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Questioning ... Sarah Stroumsa

Sabine Schmidtke

Sarah Stroumsa, born in 1950, is one of the most influential experts in the field of philosophy and religious thought in the Islamicate world of the Middle Ages. She is especially known for her interdisciplinary approach to the study of the intellectual history of Islam, taking into account the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian perspectives and their common intellectual history.

Sarah Stroumsa studied Arabic language and literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She also studied at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.

Since 2003, she is The Alice and Jack Ormut Professor (now Emerita) of Arabic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She served as the Vice-Rector of the Hebrew University from 2003 until 2006, and from 2008 to 2012 she was the Rector of the Hebrew University, the first woman to hold this position. Sarah Stroumsa has taught and conducted research at various universities and institutions in the United States, Canada and Europe. Being a prolific writer, she is the author of numerous books and articles.

Among her books are: *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ's Twenty Chapters (Ishrūn Maqāla)*, originally published by Brill in 1989, reedited and published by University of Chicago Press in 2016; *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their impact on Islamic thought*, published by Brill in 1999; and *Maimonides in His World. Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, published by Princeton University Press in 2009.

In her forthcoming book, entitled *Andalus and Sefarad: On Philosophy and its History in Islamic Spain* (to be published shortly by Princeton University Press), Stroumsa focuses on the Iberian Peninsula under Islam in the Middle Ages.

Turning her scholarly insight into higher education in the contemporary political context, Sarah Stroumsa has also been engaged in bringing Israeli, Palestinian, and German students together by initiating, together with her friends and colleagues Sari Nusseibeh and Sabine Schmidtke, the MA program *Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World* (www.intellectualencounters.org and <http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/ieiw/>). The Program is anchored at the Freie Universität Berlin,

which cooperates with The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, on the one hand, and with Al-Quds University on the other.

Sarah Stroumsa is a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, as well as of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. She is a laureate of the Humboldt Research Award, and of the Italian Order of Merit. Together with Professor Guy Stroumsa, she is the recipient of the Leopold Lucas Prize for 2018.

The interview was conceived and conducted by Sabine Schmidtke, Professor of Islamic Intellectual History at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, and was recorded at Princeton on October 8, 2017. The editors would like to thank both the interviewer and the interviewee for their time and cooperation.

Sarah, you were born and raised in Haifa where Arthur Biram, who himself was one of the representatives of the Science of Judaism, and who was trained in both Jewish and Islamic studies, in 1913 had founded the famous Reali School. What prompted you to go into studying Arabic and to embark on the study of the intellectual history of Jews and Muslims and, in fact, Christians?

These are actually three different questions. I was born near Haifa, not in it, and I did not go to the Reali. I lived near Haifa in a small neighborhood called Qiryat Bialik, which was founded by German Jews, and Arabic was not on the horizon there, certainly not on my horizon as a child. When I reached the age of high school, we moved to Jerusalem, so I did not go to the Reali, but to a high school in Jerusalem called the “near (next to) the university” high school (nicknamed “Leyada”). It was not connected to the university, although that was its name. But your question is correct nonetheless. If I try to think where my academic interest begins, it begins at home, and it begins in high school. I think the interest in Judaism, in literature, in philosophical thought, and in particular in Jewish thought, came from home. My parents loved to talk about things. Neither of them was an academic or an historian; my father was an engineer, but he loved reading, he loved studying, and he loved to discuss things. And then, when I entered high school, I had several amazing teachers. I had one teacher who taught a class in Jewish philosophy and in philosophy. As 15-year olds, we read some Plato, and some Maimonides and some Zohar – and I loved it. To have an inspiring teacher at that age, who makes you realize the depths of thought and allows you to experience the interest in it with the immediacy of personal mentoring – it forms you for life. We read Maimonides in Hebrew, and this teacher, who did not know Arabic, told us: “You know that Maimonides wrote in Arabic, you should study Arabic.” I therefore opted for Arabic as a second foreign language, but there were not enough students that year to open a class, so I didn’t learn Arabic, I learned French instead.

Somewhere the interest remained, and when I was about to enter the university after finishing my military service, I was not sure what I wanted to do. I considered history, philosophy, and Jewish philosophy, and enrolled in all three, hoping to be able to decide when the time comes. I had three free months that summer. In the mornings I had an odd job, and I found out that in the afternoon, there was a summer course in Arabic at the Hebrew University. And I remember thinking: If you don't do it now, you will regret it when you are older. I thus took a summer course in modern Arabic, and by the end of that summer course, I knew that this is what I wanted to do. I did not have enough Arabic to enter the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, so I started with modern Islamic history, Middle Eastern history, and then a year later I added to it a major in Arabic. During my undergraduate studies, I did not connect it in any way either to Jewish studies or to Christian studies. I studied only modern Middle Eastern history and whatever was an obligatory part of studying in the Department of Arabic. But when I started my Ph.D., which is a different story, I worked on a Jewish text. And then the love for the medieval Judeo-Arabic thought came back. But that is a long story.

Part of that you already said, but during your studies, at the Hebrew University, and also at the EPHE in Paris, and at Harvard later on, you were exposed to a wide spectrum of teachers and academic environments. Could you explain in some detail who among your teachers influenced you most and how you experienced the different academic environments in Israel, in France, and in the US at the time?

This is a hard question because of the word "most": I can think of quite a few people who were responsible for triggering my interest. I mentioned my high school teacher, Ya'aqov Me'ir. When I finished my B.A., I loved a few things in my studies, but I didn't intend to continue in an academic career; I intended to continue studying, but not as an academic career. And then we went to Paris for a year and I wanted to study with Paul Nwyia, to work with him on the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, the *Stories of the Prophets*. It turned out that Paul Nwyia's class was held late on Friday night. As an observant Jew, I was unable to take this course, so I talked to him and he said: "Well, here are the other courses that you can take; you can write your thesis with me but take another course." There was a course given by Daniel Gimaret on Islamic theology, and at the Hebrew University I had already taken a course with Haggai Ben-Shammai, reading texts of Muslim theology, and I loved it. So, I said: "Okay, I will attend Gimaret's course and I will write my thesis with Nwyia". The two of them got along very well with each other, and they were both amazingly helpful and encouraging.

At the time, I had very little idea of what I wanted to do. I had a little baby, so I had little time to do anything. Both Gimaret and Nwyia were extremely helpful,

and I remember that after each conversation with one of them I would come home, my head exploding with new ideas. I remember that I had difficulty finding books in Paris, because the libraries are spread all over the city; and as I said, I had a baby, my husband was also a busy graduate student, and I did not have the possibility to go and collect the dispersed books. Gimaret, however, realized it and he said: “No problem, I have my library, you can use it.” He opened his own private library for me, and he also sat with me, showing me how to use the books. You do not forget such a generous behavior; and you do not forget anything you learnt this way.

Then we spent a few years in the US. My husband was a graduate student at Harvard. I was not registered as a student, but I audited courses. I remember vividly the courses of Oleg Grabar, and how ignorant I felt in every class. There was also a course I audited with Annemarie Schimmel, and another one, reading Qurʾān commentaries with Ilse Lichtenstadter. When we came back home to Israel, I did not intend to go to the university, I started working as a research assistant in a project at the Ben Zvi Institute. Shaul Shaked had thought of reviewing Moritz Steinschneider’s book on Judeo-Arabic literature. I started working there, and I came across the name of a philosopher of whom I had never heard before: Dāwūd al-Muqammaṣ. Steinschneider says about him: “The first Jewish philosopher”. I thought: “The first, and I have never heard his name?!” At the end of the entry, Steinschneider mentions that there is a modern copy of al-Muqammaṣ’s book, made by Avraham Shalom Yahuda, so I started looking for it, and it turned out that it was in New York. I was almost giving it up, but then someone said: “The copy in New York was kept by Moshe Zucker, and Moshe Zucker gave it to Abraham Halkin. All that is left of the modern copy is one half, but Abraham Halkin has it and he will give it to you.” I got this modern copy, went to Haggai Ben-Shammai and said: “I want to write a Master’s thesis on this”, and he answered: “That’s material for a Ph.D.”, which is how I started. Parallel to that – I was already registered as a Master’s student – I took a course with Shlomo Pines. Although I mention him last, he is probably the one who is the most influential of all. He was not my Ph.D. advisor (Haggai Ben-Shammai was), but the conversations with him were.... I cannot even say “inspiring”, it does not begin to explain the impact of these conversations. Every time you asked a question, his answer would be something that you did not expect. He behaved as someone who didn’t know the difference between university departments, it didn’t interest him. He knew the relevant languages, and he just saw a huge world of what we would today call “networks of intellectuals”, and he followed them. This approach was something that fascinated me. So, you see, if you ask for the person who was most important as a teacher, it is very difficult to say, but I think that as a young person, you see people doing different things and it’s all interesting.

Speaking of your dissertation, which you completed in 1984 and which was then published in 1989 by Brill, and which, as you mentioned, is devoted to the earliest theological summa by a Jewish theologian and philosopher writing in Arabic, Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ, this text was recently republished in 2017, one of the principal differences being that the edited Arabic text is now rendered in Arabic characters instead of Hebrew characters as was the case in 1984/1989. Could you explain in some more detail how you got interested in this remarkable work in the first place, and how your views changed over the decades on how best to present the literary oeuvres of Jewish authors writing in Arabic to the scholarly audience, on the basis of this case?

I described already the serendipity of finding the modern copy of Muqammaṣ's manuscript, but one can see a manuscript without becoming interested in it. The reason it fascinated me was particularly al-Muqammaṣ's interest in heresiography. He was a Jew who converted to Christianity and then returned to Judaism. Apparently, he traveled a lot with his teacher Nonnus of Nisibis, he had met Christians, did not agree with them but knew (or thought he knew) what they thought; he met Muslims, he met Indians, and he read about Sabians. The puzzle of different religions interested him – and it interests me. This was what really caught my attention.

Most Rabbanite Jews who wrote in Arabic in the Middle Ages wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters. Muqammaṣ was the earliest Judeo-Arabic thinker in many ways; he, however, clearly wrote in Arabic characters, perhaps because that was easier for him, or perhaps because of his intended audience. There are very few marks of his Judaism in this text, perhaps he intended the book for a broader audience. Whatever the reason may have been, he wrote it in Arabic characters, but all the manuscripts we have are in Hebrew characters. When I wrote my dissertation, I discussed it with my supervisor Ben-Shammai and with Joshua Blau, who was regarded then as today as “the dean of Judeo-Arabic studies”, and I remember Blau saying to me: “You don't touch a manuscript! If you don't have an Arabic manuscript [in Arabic characters], how can you invent one?” So I published the text as it was, in Hebrew characters, and I must admit that I was happy with it.

But then, I remember a review that Daniel Gimaret wrote shortly afterwards. It was a rather complimentary review, but at the end of the review he said: “But why is it in Hebrew characters? You can't really expect us to read Hebrew!” At first I thought: “Why not? I can. Scholars are learning so many foreign languages, they can learn twenty-two more letters and read Judeo-Arabic...” But as the years passed, I realized that by publishing this text in Hebrew characters I made it inaccessible to its natural scholarly audience. It was as if I just put a sign on it, saying that it should not interest Islamic scholars; this is only for Jews and for people interested in Jewish history. Muqammaṣ, however, is not only the earliest Jewish theologian,

he is also one of the earliest theologians of any religion whose writings in Arabic we have. He is, for example, an enormously important source for Christian Arabic theology. But by publishing his work in Hebrew characters, I closed the door to people for whom this text should be relevant. Which is why (I should add: with your encouragement, Sabine) I decided to publish it in Arabic letters. This was not a simple decision because, as I have said, I had to invent the manuscript. The published new edition is probably an eyesore for people who are used to classical Arabic, because this is middle Arabic. It is probably also an eyesore for people who are used to the conventions of publishing Judeo-Arabic texts. I hope, however, that it makes the content of this text, an important link between cultures in a formative period, available to people who can now use it.

After the new edition was published, a dear friend and colleague, Sari Nusseibeh, saw it and invited me to speak to his students at Al-Quds University. We had a two-hours discussion of this text, after they had read two chapters. The ability to discuss it with young researchers and students for whom Hebrew and Judaism are in many ways beyond the horizon – I believe that this justifies the publication.

If one were to define a red thread running through your scholarly oeuvre, it is certainly your remarkable ability and readiness to analyze intellectual history beyond denominational borders. Dāwūd al-Muqammaṣ was already a good example in that he was born, as you mentioned before, as a Jew, then converted to Christianity, and eventually returned to Judaism, writing his 'Ishrūn maqāla, that you have published, a theological summa in which he also polemicizes against Christianity. Now, in one of your remarkable publications, you spoke about the 'whirlpool' effect to describe the intellectual interactions that characterized Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies over many centuries. Your monograph on Moses Maimonides is another excellent example of this approach and so is your current book project devoted to philosophy in Islamic Spain. So, could you elaborate on both your approach that you exemplified in your book on Maimonides and perhaps also give some glimpses into your forthcoming book on philosophy among Jews and Muslims in Islamic Spain?

I think in modern academia the word 'influence' is frowned upon, and it is not well viewed to look for 'influences'. Well, I, for one, do not mind using the word 'influence': I think it is actually the appropriate term, in the sense that it does not indicate hard, material connections, but, like rays of light that shine upon objects, it captures the influx of the light that leaves its mark.

In studying the medieval intellectual world, the search for influences cannot be avoided. I do not romanticize the society of the Middle Ages. It was a pre-modern society, segregated in many ways, and tolerance was not among its ideals. But it was a functioning society, where intellectuals could look for what interested them. Intellectuals – philosophers, but also theologians, poets and certainly

scientists – strove to understand the world as they saw it, and they also looked for teachers who could help them understand. Many of them did not refuse the teaching of a person who belonged to another religion. They were not always friends, sometimes they were just colleagues and at times not even that; occasionally they just exchanged books. What we would call a network sometimes amounted only to occasional meetings – and yet, we can see knowledge and ideas moving around between the different communities.

It was not just by mistake that they came across these ideas, they were really hunting for them. We hear about a bookdealer like Ibn al-Nadīm getting a manuscript that he was about to sell, and sitting all night copying it. He wanted to own that book, and he did not check beforehand if it had the *imprimatur*, if he was allowed to read it, if it was, so to speak, a kosher book or not – he just read it. Especially among philosophers, there was also an ideological concern, a conviction that truth transcends religious borders. Some of them said it plainly, others formulated it in a different way, but the sentiment was that truth is one and the same. Those philosophers lived in a religious society, and they do not always tell us where they got their information or their ideas. Because they lived in a religious society, with censorship, sometimes they do not even tell us plainly what they themselves think, they just give us hints. But if we want to get a full picture (or as full a picture as possible) of what they think and of their intellectual biography, we must assume a very broad ‘hunting ground’ and try to imagine it. People heard that a neighbor in the other street had a book, say, by Ptolemy, and they borrowed it. If they were not sure if they could understand it, they sat with the neighbor and read it together. One person went to the mosque, the other to church, and the third to the synagogue; they may even have written polemical works against each other, but as philosophers, they had some points of meeting.

If I go back to the question of influence: for the historian, it is very nice when a medieval philosopher says explicitly: “I studied this with X”, and then we can be sure that we have the correct information. More often, however, they do not tell us of a direct influence. Nevertheless, we can sometimes follow the idea as it moves, for instance, from a Christian to a Muslim, and then to a Jew; and then another Christian, a generation later, gets it, through the back door, as it were, from another Jew. This circular movement, which sometimes goes back and forth, is what I tried to describe by the metaphor of the ‘whirlpool’. Sometimes, we cannot really say if it is a Christian idea or a Jewish idea; there are some elements that are obviously more in line with Christian theology, others are more in a line with Muslim theology – the fabric of ideas is very complex.

As I read the texts, I love seeing the fingerprints of the different people who read it. Think about a person like Maimonides, who tells us that he read everything that he could find and who lists also the things that he would have liked to have

read but did not. It is very clear that the books and ideas that were circulating in his time were meaningful to him. He chose what to accept 'after' reading, not 'before' reading. He encouraged his student to go and read. He does not say: "This is beyond the pale; you don't read this book." But he does say: "You read it only when you're ready." The expectation was that one follows a training as a preparation for higher levels, but when you're ready, you read the relevant book and you reflect about its content. And you do so with an open mind.

My present project focuses on al-Andalus, or Islamic Spain, which for various reasons can function as a good example of how I believe things worked in the medieval Islamic world. The territory of the Iberian Peninsula, as a peninsula, is defined by natural borders, a fact that seems to have encouraged the development of a pronounced local patriotism. One can see the interconnections between intellectuals – Jews, Christians and Muslims – within these territorial parameters, which is what I am trying to do. I am not working on al-Andalus because it is different from other places; I do not believe that it is inherently different. Regarding al-Andalus, scholars speak about the religious *convivencia* during the Middle Ages (a topic which deserves a separate conversation). I don't deny the existence of such *convivencia*, but parallelly to working on Islamic Spain, I am also working on what I call "Oriental *convivencia*". The same kind of wonderful culture, nourished by religious interconnections, existed in the area that was recently taken over by ISIS, an area that today is synonymous with bigotry, where the names of cities like Mossul, Raqqa and Aleppo are associated today with such tragic events. When one reads Oriental texts of the Middle Ages, they shine just like texts from medieval Cordoba, with the same kind of *convivencia* among intellectuals. At the moment I have these two projects, where I try to see how ideas, books, interests, and students were shared between people of different religious communities.

In addition to everything we discussed so far, you also contributed to fields which may be primarily defined as pertinent to Islamic Studies, for example, your remarkable work on the early history of the Mu'tazila that was published in 1990, or your monograph on freethinkers during the early centuries of Islam of 1999. How was your scholarship received among hard-core Islamicists? And the same for your scholarship on purely Jewish topics?

I am really not the one that should be asked. The honest answer is that I do not know. In the life sciences or in the exact sciences, people speak of impact factor and they expect to see the impact shortly after something is published. In the humanities, however, even when there is an impact, it may take a very long time to manifest itself: because people work on their own field, because it takes time for a person to look into what somebody else is doing. So, the process of showing – and of seeing – impact is in general slower in the humanities. There are some cases

in the humanities where a book immediately makes an impact: sometimes, these are really books or articles that make paradigm changes; at other times, these are books or works that introduce a new fashion. Rather than seeking the immediate impact, what I look for in the works of others is what remains after 20 years, not the immediate impact. But if you mention my works that have been published 20 years ago and ask me: "Did they make an impact?" – I really don't know. I do not see them cited very often. I think the fact that I do not remain within one department or niche... Well, I do not want to put a value judgement on that, but it is a fact that I am not easily identifiable. I think this affects the impact it makes. But you mentioned the book on the freethinkers, and this book was translated to Indonesian more than ten years ago; it made me very happy. I was recently addressed by young people from Turkey who want to translate it to Turkish, and this too is an impact that makes me very happy.

Do you want to add anything about the reception of your scholarship on Jewish studies?

I think it is the same, the reaction is the same. If I look at my book on Maimonides, this book puts a heavy weight on the fact that Maimonides wrote in the Islamic world and, while being a Jew rooted in Jewish culture, was part of the Islamic culture; the two cultures in his work cannot be separated. This presentation is not everybody's cup of tea. There are a lot of publications on Maimonides all the time, and I see publications that have appeared since the appearance of my book that do not mention it at all. I also see publications on Maimonides that do not mention at all the fact that he wrote in Arabic; one would think that *The Guide of the Perplexed* could have been written in Lithuanian or in Hebrew... As I say, I do what I think can be justifiable, that is the only way I know how to do things. But it comes with the knowledge that it's not to everybody's liking.

Now, between 2002 through 2008, you were team leader of the research team Philosophy, Theology and Polemics within The Friedberg Genizah Project. Could you elaborate on where Genizah studies stands right now and outline some of the desiderata of this field for the future, I mean sort of "Quo vadis Genizah studies"?

Well, let me start from the end of your question. I think, if you had asked me the question two years ago, I probably would have given a less optimistic answer than now. Things change very quickly. The idea behind the *Friedberg Project* was to put the *Genizah* online in an accessible way, so that it will not remain the domain of a few experts. To some extent it worked, but on the other hand it was not ambitious enough, because after all the *Genizah* – that is to say: what we call the *Cairo Genizah*, the *Ben-Esra Genizah* – includes mostly fragments. Putting them online is a good way to get people to look at them and to see what they are, but this is not enough in order to enable us to reconstitute the library, the whole intellectual world,

that went into the *Genizah*. You see a fragment and it is sometimes very moving; it is very exciting to recognize a fragment of a lost book, but sometimes the book remains lost. There are many other collections in the previous Soviet Union, like the Firkovitch collection, which include full manuscripts, some of them manuscripts that can complement the fragments that we have in the *Genizah*. In order to reconstitute the intellectual world of the *Genizah* or to get a sense of what it was, we have to define *Genizah* studies in a much broader way.

Now, this is terribly ambitious; it takes many people working together, it takes a lot of funding and it takes patience. It is not a project where we can say: "Okay, we have three years and the funding to put all the fragments online and that's it." That would be only the beginning. I think everyone understands that, I am not discovering anything new by saying it, but there are not enough people who are working on these materials with this broad ambition. In the last three years, however, I see more young people getting into the so-called *Genizah* studies. They define the *Genizah* broadly, they are curious to see the *Genizah* in its broader context. They know that the *Genizah* of Judeo-Arabic material must be connected to whatever treasure troves we find in the big mosque of Sana'a or in Damascus or in Qom, that this was one intellectual world that has to be put together. There is a Talmudic saying: "It is not your responsibility to finish the job. At the same time, you are not free of the responsibility to do it." One cannot say: "It's not my responsibility." One knows from the start that one will not be able to complete the ambitious plan, but that does not mean that one does not have to start. I find it very heartening to see young people, in Princeton, in Haifa, in Germany, getting into *Genizah* studies with the ambition to put it in its broader context. Wouldn't you agree to that?

Yes, especially what you said about the young generation and that the field is broadening: That is definitively fantastic.

Much of your work was focussed (and continues to do so) on Islamic Spain, especially your work on Ibn Masarra, but also the interactions between Jewish and Muslim philosophers over the centuries. How did you get interested in this field? And where does the field stand right now? And how do you manage and evaluate the field and its very divergent players, especially in view of your own scholarly background which covers the Mashriq as well as the Maghrib and Islamic Spain?

When you say "the field": What field do you mean?

I think the background of my question (to explain a bit more) is: My observation of the 20th century and 21st century study of the intellectual history of al-Andalus or Islamic Spain is that as far as I can see there is significant group of scholars who only work on Islamic Spain. Most of the scholars who are engaged in this field never study anything that is happening in the Mashriq. Their exclusive focus on the Maghrib has

implications on how they study things and on the outcome of their study. In addition, I also see the tendency (but again this goes back to something you said before) that the majority of scholars remain focussed on one denominational group. You have started with Muqammaş, who comes of course from the Mashriq, and my first question would be, what did turn you into studying Islamic Spain and not remain in the Mashriq which is a big field for research; there is a lot to be done. But also as someone who has started studying the intellectual history of the Mashriq you go into the study of Islamic Spain and of course you are one of the leading experts now. Coming from this specific background, how would you describe the status quo of where the study of Islamic Spain and its intellectual history stands right now, both with respect to what is happening in the study of the Mashriq and to what is happening in the study of the Islamicate world beyond denominational borders?

Let me start with the personal aspect: I often feel, as I described concerning the manuscript of Muqammaş, that things come my way, that I did not look for them. I first arrived to Spain only for a conference, but then – you tour, you see things, people tell you things, and you get caught. So, there is a serendipity in finding something new, you try to understand what you see and then you dig a little deeper and finally you get caught. But, of course, this can happen only if you think that what you see and hear is relevant to you, that it is part of your field – which is why I asked how you define the field. I mean, it is not like in farming, where you mark a territory and this is your field and you don't go beyond it, although you can still see the trees on the other plot. I think everyone would agree that al-Andalus came under the influence (again that word!) and intellectual impact of the Orient, and *vice versa*. For example, Ibn 'Arabi is an Andalusian, but he wrote his biggest work, the *Meccan Illuminations (al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya)*, in Damascus and Mecca. The medieval Islamicate world was one interconnected intellectual world.

My first inclination to study Spain may have been precisely 'because' I had been working on the Orient, not in spite of it. At some point, I felt that it was too embarrassing that I knew nothing about the Islamic West, and that it was time that I learnt something about it. I had a sabbatical, half of which I spent with a fellowship at Harvard, and I decided to study Spanish, I would go three times a week in the morning with my daughter to a Spanish undergraduate class. In the second half of the sabbatical, which was spent in Madrid at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, and with the help of the scholars there who are specialists of Islamic Spain, I realized that I knew nothing and that I wanted to learn, and they were willing to teach me. I was no longer a student at the time, but one of the wonderful things about being an academic is that you never say: "I've learnt enough, now it's only time for output". You must continue to study, and it is possible to do so. I remember opening books and not understanding them, and

then asking Maribel Fierro or somebody else: “How do I continue from here? How do I do that?” Very generously, they helped me to get into this new field. But, of course, for me it is connected to whatever I did before, it just explains new things. As I learn new things, it throws new light on things that I have seen before. And the cross-denominational aspect of this world is inescapable. I do not know how to stress it enough: It is not I who choose the cross-denominational approach, it is the texts I read, they are cross-denominational.

I got interested in Ibn Masarra for the same reasons that I got interested in Muqammaṣ, because he is a first: the first Andalusian philosopher known to us. He was not much studied, and I wanted to see the beginnings of Andalusian philosophy. I started reading Ibn Masarra and what jumped to my eyes was the fact that he is using expressions that would fit better in a Jewish context than in an Islamic one. When I scratched the surface a little deeper, I could see that he is using whole sentences that have an equivalent in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*, much later. Probably both of them were drawing from some commentary on a Jewish mystical work on letter-speculation, the *Book of Creation*.

How did Ibn Masarra get to this Jewish text? The identification of where this sentence originated was very obvious. But Ibn Masarra was not a crypto-Jew, he was a very devout Muslim, so where did he get it? In such cases, there is a detective work that must be done. I find such detective work fascinating, it’s very enjoyable. You can be mistaken; but when you think that you identified something, it is a lot of fun. What this kind of work reveals, in this case, for example, is that this intellectual, who sat probably in Kairouan in North Africa, must have heard a Jew speaking about something and it clicked for him, it felt correct or important. So ‘he’ was the one crossing the border, not me. I am just observing it; with relish, but I am only an observant.

And when I observe a person like Maimonides who comes from al-Andalus, who longingly remembers his life in al-Andalus while sitting in Egypt, and who writes to people in Iraq or in Syria telling them about things that he had heard in North Africa or in Spain, one cannot but see what I call for simplicity ‘the Mediterranean’, or what we can call the Islamicate world. The Islamic East, the *Mashriq*, has its character, and I am not denying the different character of the Islamic West, the *Maghrib*, but they are not worlds apart, they belong somehow to the same world.

I think that what happens in the study of Andalus now is that after a tendency of some scholars in the 19th century to stress the connections of Islamic Spain to Spain, to Europe, and to what they saw as a European Christian genius, it’s been quite a few decades that the connection of Islamic Spain, of al-Andalus, to the rest of the Islamic world is very obvious, and people work on it. And I think it is going to be very interesting to see what comes out of this research.

Over the course of your academic career, you not only proved to be a highly prolific and versatile scholar, you also opted at two occasions to serve in administrative positions, as vice-rector of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 2003–2006 and as its rector between 2008–2012. Unlike others, this clearly did not mark an interruption in your scholarly work as is evident from your steady flow of publications, especially your monograph on Maimonides which came out in 2009, during your term as the Hebrew University's rector. What prompted you to take those positions and what did you achieve?

In some way, my response would be parallel to the way I described my academic work: Something came my way. I should say: I do believe in Free Will, I am not a predestinarian. But for me, quite in important ways, the Free Will was to accept an opportunity that presented itself. One sees a door opening, and one responds (although there probably were other opportunities, which I did not respond to). I had never thought of an administrative career. I knew that, like everyone else, I would have to do some administrative service at some point, but I did not look for it. I never thought that it would get me to be the academic head of the university, because I had absolutely no ambition in this direction. I became Vice-Rector because the Rector had asked me to be his Vice-Rector. The immediate reason was that my predecessor unfortunately became very ill, and the Rector had to replace her in the middle of her term. I had about 12 hours to give him an answer, it came to me as a complete surprise, and I remember coming to his office after the 12 hours were over, and saying: "I say 'Yes', because I couldn't find a good reason to say 'No'." As a complete novice, I had no knowledge of how to do things and what to do. I certainly did not think of continuing beyond completing this period of serving.

I learned a lot from the Rector with whom I worked. As I did the work and learned things, I also saw things that I wanted to do differently, or that I wanted to do more of. So the decision to be a Rector, or rather: to try to be elected as Rector, was already something I myself opted for, something that I actively sought. The first appointment, to be a Vice-Rector, was a response to circumstances, but then I said: "Ok, so I've learnt how to do it; now there are a few things that I want to do." Between being Vice-Rector and Rector, I had a sabbatical year. The Hebrew University has a wonderful, generous system of sabbaticals. The assumption is that people teach and do academic service very intensely and at the same time do research, but they also need to go somewhere else, to see how others are working. When I finished my term as Vice-Rector I had a scheduled sabbatical, and I was not intending to come back to administration. During these three years as a Vice-Rector, in terms of research I was just trying to keep my nose above the water, and do a little bit of research. The sabbatical year gave me the opportunity to plunge into a bigger project, which was the book on Maimonides.

It was also during this year that the idea to do some more work in university administration also crystallized. I know that in the American system people sometimes go into a career of academic administration and then they do 'admin' as a profession. In Israel, more often than not, administrative positions at the university are held by people who remain academics, who come from the academic staff and go back to it. This Israeli system has some very clear advantages, because you remain attached to the world of academia, you continue to see things through the lenses of academia, of research. It was always obvious to me that I will go back to it and that I have to keep in touch, as I said, to keep my nose above the water, not to forget why initially I came to the university. When you work with people who do research, you also have to have your own identity as a researcher – even just in order to understand what bothers them, what works for them. So, I am glad I did service for a number of years, and I am glad to have returned to do research.

When you began your academic formation in the mid-1970s, at a time when academia was even more male-dominated than is the case today, what did it mean being a woman at the time and how did things change (if they changed) over the course of your career?

Well, I should first say that I myself have changed. I think that as a very young woman, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was not aware of the problem. I knew that I was a woman and that I was going to study. For my parents, it was clear that a girl has to get an education and a profession, but not a career; and I did not think otherwise. As an undergraduate, we had a group of friends with whom I studied together very closely, we worked together and prepared together for the exams. This was a wonderful experience for me. We were two young women and two young men, and it was very clear that the two young men had academic ambitions. They wanted to become Professors; neither I nor the other woman said that, not even to ourselves. I remember one conversation when one of these young men said to me: "Well, for our teachers and our Professors you are not a threat, because they know that you will get married, that you will have children and that you will drop out." The fact is that I do remember him saying it, so it made an impression; but I do not remember getting terribly shocked then by what he said. So, I changed.

I think that, at the time, there were many women like me who were not aware of what is going on. There were quite a few who had the awareness, but not around me. I am glad to say that I see my female students and my daughters completely conscious of what is going on; I am less glad to see that they still have to be aware of the fact that the academic world is male-dominated. I had hoped that this will not be the case, that my daughters and my female students will not face a world that is male-dominated. It is, however, absolutely still the case. Two or three years ago I still found myself in conferences where I was the only female participant. I

know of other names of females who were competent scholars, but who were not invited. I am not a young person, so people treat me with the attitude reserved to older persons: some respect and some listening. But I still see people looking through me when I speak, in ways they would not look through male colleagues. I find myself having to say things more pointedly in order to be heard, because I am a woman. One then also gets the reaction of people complaining that they do not like women speaking this way. They still expect one to be 'a delicate woman'. I must say that it does not come to me naturally to speak more forcefully, and I resent having to do so. I would have liked to remain the soft-spoken, even shy, young woman that I was. But I cannot, because as a woman, if you want to be heard, you have to say it more loudly.

Let me say something else: People talk a lot about diversity. I am an Ashkenazi Jew in Israel, where Oriental Jews feel discriminated against. I am white in America, where people with black or darker brown and other skin colors feel discriminated against. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for them. So yes, I think diversity is important and not enough is done there. But you asked me about women: I think that women, that is to say: the advancement of their equality, suffers from the fact that it goes under the umbrella of diversity. 'Diversity' addresses the issue of minorities. Women are 51 percent of the population – this is not a minority group, and therefore not an issue of diversity; it is a different issue.

What changes nowadays is that not only more women are aware of the problems, but also more men become aware of them. Men now are aware that it's their responsibility and their problem and that they have to do something about it. I think that this is where the solution will come from, when men and women will realize that equality is not an issue for women but an issue for the academic world. I am frustrated to see that the process is slow; but I am heartened to see that, with occasional setbacks (and there are occasional setbacks) we are all the time advancing. I can see the setbacks coming, sometimes, but the last word is not for the setbacks, the last word is for the advancement.

I think it is crucial what you said that it is not an issue of diversity, because it is usually discussed under this label. You are absolutely right; it is not an issue of diversity.

I am not in a good position to say it. If I were a black woman, it would be more convincing. If I say it as a white woman, people could rightly say that I speak from a position of privilege, but I do think that the position of women in academia is a different issue. I see the percentage of women in some places that are considered to be well advanced in this respect, and it is often only 10 percent or 20 percent. If this is considered to be a success, that is because it is categorized as a diversity issue which concerns a minority. But among our students in the humanities, women are 51 percent of the graduate students. The curve of the famous 'scissors' diagram,

where the percentage of women goes down drastically after the post-doctorate, is not acceptable. As I said: I would have enjoyed it if we could state these things softly and it would work, but I do not see it happening this way.

A change of topic: You not only study cross-denominational dynamics in the intellectual history of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, you also engage in ensuring their continuity into our present times, despite countless obstacles. Together with Sari Nusseibeh you initiated in 2008 Intellectual Encounters, bringing together Israeli/Jewish students with Palestinian students who together study the literary, intellectual, and especially philosophical, heritage of Jewish and Muslim thinkers of the pre-modern period, an initiative which in 2013 evolved into an MA program Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World, run by Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Al-Quds University. Could you relate some of the background that led you into this wonderful initiative and some of the experiences and lessons you had along the way?

This is a very long story that could have been told in one sentence. The one sentence is: Of course, isn't it natural? But you are right, there are not too many such initiatives. In a world torn by political and religious animosities, it becomes less and less natural. For me, as I think it is for you, it is natural. When I was a graduate student, my husband Guy and I came back to Jerusalem after he had finished his studies in America. Sari Nusseibeh had also just returned to Jerusalem from his studies at Harvard University. He was teaching at Birzeit University and there were some other scholars and young teachers we knew from abroad, Steven Harvey, for instance, also came to Jerusalem several years later. They knew one another from Harvard graduate school. I was a little behind them in terms of academic biography, but we all lived in or around Jerusalem and we thought that we will get together and read philosophical texts. We had several people from Birzeit University and several people from the Hebrew University and I think also from Tel Aviv, and at the time, it was in the late 1970s, none of us thought much of it. There was already a long history of political clashes between Israel and Palestine, but people in Birzeit and people in Israeli universities did not think twice about reading mediaeval philosophical texts together: It was normal. I do not remember when and how this group stopped meeting, but with some of the participants I remain in contact.

Then, in the early 2000s, there was an initiative of Yad Hanadiv, who knew that Sari and myself were good friends who worked in the same field, and they suggested that we do something together. They also suggested that we use modern technologies, the internet, to get across borders. The two of us were interested in doing that, but we did not quite know what to do. So we began with a one-day workshop at Harvard, where we got together several leading scholars in the field

(Charles Butterworth, Patricia Crone, and others) and asked for their advice. We looked at the internet websites that existed, and, clearly, each internet website was within one denomination: there was one for Islamic manuscripts, one for Hebrew manuscripts, for Islamic texts, for Jewish texts, for Christian texts etc.; everything was very well defined. The one thing that did not exist was a website that will recreate the interconfessional scene of the medieval intellectual world, where these people read and studied together, and this is what we tried to do in the *Intellectual Encounters* website. The idea was that a person looks for material on Maimonides or on al-Ghazālī, and this website takes her or him by the hand and shows him the connection to the other person, to the Maimonides he did not look for, to the Ghazālī she did not look for, or to Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī about whom they had never heard.

Then, for one year, the website turned into a platform for teaching, and it was concluded, with the help of the Hermes Foundation, in a workshop in Marrakesh. It would have remained a one-year initiative, had it not been for you, Sabine. You had your own project on the History of the Islamicate World, and this was the point where the three of us got together and said: “Teaching is what has to be done. We have to look for young people who will study the field in a cross-denominational way and who will do it using the modern techniques of online teaching.” We also thought that this is an opportunity to get Palestinians and Israelis together: just as they were able to study together in the workshop in Marrakesh, they could study for a whole year together. The Freie Universität Berlin got in because you were there at that time. The DAAD got in and financed it with an amazing vision. The German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development got in and helped. Yad Hanadiv pitched in. And an anonymous friend who heard about it and got excited also pitched in. She wants to remain anonymous, but I am still very thankful because she pitched in at a moment where her help was crucial.

We are now in the fifth year of the one-year M.A.-program in Germany, where Palestinians, Israelis, Iranians, Germans, Egyptians, or Bosnians get a German degree. They all study together in the same way that Ibn al-Qifṭī and Maimonides’ disciple Joseph Ibn Shim‘on studied together, as friends. For me, it is like recreating something that should naturally be there. Except that, when things are natural, you are not moved by them, they are just natural; but when I see the Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, Bosnians, and Germans bent over one manuscript and reading it with shining eyes, I find it very moving, because it is so rare. It should not be rare, but I know it is. This does not mean that the same students will not have a fierce political disagreement over dinner afterwards, but that’s fine. If they disagree, and discuss it over a common dinner, it’s fine.

Your parents left Europe during the 1930s: your father left Germany before Hitler's rise to power, your mother was able to leave Polish Ukraine in 1938. What does it mean for you today to interact with German scholars and scholarship, and how do you experience Germany and its society during your repeated sojourns especially in Berlin, as recipient of the Humboldt Prize or as fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin? And do you see your scholarship as some kind of continuation of the early Science of Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentums), some of whose representatives had a very similar approach in their work as you have, and most of whom were, in fact, based at the turn of the 20th century in Germany and its neighboring countries?

My father came from Chernovitz (Ukraine), at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his mother tongue was German. He had a very strong Jewish education, his culture was Jewish, and it was also German, although he never went to Germany. As a small child, behind our dining table there were the volumes of the *Buddenbrooks*, so in some way, personally, the connection to Germany and its culture was there since childhood. The horror of the Holocaust was always there, too. Both my parents were already in Palestine during the war, but both of them were in many ways survivors, because they lost many of their family members. My in-laws are survivors of the camps. Going to Germany and to any of the countries of origin of my, I should say, four parents, my parents and my in-laws, is not simple. The past is there, it is very palpable all the time. I now go often to Germany; I have dear friends in Germany, people who are really very close friends and colleagues. So, on the individual side, of course, I do not look on any of my friends as responsible for anything that was done by others.

However, my encounter with Germany goes beyond the individuals. I think Germany dealt with its past and continues to deal with it in an amazing way, not only compared to Poland, Austria, Ukraine, but compared to every country that has a blemish on its past. To come and say: We bear the responsibility for our parents and grandparents, although we ourselves did not do anything, and we ask to correct it as a nation – this is immensely difficult, immensely generous, and Germany does it, day in day out. I spent a semester at the Wissenschaftskolleg almost five years ago, and that was the first time that I spent a consecutive long period in Germany. This was in Grunewald, and going every day to the train station from which the Berlin Jews had been deported was very difficult for me. I remember thinking, what will I do if I hear someone saying: “Well, we’ve heard enough, let bygones be bygones”? For me, they are not bygones. And it was very – I do not really have the words for it – it was touching and healing and instructive for me to see that my German colleagues at the Wissenschaftskolleg are bearing the weight in the same way that I do, not differently. I felt, I still feel, very close to them. And I feel that it would be good, if we all took a lesson from the way Germany is dealing with the

past. If we can correct, if Israel can correct and approach the Naqba in the same way, rather than as a threat. Or if the Palestinians can recognize their mistakes, the blemishes of their past, in the same way, rather than feeling entitled as victims. I am not speaking only about my region; you can see it elsewhere too; not everywhere people react to the crimes of the past in the same way that Germany does. I find it remarkable. So, the short answer is: I come to Germany without any hesitation. The past is still difficult for me, but not Germany. I was horrified to see the extreme right raising its head again in Germany. But I know that my German friends are horrified at least as much as I am. It is our common front: I am on the same side as my German friends, not on another side. But you know that.

Do you have a comment on the other unrelated question whether you see your work as a continuation of the Science of Judaism?

Yes and no. In some way it is. As I said, this is how I started; I got into this path through Steinschneider. I very often have a humbling experience, when I think that I discovered something new, and then I go and read Steinschneider, and I find in a footnote in tiny letters that are now difficult for me to read that he saw it all. So, in some ways, yes: I would like to see myself as continuing that great tradition, very humbly. But in other ways, no, because I do not define my field as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. In still other ways, yet again, yes, because if you look at people of that generation – Munk, Steinschneider, Schreiner, and many others – there was no question for them that they have to read the original Judeo-Arabic, and they also read the Muslim philosophers and the Arabic Christian philosophers, and they did not say that it is not related to what they do. In many ways they are, therefore, a model for imitation. But I think that, since we have privileges that they did not have, possibilities that they did not have, we should be using these privileges, including the modern technical possibilities. I remember reading somewhere of Mrs. Steinschneider sitting in the library in Dublin and copying, through a transparent paper, a manuscript for her husband in letters that she could not read, in a language that she did not understand. We have photocopy and scanning machines, we have the internet, we can use them even if we are called Mrs. So-and-So, not only Mr. So-and-So, and this should encourage us to do more daring things than they did. For the time being, I think they were still more daring than we are. So, we have a way to go.

What would be the three most important things you would tell a young scholar of today in the field you are studying to strive for?

This is perhaps the hardest question that you asked until now, because I have a list of things that, in retrospect, I would have told myself as a young student. These are the things that I think would have been crucial for me as a student, the things that I consider most important:

Going into academia in a serious way is so difficult: it is so hard to find your own ideas, there is so much to learn, you have to be so dedicated. It is hard work, and on top of the hard work you want to have a new idea, which you do not know if you will ever find; you hope for it, but you do not know. It is hard, and often frustrating. So, the first and most important thing is that you really must love what you are doing. It is going to remain hard even if you love what you do, but if you are not completely fascinated by what you are doing – it is impossible. It is not worth it, if you are not fascinated. Of course, sometimes you are bored by what you read, but on the whole, you are willing to do some boring things because something bigger interests you. This holds true for every student and every young scholar.

Let me mention again a Talmudic saying: “A shy person cannot learn, and a strict teacher cannot teach.” I think that when students begin their studies, they are often shy and insecure in some way. As a retired teacher, what I want to say to them is: “Ask, do not hesitate to ask, do not be shy. If you want to use your potential, ask. It is not a shame not to know.”

There is a technical skill that is very important in our field, which is languages. This is not as appreciated as it used to be in the past. I think that it is a crucial, essential key for our field, to get the languages early and to get them right. This holds true not only for philologists. A student may begin to do philological work and then switch to another aspect, but you have to be grounded in a solid knowledge of the language so that you do not impose on the texts something they do not say.

These, then, are the three essential things that, from my own experience, I would say to a student: Choose something that you do with passion; keep asking and banging on doors; and get the tools, get the languages.

But these answers are not enough, because the academic world today is very well organized and it has additional requirements. These requirements are essential if you want to get ahead, to do what you want to do. There are rules to the contemporary academic world, or the academic game. Fortunately, it is not only the children of the wealthy who get into the academic world today. In order to be funded, however, you have to play by certain rules, and the rules sometimes take you on a different way than the three points I have mentioned. You are not always encouraged to admit ignorance; you have ‘to sell yourself’. I find this very hard... I do not tell students to sell themselves, to say “I’m the best, I am the ‘this’, I am the ‘that’”. But they often find themselves encouraged in this direction. Students are also sometimes taken away from the things they are most passionate about, because it is not where they are likely to find a job, and they need to look for something that is more in fashion now.

We also spoke about interdisciplinarity. I find that crossing borders is something that many excellent students want to do, because it is fascinating. If I were to

give them an advice that is directed by the job market, however, I should say: It is easier to find a job if you are within a field and in the center of that field, and not in some God-forsaken corner. The Bologna agreement forces students into modes of very short periods for each degree. It is three years for a Ph.D., in England, in Italy, in France, in Germany. You have three years, and then people realize that perhaps in the humanities you find yourself without the languages that you need for your work. So, in Germany you get the propaedeutic year: half a year, or an extra year for languages; this, however, is not enough. Realistically, then, one should encourage students to choose a topic that they can finish in three years. This is possible, but then you need to know exactly what can be done in three years. You will still have to continue to study afterwards even though you have your Ph.D., because you have not finished. You have learned just what can be done in three years. There are some people who are very talented, but even they need time. The academic system today does not give this time.

I remember a manifesto that several members of the British Academy have published a few years ago, speaking against the system that sets strict time limits for a degree: three years, two years, the system of counting heads in the academia and calculating and counting number of articles, forcing people to publish, publish, publish before they get a position. I remember that some of the members of the British Academy mentioned the fact that, as young students, they got a scholarship to All Souls College, in Oxford, and had 8–10 years to write a book, taking a deep, long breath and having the time to do serious work. If they found out that they needed another language in order to finish the book – they took the time, learned the other language and went to read the sources written in it. This is hardly possible today. I cannot suggest this path to a student, because it would be unfair and unrealistic, but I still consider it important. I still believe that universities should minimize the bibliometric considerations of how much people published, how many pages, how many times they were cited, or how many students sat in their classroom. This “How much?” becomes crucial today because we are funded by public money, and I understand that. But I think the people who fund us with the public money must be shown the shortcomings of what they ask for. They can be brought to see the results of what they are asking, and maybe one can thus minimize the impact of these bibliometric calculations.

Thank you.