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TALES FROM THE SEPHARDIC DISPERSION

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The Story of the Baklava

TOLD BY YITZHAK AL-BAHRI
TO ELISHEVA SCHOENFELD

Once a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim sailed from Izmir to try their luck in Istanbul. Bedtime approached. Because it was a cold night, each of them wanted to sleep in the middle, where it would be warmest. Proclaimed the Jew: "It is written in the Torah that I should sleep in the middle."

The Christian and Muslim were astonished.

"Listen," continued the Jew. "You, Suleiman, celebrate your sabbath on Friday, and you, George, have your day of rest on Sunday. But I rest on Saturday. Just as my day of rest falls between yours, my place to sleep of rest is also between yours."

The two agreed, and the Jew got the coziest place to sleep.

When they reached Istanbul, they found a gold coin in the street. What should they do with it? The Jew stayed out of the debate. After a long and stormy dispute, the Christian and Muslim agreed to buy baklava with the money. Whoever had the best dream would get the entire pastry.

They proceeded to their inn. During the night, the Jew woke up, feeling hungry. He tasted a bit of the pastry and tried to awaken his companions, but they were sleeping soundly and did not respond to his voice. The Jew fell back asleep for a while, only to wake up again and take another bite of pastry. Again he tried to rouse his companions, and again had no success. In this fashion the Jew kept nibbling away at the pastry throughout the night, until it was all gone.

In the morning the three went to the coffeehouse in the marketplace. The place was packed with Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Suleiman told them that he and his two friends had found a gold coin on the street and bought baklava with the money. Now they wanted those present to judge which of them had had the best dream.

The Christian began his recitation: "I dreamed that Jesus came to me, bore me on his shoulders, carried me to Paradise, and showed me the saints sitting there and talking quietly among themselves."

Recounted Suleiman: "I dreamed that Muhammad came to me and bore me on his shoulders, and showed me Paradise."

"Could any dream be more beautiful than that?" whispered his audience in amazement. "That is a great and sublime dream!"

Then it was the Jew's turn. "My dream is not on the level of yours, for I didn't get to Paradise. Instead, our teacher Moses came to me and said, 'Suleiman is with Muhammad in Mecca, and George is with Jesus in Nazareth. Who knows when they'll return, or whether they'll return at all?' And he advised me to eat the baklava myself."

"Did you eat it?!" asked his two companions in a single voice.

"What do you think?" thundered the Jew. "Would I ignore the advice of our teacher Moses?"