

*Halakha, Suicide and Social Policy*¹

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ABSTRACT: *Rabbi Raphael Ben-Shimon (chief rabbi of Cairo 1891-1921) successfully applied halakha (Jewish religious norms) in a radical manner, in order to suppress a growing incidence of suicide among young Jewish men in late 19th century Cairo. In this paper, I present and analyze Rabbi Ben-Shimon's reasoned justification of his policy, bringing to bear not only halakhic material, but also, inter alia, historical studies of Egyptian Jewish social history, studies on suicide in 19th century Europe (including Durkheim's classic work), the findings of a little-known paper on suicide in Egypt by Rene Maunier (1930) and anthropological studies on honor and shame.*

Rabbi Raphael Aharon Ben-Shim'on (Rabat 1848 - Tel Aviv 1929) was chief rabbi of Cairo for thirty years (1891-1921)². During this challenging period of community growth and rapid change, he toiled to create fitting halakhic responses to emerging modern Middle Eastern realities.³

One of his seminal halakhic works is entitled *Nehar Mitsrayyim*, i.e. River of Egypt: "For, just as the Nile river rises up and waters and quenches the physical thirst of the inhabitants, so too may this river water and quench the spiritual

1 A draft of this paper was read by Shlomo Fischer, Harvey Goldberg, Norman Stillman and Walter Zenner, and by two anonymous lectors. I gratefully acknowledge their valuable and enlightening comments and critiques; any mistakes in the current version are, of course, my own.

2 For a brief biography, see Zohar, 1981: 182-190. For a more hagiographic version of his life, see Weiss, 1982: 269-286.

3 Halakhic means pertaining to Halakha. Halakha is Jewish religious law, analogous in many ways to the Shari'a in Islam. A description and analysis of the development of Egypt and the Egyptian Jewish community during these years is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. A brief survey of the development of the Jewish community, including references to the scholarly literature, forms the first chapter of Zohar, 1993. Oppenheim (in press) should provide a well-rounded overview of the topic.

thirst of the lands residents'.⁴ This work, published in 1908, began as a compendium of Cairene Jewish customs, but in the course of its writing grew to cover "All matters that are necessary for the public, and of frequent concern, and matters that people need to know as required by the generation and the times" (ibid.). One such matter turns out to be -- somewhat surprisingly, at first glance -- the issue of youthful suicides.

Halakha, usually translated as "Jewish Law", generally takes a very negative stand towards suicide.⁵ A proven suicide is buried with an absolute minimum of rites at the edge of the cemetery, ostracized in death by the community whose central value - the sanctity of life - he spurned. However, precisely because of the extreme and final nature of such a move (once buried, it is considered virtually impermissible to move a body to another site), rabbinic custom was to try and characterize self-inflicted deaths as tragic mistakes, or as caused by momentary insanity, or by intolerable pain ... in short, not truly a 'suicide' in the halakhic sense.⁶

Rabbi Ben-Shimon's general attitude towards modern realities reflects his deep belief in the innate flexibility and openness to change that characterize halakha at its best.⁷ Yet, in the case at hand, he rejects the time-honored convention of de-facto leniency towards self-inflicted death, and specifically applies truly harsh sanctions. In this paper, I will present and analyze Rabbi Ben-Shimon's reasoned justification of his policy, bringing to bear not only halakhic material, but also, *inter alia*, the implications of Durkheim's classic work on suicide and the socio-historical findings of a little-known paper by Rene Maunier (Maunier, 1930). So one may understand the nature and quality of the phenomenon facing Ben-Shimon, this is how he describes the matter:

4 From author's introduction to Ben-Shimon 1908.

5 With certain exceptions, on which see: Zohar, 1997: 54-58. It should be noted that the Hebrew term for suicide is "M'-abed 'Atsmo L' Da'at", lit.: [one who] "Annihilates himself knowingly/intentionally". It may well be that the meaning of this term is not completely coterminous with "suicide" which means, of course, "self-killing". However, an investigation of this matter is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

6 For what may be regarded as reflecting conventional halakhic views on these matters, see Tukacinsky 1960: 269-273. An analysis of the sources cited by Tukacinsky indicates that reticence in declaring a person who apparently died at his own hand as a 'suicide' is already reflected in Tractate Semahot, a text dating from early medieval times or late antiquity.

7 His halakhic rulings and outlook are extensively discussed in my two works cited above (notes 2 and 3), *passim*. Two articles in English that include, *inter alia*, discussion of Ben-Shimon's views are Zohar 1986 and Zohar 1987. See also Stillman, 1995, Ch. 2.

"...My Witness is in the skies, and Heaven shall bear testimony, that in my first years on the Seat of Instruction [=as rabbi] in this lively city of Cairo,⁸ my heart melted like wax and I was seized with trembling, because of the evil that I beheld. For suicides were a very prevalent sorrow. And many destroyed themselves because of some petty reason, or because of loss of so-called honor, or because they had failed to fulfill a lust after some filthy fornication, or for other similar reasons marked with the sign of ignominy...

For I saw that this affliction had infiltrated from the cities of Europe; and that they had learned from the sons of aliens to imitate the most degenerate of the nations whose way is, for hundreds and thousands to destroy themselves for reasons of slight significance. For they have no belief in the remaining of the soul, nor of an accounting in the underworld (to which he is destined), nor fear of God. And therefore, when Time afflicts them even ever so slightly, they do not accept with love the decree of Heaven, but in a brief time set themselves free by invoking death. Not such is the portion of Jacob; for we are warned against murder of the self and commanded to preserve it. And we believe in reward and punishment for all acts, after death. Blessed is our God, Who has separated us from the misguided." (Ben Shimon, 1908: 141b).

Rabbi Ben-Shimon describes suicide as disturbingly prevalent within the Jewish community of Cairo. He claims that attitudes conducive to suicide were not indigenous; rather, they reflected socio-historical change. Specifically, he links such change in Egypt to similar, earlier developments in Europe.

Socio-Historical Change and Suicide: Maunier's findings on Egypt

Not infrequently, rabbis addressing an issue of concern may present the issue in hyperbole in order to impress their readers with the gravity of the matter at hand. Rabbi Ben-Shimon makes two assertions: first, suicide had become increasingly prevalent in Cairo. Second, the cause of this change was European influence. Are these assertions essentially factual, or hyperbolic?

Rene Maunier's pioneering work on the topic of suicide in Egypt (Maunier, 1930) provides a fascinating insight on the matter at hand. Maunier writes, that the incidence of death by suicide in the indigenous population of Egypt is the lowest, compared to all countries for which data is available. Within Egypt dramatic differences exist between the rural and the urban populations. Thus, in any given year, the incidence of attempted suicide was radically higher in major urban centers than in rural areas; and the incidence in Cairo was significantly higher than in Alexandria. Analysis of the data for the years 1913-1917 for all

8 Rabbi Ben-Shimon became rabbi of Cairo in 1891. As he speaks here of his 'first years', I have assigned 1895 as an approximate date for the policy decision he describes below.

of Egypt's provinces shows the attempted rate of suicide per one million of population, in four main geographical blocs:

Upper Egypt	4
Nile Delta	9
Alexandria	112
Cairo	130

Maunier argues, that these data representing the second decade of the twentieth century should be read and understood in the broad context of the preceding half-century. During that period of time, the incidence of both attempted and successful suicide in Egypt increased tremendously. Thus, during the entire year of 1871, there were only six cases of suicide in the entire population of Egypt; of these, four were foreigners. In the years 1887-1890, 54 deaths due to suicide were recorded in Lower Egypt (including Cairo, Alexandria and the Nile Delta region, but excluding Egypt's Southern provinces), and none at all in Upper Egypt. Of these, however, 37 were of foreign citizens, and only 17 of the local populace. Thus, the annual average for all of Egypt was slightly less than 14.

After 1900, however, the suicide rate began to increase dramatically, and by 1910 suicide had become an epidemic; indeed, in that year, for the first time, the Egyptian penal code related to suicide - forbidding assistance in suicide attempts. At the time Maunier composed his study, in 1917, there were over 200 such attempts per annum in Egypt, of which some 40 were 'successful', which results in a rate of about 5 successes per million inhabitants per year, for Egypt in toto.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the absolute number of suicides in the ranks of foreigners in Egypt was higher than that amongst the local population. By 1917, this was no longer true, but the *relative* incidence of suicide amongst foreigners was incomparably greater than amongst the locals. Thus, the 1917 figures for the indigenous population were 225 attempted suicides and 30 successful suicides; whilst the figures for the foreign population were 38 attempted suicides and 14 successful suicides.

One can calculate the significance of these figures on the basis of the Egyptian census of 1917, which shows a total of 12,512,306 local subjects and 205,949 foreign subjects.⁹ Thus, the incidence of attempted and successful suicides, for the local and the foreign population of Egypt in that year, per million, are as follows:

9 Census of Egypt, 1917, cited according to quotation in Shamir, 1987: 51. Maunier only had access to preliminary data based on this census -- as he writes in Maunier 1930: 207.

	Local Population	Foreign Population	Ratio
attempted suicides	17.98	184.51	1:10.26
successful suicides	2.40	67.98	1:28.32

As noted above, the overall figures for the indigenous population do not reflect the situation in Alexandria and Cairo; in those cities, the figures more resemble those for foreigners, with an attempted suicide rate of 130 per million for Cairo and 112 per million for Alexandria, respectively.

Maunier's explanation for the general rise in the incidence of suicide in Egypt (in general) in the half century before 1917, and for the specifically extreme rise in its incidence in the two metropolitan centers, has direct bearing on our discussion. He writes:

"L'afflux des peuples étrangers fut sans doute la cause qui fit plus fréquentes les morts volontaires ». (Maunier, 1930:199)

In his opinion, this is also the explanation for the relatively high incidence of suicide within the indigenous population of Cairo and Alexandria, compared to the rural areas:

"Il apparait par là, que les progrès du suicide dans la population indigène sont l'effet du contact et d l'exemple des étrangers."
(Ibid:208)

In other words, he postulates a causal link between the exposure of local Egyptians to foreigners and their influence - an exposure that increased over the years, especially after Egypt came under direct British domination in 1882 - and the rise of the suicide rate within the local populace. Therefore, the relatively greater exposure of the Egyptian urban populace to foreigners, who were concentrated mainly in the capitol city of Cairo and the great seaport of Alexandria, also explains the higher suicide rate in the populations of these two cities.¹⁰

The Egyptian Jewish Community

Let us now focus for a moment on the characteristics of the Egyptian Jewish

10 The notion of the 'explanation' presented by Maunier lacks clarification. What he has done is, noted a **correlation** between Egyptians' exposure to European influence and a rise in their suicide rate -- and **hypothesized** a **causal** link. However, he does not explicate this cause. Such an explication is attempted by Rabbi Ben-Shimon, as I note below.

community in the half-century leading up to 1917. The Jews, who had been a primarily urban element in Egypt since late antiquity, were even more densely concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria during these years. In response to the economic prosperity and the stable and relatively benign attitude of the regime toward minorities that existed in Egypt under British domination, there was an influx of Jews from abroad combined with a significant rise in the general economic welfare of virtually all classes of the local Jewish community. Jews entered new professions and new spheres of economic activity, characteristic of the expanding Egyptian economy; their ability to do so stemming, to a significant extent, from the relatively high level of European-type educational opportunities available to them in both Jewish and other (European-sponsored) frameworks. This educational background also contributed to the adoption of European languages (especially French and Italian) as the main vehicles of discourse and culture for most Egyptian Jews, during this period.¹¹

Thus, several synergetic factors combined resulted in an outstandingly high level of exposure of Egyptian Jews to European influence: Urbanization, education, language, involvement in modern economic activities – and the presence of a significant number of European émigré Jews. Following Maunier's thesis, it seems quite reasonable to expect that the Jewish community of Egypt in general, and of Cairo in particular, would during this period experience a dramatic rise in the incidence of suicide due to European influence. This is exactly what Rabbi Ben-Shimon, writing over a decade earlier, describes as being the case. Thus, Maunier's research serves simultaneously as context for Rabbi Ben-Shimon's description and analysis and as corroboration of their veracity.

Proliferation of Suicide as a modern European phenomenon: Cultural and Sociological Analyses

Maunier notes, that despite the relative increase in suicide in Egypt, its rate was still much lower there than in various countries of the 'western world' (e.g. 30 per million in Ireland; 63 p/m in Italy, 124 p/m in Australia, and 232 p/m in France). What was it that led so many people in modern Europe to take their own lives?¹² At least two avenues of response present themselves: the cultural

11 The literature on the Jews of Egypt during the late 19th and early 20th centuries is substantial; see especially Landau, 1969; Kramer, 1989; Shamir, 1987.

12 A possible response might be the negation of the soundness of the 'fact(s)' being discussed, e.g.: "Who can know that suicide increased in Europe in modern times?". This fundamental critique was indeed closely argued by Jack D. Douglas (1967). It may well be that Douglas' critique is cogent. In the context of this paper, I shall bracket the 'factual' issue by focusing on what observers of society held to be the case. Durkheim, Maunier and Rabbi Ben-

and the sociological.¹³ According to the cultural approach, the rise of suicide in modern Europe is linked to changes and developments in European culture. According to the sociological approach, social factors heavily influence the incidence of suicide.¹⁴

A number of scholars present the cultural grounds for the increase in suicide in modern Europe, for example H.G. Schenk. In his work, Schenk (1979) entitles the sixth chapter 'The Romantic Malady of the Soul', and the seventh 'The Lure of Nothingness', in which he writes:

"Romantic nihilism did not in fact mean the complete absence of hope or belief of any kind. If the nihilists did not believe in anything else, they firmly believed in nothingness itself. If they lacked any other hope, they still hoped for utter extinction. Faith and hope, no longer able to cling on to life in this world or the next, fastened on to death, or more precisely: to death conceived as the negation of all manner of life. ...an eternal sleep, an everlasting general anaesthesia, an insensibility to all kinds of pain and suffering... death thus pictured appeared as the only salvation to those suffering from the unredeemed Weltschmerz "(ibid: 63).

Kaplan and Schwartz (1993) would contend, that the Romantics were not tremendously innovative in their attitude towards suicide; rather, that attitude was a resurgence of a deep cultural orientation stemming from Greco-Roman civilization, an orientation which, in medieval times, had been suppressed by Christian, biblically-grounded views. However, they would agree with Schenk in attributing the increase in suicide to change in cultural attitudes.

Durkheim's work, *Suicide*, (1966) is a classic example of the sociological ap-

Shimon, and others in the nineteenth century, all believed that in the society they were familiar with, suicides had/were indeed proliferated significantly. The sense of suicide, as being on the increase and constituting a major social problem, is expressed and reflected in the many works (for example, in French, German and Italian) written in the 19th century, dealing with suicide (see: Giddens, 1971, esp. notes 6,7).

13 A third avenue is, of course, the psychological. However, psychological approaches, in general, tend to focus on the individual in a way that is not historically contextualized, and such an approach would be completely unhelpful in interpreting Rabbi Ben-Shimon.

14 To my understanding, these two modes of explanation are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive.

proach.¹⁵ Summing up a wide range of data, he concludes that there has been "...[a] tremendous aggravation [of suicide] during the past [=19th] century... it is general in Europe, and more pronounced the higher the culture of European nations."¹⁶

Durkheim found that differences in the incidence of suicide exist not only between states, but also between provinces within each state, between rural settlements and city, and between various social groups and categories. Rather than explain these differences on the basis of the accumulated idiosyncrasies of the thousands of individual cases, Durkheim sought a social explanation, that is, one based on the general differences between societies and between their sub-groups and categories.

He went on to identify three main categories of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, and anomic. In our context, the relevant category is that of egoistic suicide, which Durkheim understands as suicide deriving from a condition in which

"the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack. The incidents of private life which seem the direct inspiration of suicide and are considered its determining causes are in reality only incidental circumstances. The individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance because the state of society has made him a ready prey to suicide".
"(ibid.: 214-215)

"religion, family and polity are high, rates of egoistic suicide are low; and vice versa: low religious, familial and political integration correlates with high rates of suicide (ibid.: 208). 'Social solidarity' is the term Durkheim coined for this commitment, involvement, identification and integration of the individual with larger social groups. Durkheim recognizes the existence of the Romantic philosophical and cultural tendencies noted above, but regards these currents themselves as deriving from the malaise of social integration: 'they are an effect, rather than a cause; they merely symbolize ... distress of the body social... they are the echo of a general condition'"(ibid: 214

15 Originally published in 1897, Durkheim's work has been extensively criticized and/or revised; a concise overview is presented by Ronald Maris (Maris, 1997). Nevertheless, it continues to serve as a reference point for subsequent theorists -- none of whom seem to have come up with a theory that has been generally accepted as supplanting Durkheim's. Indeed, certain recent research indicates that Durkheim's concepts and analyses are valid and useful in interpreting current empirical data; see Thorlindsson and Bjarnason, 1998.

16 (Durkheim, 1966: 367) He continues: "In fact, it rose 411 per cent in Prussia from 1826 to 1890, 385 per cent in France from 1826 to 1888, 318 per cent in German Austria from 1841-45 to 1877, 238 per cent in Saxony from 1841 to 1875, 212 per cent in Belgium from 1841 to 1889, only 72 per cent in Sweden from 1841 to 1871-75, 35 per cent in Denmark during the same period".

and note 48 ad.loc.).

Rabbi Ben-Shimon's explanation of the suicide epidemic amongst Cairene Jews

Durkheim's characterization of the 'direct' motivations for egoistic suicide as 'incidental circumstances' in which 'the individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance' is congruent with Rabbi Ben-Shimon's characterization of the motivations typical of the cases of suicide he encountered in Cairo.

Ben-Shimon's claim that in Europe 'hundreds and thousands ... destroy themselves for reasons of slight significance' is also compatible with Durkheim's statistical and motivational description of European realities.

However, in his discussion of the underlying basis that enabled such an extreme response to such ultimately trivial circumstances, Rabbi Ben-Shimon opts for a cultural model, much closer to Kaplan and Schwartz than to Durkheim. People in Europe (and those imitating them in Egypt) commit suicide, he writes, because

"...they have no belief in the remaining of the soul, nor of an accounting in the underworld (to which he is destined), nor fear of God. And therefore, when Time afflicts them even ever so slightly, they do not accept with love the decree of Heaven, but in a brief time set themselves free by invoking death." (Ben-Shimon, *ibid.*)

Thus, Ben-Shimon goes beyond Maunier in attempting to explain the nature of the link between European influence and the rise of suicide in Egypt, at least among Egypt's Jews. He argues that a segment of the Jewish population had internalized a European-originated rejection of central components of traditional monotheistic religion: belief in an afterlife, belief in retribution after death, and fear of God.¹⁷ This internalization is what 'freed' those Jews from an overriding commitment to live life as it is, taking the thick with the thin – and, as a result, 'objectively trivial' problems sufficed in evoking suicidal reactions.

At this point, I note in passing one of the values mentioned by Rabbi Ben-Shimon as **leading to** suicide: 'loss of so-called honor'. Interestingly, Ben-Shimon subsequently invoked shame/disgrace as a major lever in his campaign to **forestall** suicide. I shall later return to a discussion of this matter; but first, let

17 Of course, rejection of belief in an afterlife would seem to preclude belief in post-mortem retribution.... 'Fear of God', however, might well not be another redundancy, as Shim'on may be referring not to fear of retribution, but to a type of qualitative attitude in this life towards God's conduct of this world -- an attitude compatible with the 'acceptance with love of the decree of Heaven' cited further on.

us see how Rabbi Ben-Shimon responded to the challenge presented by the epidemic of suicide in the ranks of Cairo's Jews.

Halakha as Applied Social Policy

Having discussed the phenomenon facing Rabbi Ben-Shimon, let us read and analyze his response:

"I girded my loins, and decided in my heart to repair this breach, if Heaven be with me, He Who seated me upon the seat of judgement. And, when the first such case came before me, and after I had verified that he had destroyed himself in anger and in froth and was not drunk nor confused, I applied to him the full severity of the law, as detailed by MaHaRiCas of blessed memory.¹⁸ And I did not endeavor to scout and to search-out the words of the poskim [= rabbinic decisors] to find an aspect of leniency, which I might discover in their words. For my heart was exceedingly distraught."

"And then again, shortly after, there occurred another case of suicide, which I also verified as such; and also towards him did I incline the full severity of the Law, in all its stringencies, and publicly. And the whole city was in uproar." (Ben-Shimon, 1908: 141b)

As I noted in the opening section of this paper, rabbinic custom was to try and characterize self-inflicted death as not truly a 'suicide' in the halakhic sense. Apparently, this had also characterized the policy of the Cairene rabbis who preceded Ben-Shimon. Rabbi Ben-Shimon, therefore, stresses that he well knew that grounds for milder conduct towards suicide exist in rabbinic literature – and, nevertheless, intentionally refrained from such leniency. After he reacted in a similarly severe way to a second suicide, the Jewish public realized that this was a determined policy decision -- 'And the whole city [i.e. the entire Jewish community] was in an uproar'.

We have no knowledge regarding the sentiments expressed by the public in

18 MaHaRiCas is an acronym for Rabbi Jacob Castro, Cairo, c.1525-1610. Rabbi Castro authored several halakhic works, one of them -- *Erekh Lehem* -- consisting of elaborate annotations and commentary on a major halakhic codex, Rabbi Joseph Caro's *Shulhan 'Arukh*. In his notes to section 345 of *Shulhan 'Arukh Orah Hayyim*, he explicates the rites denied to a suicide: The body is not washed nor clothed in shrouds; the funereal procession is not led by candle-bearers, nor is the burial service recited. He is buried in a Jewish cemetery, but at a significant distance from the graves of community members, and the traditional circumambulations of the grave are not performed. Rabbi Castro stresses that all this should be publicly accentuated 'so that the rest will hear and take fear'.

this uproar. It does not seem likely that the ‘uproar’ was caused by the existence of a significant sector of the public that supported suicide as a normative possibility. Rather, it seems that concurring, in principle, with the Rabbi’s negative view on suicide, the Jewish public was aware that Ben-Shimon’s policy differed radically from conventional rabbinic usage, and regarded his decision as outrageously harsh. However, Rabbi Ben-Shimon had a specific target group in mind: those who might be prone to considering suicide as an option. How were they affected by his ruling? Here is how he responded to that question, over ten years after his bold move¹⁹:

“And when those of slight faith saw all this, that this severe punishment would bring disgrace/shame [=herpa] upon them and upon their families after them, for they would be denied all manner of honor towards the dead -- since then, they ceased their travail. And, thank God, the breach was almost totally sealed.” (Ibid.: 141b-142a)

At the bottom line, then, Rabbi Ben-Shimon reports his policy as having been

19 Rabbi Ben-Shimon’s introduction to *Nehar Mitsrayim* was completed in the month of Elul 5708, which month began on August 28th 1908.

Several readers of a draft of this paper raised a similar query at this point: How can we know that the Rabbi’s policy indeed met with success? Perhaps his claim to that effect reflects wishful thinking, but not historical reality? The import of these questions is amplified by the fact that I have not been able to locate independent documentation of matters pertaining to Jewish suicides in Cairo during these years. After careful consideration, it seems to me that Rabbi Ben-Shimon’s report may be considered as factually sound, for several reasons. First and foremost, this is not a posthumously published account that remained hidden from the eyes of the community it was describing, until the decease of all living witnesses who might contradict it. Rather, the Rabbi’s claim that Jewish suicide had dramatically decreased was openly published in 1908, and was intended by the author as a normative guide for Jewish religious life in Cairo. It seems unreasonable to suppose that the author would risk making a claim which could immediately be refuted as empirically false, by the very public to whom the book was addressed; a claim which might brand him as a liar in the eyes of the community he had no intention of leaving, and which, indeed, he continued to serve for another twelve years. Secondly, other aspects of Rabbi Ben-Shimon’s report, for example, his description of the increase in suicide in Egypt, and his attribution of this increase to European influence – were corroborated by an independent source (Maunier). If we do have corroboration for much of a document, and we have no facts disproving the rest of that document, it seems methodologically sound to accept it *in toto*. Thirdly, as discussed below, the power and importance of honor and shame in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern society render plausible the claim that consideration of the shame incurred by the family of a suicide might significantly curtail the inclination of young men to consider such an option. For these reasons, therefore, I accept Rabbi Ben-Shimon’s account of the effectiveness of his policy as historically sound.

highly (although not totally) effective: the breach was *almost* totally sealed. In and of itself, such an outcome is noteworthy, especially taking into account Maunier's assertion that within Egyptian society as a whole, the rate of suicide increased dramatically, in the first decade of the twentieth century (19a). However, even more interesting is the social dynamic, through which this effect was achieved. To appreciate the matter more fully, let us return for a moment to Durkheim's opus.

The Social Effects of Denying Rites to Suicides: Europe vs. Cairo

Durkheim was not only a social scientist; he was an *involved* social scientist. Consequently, towards the end of his study, he writes: "All proofs combine, therefore, to make us consider the enormous increase in the number of voluntary deaths within a century as a pathological phenomenon, becoming daily a greater menace. By what means shall we try to overcome it?" (Durkheim, 1966: 370). After considering -- and dismissing -- the suggestion that legal penalties be applied, Durkheim offers a better alternative: "For all these reasons, only moral penalties could be decreed. The only possible thing would be, to refuse the suicide the honors of a regular burial ..." (ibid: 371).

Descended from a long line of rabbinical ancestors, Durkheim initially prepared himself for the rabbinate (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971, VI: 308; Strenski, 1997). It is not unreasonable to assume that the notion of denying the suicide the honors of a regular burial derives from his Jewish background.²⁰ Be that as it may, Durkheim proceeds to argue that such a measure "could never have more than a very secondary influence"; basically, because society in general feels much less revulsion towards suicide than in the past. Indeed, he writes, "Our excessive tolerance with regard to suicide is due to the fact that, since the state of mind from which it springs is a general one, we cannot condemn it without condemning ourselves; we are too saturated with it not partly to excuse it" (ibid.: 372). Ultimately, Durkheim concludes, no remedy will work until the very source of the malady ceases, that is, until social solidarity is restored.²¹

Returning now to *Nehar Mitsrayim*: how can one best comprehend why a policy, which Durkheim explicitly considered only to dismiss as hopeless,

20 Of course, a similar policy was also adopted by Christian Churches. In 346, the Coptic church (Egypt) decided to deny funeral rites to suicides. Two centuries later, in 563, the Council of Brega adopted a similar decision, denying them Christian burial.

21 Durkheim's own view was, that religion, the polity and the family, which had in the past formed the ground of social solidarity, would not be able to fulfil that function in modern times. He believed that trade unions might be able to do so, if wisely constituted and vitalized.

proved so effective when employed towards Cairo's Jews?

Social Solidarity, Suicide, Honor and Shame

The crucial words in Rabbi Ben-Shimon's explanation of his policy's success seem to be those describing the consideration which led potential suicides to desist, after realizing the social effects of his initiative to 'go by the book', lest their suicide **'bring disgrace/shame upon them and upon their families'**. At this point, our discussion impinges upon what has become a major topos in anthropology, since the mid-sixties: honor and shame.²²

Much of the anthropological literature focuses on honor related to or derived from sexual conduct; especially, with the effects of women's sexual purity/impurity upon the honor of their men-folk. Yet, it seems both reasonable and clear that honor and shame derive not only from sexual conduct, but from a wide range of behaviors. Thus, writing of an Egyptian Bedouin society, Zeid (1965: 245) reports

"A man is considered "a man of honour" if he displays honesty in his personal dealings and contacts, if he keeps his promises and sticks to his word, if he revolts against injustices and declines to comply with any form of oppression, and if he shows sufficient eagerness and readiness in defending his own interests as well as those of his kin group and his neighbours. Shame, on the other hand, is ascribed to those who fail to observe the rules of good manners in general: the unreliable, the treacherous, the spiteful and the unfaithful to both their spouses and their friends."

Most of the literature follows the theme of the above paragraph in dealing with honor as pertaining to the individual (e.g., Stewart, 1994). However, the significance of the family in this context is crucial. With regard to the link and interplay between personal and family honor, Pitt-Rivers (1977: 78) writes,

"while honour is a collective attribute shared by the nuclear family, it is also personal and dependent upon the will of the individual; individual honour derives from individual conduct but produces consequences for others who share collective honour with this individual."²³

22 A work of significant impact was Peristiany (1965). Of course, as Stewart (1994) and others demonstrate, these values are not limited to Mediterranean society but appear in a very wide range of human societies.

23 So too, more recently: 'Honor belonged in solidum to the family or the lineage as such ... it could be accreted or depleted by individual members, men or women, through their laudable or shameful behavior' (di Bella, 1992: 151).

Describing the realities of late 20th century Cairo, Singerman (1995: 53) observes,

"The question of honor and respect permeates discussions within the community. It is important for both individuals and families that others respect them... Individuals are seen as members of a family, and the respect given or withheld from an individual reflects upon his or her household and extended family."²⁴

Anthropologists and other students of society have noted salient differences between the West and the Middle East, with regard to the construction and focus of social reality. Singerman concisely explains the issue:

"Individual spirit, ambition and independence are valued and honored in the political culture of Western liberalism... In the Middle East the family, rather than the individual, continues to be the more relevant unit of society." (ibid: 45)

A basic assumption that underlies much anthropological writing is, that while a vast variety of societies exists, and while the biography of an individual may span (sequentially) more than one socio-cultural framework,²⁵ at any given point in time an individual 'belongs' to *either* this *or* that society. However, this basic assumption does not seem to suit the case under discussion: a significant segment of Cairene Jewry apparently felt a *simultaneous* belonging to both Western and Middle Eastern social values and norms.²⁶ To understand the socio-historical background of this reality, and to begin answering the question we raised as to why a policy rejected by Durkheim as doomed to failure worked so well for Jews of Cairo, we would benefit by reviewing the extremely different social grounds of modernization in Europe and in the Middle East. In

24 It should be noted, that the extent to which 'discussions within the community' of Cairo actually make use of the concept of honor is directly contradicted by Unni Wikan, who argues that 'honor' is much more a theoretical construct of anthropologists than an actual presence in Cairene social discourse (Wikan, 1984).

25 For example, a person born and bred in Vietnam may emigrate to the United States and ultimately integrate into a society very different from that into which he/she was born.

26 It may well be that Pospisil's thesis with regard to legal systems -- 'the same individuals may be subject to several legal systems different in the content of their law to the point of contradiction' -- applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to normative systems as well. See: Pospisil, 1971, chapter four. The quote is on page 107.

Europe, modernity was endogenous. Internal scientific and technological advances, together with local types of economic entrepreneurship, enabled the Industrial Revolution, which, in turn, led to vast socio-economic upheavals, urbanization, changes in class structure, changes in political forces and alliances.... against this background, the Reformation fits in as a 'natural' response, in the religious-theological realm, to these tremendous changes. All these, taken together, ultimately undermine social solidarity, on the one hand, and prepare the ground for ideational trends and philosophies that explicate and justify individualism, in general and in particular for what Schenk referred to as 'the Romantic malady of the soul'. In this European context, it seems quite reasonable to maintain, with Durkheim (cited above [p. 214 and note 48 ad.loc.]), that such philosophies are 'an effect, rather than a cause; they merely symbolize ... distress of the body social... they are the echo of a general condition'.

In the Middle East, to the contrary, modernity was exogenous. The changes and upheavals that characterized Western and then Central Europe in the 15th-19th centuries impinged, in many ways, on the fortunes of the Ottoman Empire -- but *internal* socio-economic, religious and political life did not undergo changes similar in degree to those of Europe, during this time. When, especially from mid-19th century, urban, educated Egyptians came into increasingly intensive contact with European modes of production, education and thought, these Egyptians were not at all in a European-type condition of undermined social solidarity. For them, European philosophies and world-views advocating extreme individualism, atheism, and nihilism et al. were *causes* contributing to alienation, not 'echoes of a general condition'.

For educated Egyptian Jews, social solidarity at this time was grounded in two vehicles: family²⁷ and ethnic-religious community.²⁸ The third vehicle of social solidarity, religion, and specifically religious praxis, was on the decline in the late 19th century, especially within the more Europeanized sector of the Egyptian Jewish community.²⁹

As we noticed above, Rabbi Ben-Shimon claimed the suicide epidemic in the Cairene Jewish community was caused by the internalization of European cultural orientations that countered traditional Jewish religious beliefs. Both these claims seem reasonable, in light of our sources: the religiosity of educated Cairene Jews had, in fact, declined significantly, due mainly not to indigenous

27 Since the extended family was strong, Egyptian Jewish families had 'high density', in Durkheimian terms, and their integrative power was great.

28 Taking such community as the functional equivalent -- in a non-national state -- of Durkheim's 'political society'.

29 On the decline of religious praxis and commitment within that sector, see Zohar, 1993: 15 and passim.

Egyptian influences, but rather to contact with European thought and attitudes. Furthermore, contact with such thought and attitudes was also the cause, **in Egypt**, of the suicide epidemic, unlike the case in Europe, where the general malaise of social solidarity was most likely the cause of both the suicide epidemic and the philosophies which justified it.

For a sector of western-educated Egyptian Jews, there came to be, then, a dissonance between aspects of European thought and attitudes which they had internalized and their situation of relatively high social integration, based on family and community. Before Rabbi Ben-Shimon arrived in Cairo, this dissonance had little practical effect with regard to potential suicides; since rabbinic custom refrained from applying heavy sanctions, the 'social price' of suicide was mild. Thus, a person contemplating suicide consonant with European/individualistic culture if, for example, his honor had been irredeemably breached according to a Western code of honor, had no cause to assume that if he took his own life his family's standing would be seriously damaged. Indeed, since the rabbis refrained from distinguishing the funerary rites of suicides from those who died of 'natural' causes, the suicide had every reason to believe that his own memory (and his family's standing) would remain honorable amongst the great majority of the community, who might never come to know the specifics of his case. Rabbi Ben-Shimon's dramatic decision changed the equation, forcing these Europeanized Jews to choose (at least with regard to the matter at hand) between individualistic and familial values.

We can now appreciate that Ben-Shimon's policy decision was enabled by his ability to note (at least implicitly) the internal dissonance characterizing the partially westernized Egyptian Jews who were claimed by both Western and local cultural frames of reference. This ability of Rabbi Ben-Shimon is reflected in his recognition of the two different notions of honor/shame, which affected the consciousness of these Jews. As we saw above, Rabbi Ben-Shimon referred disparagingly to 'loss of **so-called** honor' as one of the misguided considerations motivating people to commit suicide. In his policy decision, however, he builds upon a notion of shame and honor which he regards as a positive Cairene Jewish value and which he assessed as so powerful and pervasive that it could override the false, destructive concept of honor that had gained vogue under European influence. Significantly, while the 'false' concept of honor pertains to the individual per se, the positively regarded notion of shame/honor relates to both him and his family.

Having come this far, we are now also in a position to offer an explanation for the contrast between Durkheim's assessment that a policy of denying burial honors to suicides 'could never have more than a very secondary influence' and the success of such a policy in Cairo, at the very time his book was first pub-

lished! In Europe, where suicide was linked to low family/polity integration, a policy based on the consideration potential suicides might have for family and community would not have been effective, specifically for those in high 'egoistic' suicide risk categories. In Egypt, where family/community integration remained high, the 'same' consideration proved extremely effective, that is, for most western-educated Jews, it proved sufficient to outweigh the influence of European individualistic attitudes and philosophies which had led many to take their own lives. In other words, Durkheim's judgment seems to have been sound for the society he was discussing -- which was significantly different from that of Egypt. Rabbi Ben Shimon, too, knew his society well; indeed, his sensitive reading of his community's complex reality enabled him to utilize the prime functioning base of social solidarity - commitment to family - as the Archimedean point on which he rested the lever of halakhic policy, drastically curtailing the European-influenced suicide epidemic.

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