lessons can be drawn (217). Vance writes, “Yaelle Azagoury points to the role that Sol plays in the collective memory of Moroccan Jewry as a moral lesson for the horrible consequences that can occur when the boundaries between Muslims and Jews are transgressed. In Ruth Knaffo Setton’s novel, Sol’s story is interwoven with that of a young Moroccan Jewish woman raised in America who travels back to Morocco and makes the transition from young girl to woman. Juillette Hassine traces the development of Sol as a cultural hero from the earliest texts to Erez Bitton’s 1979 poem. Here the emphasis is on Sol as a heroine who dies in the tradition of the martyrs of the Hadrian persecutions, defending her religion, accepting her fate and thereby becoming a woman of valor worthy of emulation.” (217)

**Vance’s Work and Its Implications for Future Gender Studies**

Vance’s book is a welcome critical, thorough, and insightful book will be of interest to scholars of North African Judaism, women in Judaism and gender studies, folklorists, Historians, scholars of historiography, comparative religion, political scientists of Arab-Jewish relations, and Jewish studies departments.

Vance shows that reconstructing the historical record is often complex and multi variegated and dependent on the arrangement and emphasis placed on Sol Hatchuel’s archival documents from European-language, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Spanish texts from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Because of the confusion and contradictions which are apparent in the textual evidence about Sol’s history, one of Vance’s major contributions is to attempt to sort out which texts are more authoritative, valid, sound, reliable and which elements of the story are authentic thereby shedding light on the process of historical construction of the past.

Of the many apocryphal archival sources Vance draws upon, she decisively and clearly summarizes these texts and their differences, and includes comparisons with many other European texts that have less historical validity, but are nonetheless of related interest for their other dimensional interpretations of Sol’s case. Vance classifies her types of archival sources into the following groups: (1) European, (2) Hebrew, and (3) Jewish languages (Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish). Vance demonstrates that the type of text relied on to reconstruct the historical past is often biased and dependent on the writer of that text’s
own prejudices, agendas, ideologies, and perspectives. That is to say, various kinds of historical records reflect the preoccupations of their writers. All written accounts are not merely an attempt to give testimony to Sol’s case, but unconsciously exude testimony of the biases and interests of their own writers.

Vance delineates patterns of interpretation. For example, the European authors used Sol’s story to argue alternatively for religious tolerance, the waste and usefulness of tragic unnecessary suffering (souffrance inutile), and the “barbarism of Islam.” Early European accounts, in French and English, exemplify orientalist tendencies in their patronizing portraits of weak Jewish communities and their failure to save one of their own.

Alternatively, the Hebrew texts subsume “the specifics of events under the general concepts of the sacred historical dynamic of exile and redemption, galut u-ge’ulah (81).” The affair’s representation in Moroccan Hebrew texts reflected the rabbinic sensibilities of their authors. In Hebrew accounts as noted by Hayim Yerushalmi in his book Zakor, which treats the nature of Rabbinic versus historical forms of memory, the historical details of Sol’s story recede behind Bible quotations and messianic archetypes in which sacred suffering lays the foundation for redemption. Understandably, Jewish-Muslim polemics inform the Hebrew prose and poetry that gives voice to Sol’s case. Because of their perspective and Jewish context, the Hebrew accounts most often interpret Sol’s tragic story within the Jewish theological paradigm of an act of “Kiddush Ha-Shem” whereby Sol was a martyr for the Jewish faith whose reward will be in olam ha-bah [the world to come] and will bring salvation to Jews remaining in olam ha-zeh [this world].

As to be expected, the accounts in Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish possess more Islamic references and tones, such as calling Abraham “Ibrāḥīm al-khalīl,” (165) or “the friend of God vs. the Hebrew phrase Avraham Avinu etc. Judeo-Arabic recapitulation of Sol’s story, voiced cautionary popular responses to the modernizing projects of the European Jewish Enlightenment so that Sol’s saga didactically warns against the illusory appeal of assimilation which can lead to conversion. Vance’s analysis of the Judeo-Spanish romanso (serialized novel) published in the Thessalonica newspaper La Epoka demonstrates how the story reflects Ottoman Jews’ desire to maintain “positive relations” with the state, and expresses the acceptance of Sephardic refugees into the Ottoman Empire and the nineteenth-century reforms abolishing the dhimma status. Judeo-Spanish press of Thessalonica spins the Moroccan tragedy as a barbaric counterpoint to the progressive, modern and tolerant circumstances enjoyed by Jews in the Ottoman world. Thus, each type of account manifests its own historical reconstructed reality “in the eye of the beholders.” While the structural content of the Hebrew and Arabic texts often share treatment of: (1) descriptions of Sol’s beauty, (2) attempts to seduce her, (3) polemical exchanges between her and her
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captors, (4) her martyrdom, (5) call for divine revenge against her executioners, (6) and end of exile and call for redemption by return of the Jewish people to their homeland, etc., the Judeo-Arabic texts tend to have more dialogue between Sol and her captors in contrast to the Hebrew texts which contain greater description and narration in the third person.

Vance raises the relevant issues relating to the Sol’s case including the incidence of religious conversion across Judaism and Islam, the prominence of rabbinic interpretive practices in Moroccan-Jewish poetics, the tenuous position of Jews in nineteenth-century Moroccan society, and the less then protective treatment of Jews by the Moroccan state.

Vance shows us that Sol’s gender is a reminder to all that women and not just men can live according to principle and saint-like deeds. Sol’s merit has special meaning for poor women and women lacking male protection. Vance opens the question as a first step, but not the last step, by inquiring why Europeans failed to intervene on Sol’s behalf from the clearly wrongful execution, thereby raising the question of consular protection (which granted only some wealthy and influential privileged Jews extraterritoriality and exemption from taxes). The passivity of the European consulate to intervene to save Sol is a question that requires further research and interrogation.

Because the government executed Sol, legal questions arise regarding her trial and the legislative biases against Jews at that time in Fez in judicial law. Vance writes in the conclusion (212) “One of the most significant restrictions that affected Sol was the inability to contradict a Muslim’s testimony in court. Other legal issues that were raised by Sol’s case include the question of conversion and capital punishment for apostasy under state law. If we accept Sol’s version of events, the original violation of the law was her Muslim neighbors’ testimony that she had converted, given the Qur’anic affirmation that there is no compulsion in religion. However once a disagreement between a Muslim and a Jew occurred the status of the latter as a dhimma meant social and legal subordination, the expression of which meant that Jews could not contradict Muslims of testify against them.” Thus, the Muslim neighbor who turned Sol over to the authorities clearly took advantage of a domestic dispute strictly between Sol and her mother. Vance’s extensive detailed footnotes are among the book's significant strengths, and point the reader to further avenues of exploration.


2 Ibid.
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Jacob Abuhasera’s (1808-1880) poem is cited: “They brought her in haste to the king’s court/ They tried to seduce her with all sorts of objects./ “What is your wish, o most beautiful of women?/ Whatever is your wish will be done./ We will make for your ornaments that we will add/ We will choose for you a man for which your heart pines. Borders of gold with studs of silver/ that which your soul crave you will find.”

This account of Sol is made complicated by the numerous types and number of accounts reconstructing her martyrdom. Further the matter is exceedingly complex as the Rabbinic community of Tangiers (where she was born) and Fez (where she was executed by the government) tried to convince her to submit to the rule of Islam and practice Judaism in secret as a kind of conversos, with 3 arguments (1) marshaling Rambam's letter on martyrdom which advocates preservation [unless one is forced to worship an idol, commit murder, or sexual improprity) (2) evoking that she “like Esther” should join the harem of the infatuated “Ahaversos like Sultan,” and (3) that her act of martyrdom might jeopardize the safety of the general and larger Jewish populations of Morocco, and thus she should submit.

For more information, see http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/dhimma

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