



READINGS IN THE GRUNEWALD:  
FROM ALLERGY WARNINGS IN GERMAN TO  
TECHNOLOGICAL JUDGMENTS IN ARABIC  
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I received my training in the history of Islam and the Middle East at Princeton (B.A. 1994), Yale (M.A. 1996) and Harvard (Ph.D. 2002). Upon graduation, I began teaching at Texas A&M University as an Assistant Professor of History. In 2008, I transferred to Vanderbilt University, where I am currently employed at the associate rank. As a historian of Islam, I explore the interrelationship between religious laws and social practices in various contexts. I am the author of *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (Columbia University Press, 2007). This book examines the role that funerary rituals and beliefs about the afterlife played in shaping the earliest Islamic societies. Upon completing *Muhammad's Grave*, I began to research Islamic laws on non-Muslim goods and cross-cultural trade. This project led me to publish articles about the relationship between economic and religious interests in various contexts, medieval and modern. It also led me to collaborate with a group of historians to produce *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900* (Oxford University Press, 2014). – Address: Department of History, Vanderbilt University, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, 119 Benson Hall, Nashville, TN 37235-1802, USA. E-mail: leor.halevi@vanderbilt.edu.

I arrived in Berlin in early August, together with my family, in order to figure out how to survive in the forest before the official start of the Wiko Fellowship. Our first challenge involved procuring food. Since hunting boars in Grunewald seemed too scary, we decided to venture into a local grocery store equipped with five suitcases and a German-English wordlist. Normally, in Nashville, Tennessee, where we live, we drive with our car to the grocery store to buy enough food to last us – a family of five – for a week. We wanted to

continue this practice in Berlin with one minor adjustment: the extra exercise required to transport the food without a car. Each of us, including our five-year old daughter, had to contribute to this goal by taking charge of – at the very least – a small suitcase on wheels. The wordlist was necessary because our middle son has life-threatening allergies to eggs, peanuts, and tree nuts; our German vocabulary was limited but we needed to read ingredient panels obsessively.

Somehow or other we managed to pack our suitcases with twelve liters of milk, a heavy loaf of wonderfully dark, grainy bread, a bundle of bananas, etc., and to walk the mile back to the Villa Walther, only to discover that we would need to master one aspect of the German language to survive in the Grunewald: the impossibly long compound words. Germany has strict rules for food labels, which is vital for persons with food allergies. We had made every effort to learn all the words for the varieties of nuts, assuming correctly that factories would disclose the possible presence of *Mandeln*, almonds, and such without explaining that they were *Baumnüsse* or *Schalenfrüchte*, tree nuts. But we failed to anticipate the complexity of compound words. After feeding our son crackers that we had considered safe for him, we discovered that the deceptively simple word for eggs, *Eier*, had been cleverly transformed to the maddeningly precise term “flüssiges Hühnervollei”, which apparently means “liquid chicken’s whole egg”. The term appeared in bold letters, but our brains failed to register the warning. Circumstances forced us, at any rate, to learn quickly a specialized vocabulary for allergic persons.

Before long, we moved from basic needs to higher pursuits. My wife and I began German lessons with Ursula Kohler, who was warm, welcoming, and patient: a wonderful introduction into German language and culture. With Andrea Bergmann’s assistance, we had enrolled our children at the John F. Kennedy School, a bilingual public school. Classes started, and they embarked on the challenge of making new friends and figuring out how to succeed in a different culture. (The first surprise came with my son’s discovery that it was possible to fail a sports exam while making an effort to run faster and farther than ever before.) To keep the kids busy and entertained, we found teachers for cello, violin, gymnastics, ballet, and swimming. My wife joined a choir; I found a tennis coach, and I convinced two JFKS parents and Bénédicte Zimmermann’s husband, Emmanuel Quetin, to play tennis with me once a week, under a great big bubble, during the winter season. We made an effort to do something fun every weekend. This meant visits to the Technikmuseum; the Museum für Naturkunde; the zoo, with its wonderful playground; the sand dune in Grunewald; and, near the end of our stay, the Kletterwald in Wuhlheide,

a creative and challenging assembly of zip lines and ropes courses. All of these child-oriented activities kept us fairly busy. Halfway through the year my wife and I decided that we needed to make the time to enjoy Berlin's superb musical offerings, too – without the kids. With Empfang's assistance, we made reservations for a few events. One of the year's highlights for us was a moving, unstaged performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Simon Rattle, which we attended in the company of dear friends visiting from Oxford.

My main occupation at the Wiko, the reason for our sojourn, was my research project on the relationship between Islamic law and modern things in the twentieth century. This project concerns fatwas, or legal opinions, about diverse technological innovations, imported commodities, and new commercial entanglements between Muslims and others. Before the start of my Fellowship, I decided to divide it into two parts, each forming a separate book: the first dealing with the early twentieth century, when cross-cultural trade took place mainly under European imperial dominance; the second dealing with the late twentieth century, when globalization on a different scale gave rise to a different set of legal and religious concerns. I spent the year working on the first of these book projects. I began the year with drafts and sketches of several chapters of this book manuscript, amounting to roughly 60,000 words; I ended the year with a manuscript of 160,000 words. The introduction is far too long; a few chapters still require significant revisions; and the conclusion is only halfway drafted. I wish that I had completed this work before the end of the fellowship term, but I am pleased that I made significant progress.

My research and writing agenda took a few unexpected turns during the year. Before the Wiko Fellowship began, I had noticed that many of the requests for fatwas presented to Rashid Rida, a prominent jurist based in Cairo, originated overseas. But I had only an impressionistic idea of this dimension of Islamic legal communications. I decided to study it systematically. So I analyzed statistically the provenance of more than one thousand fatwas; and I then worked with a cartographer to design a map to illustrate these communications within and across European empires. The historical analysis of trends and patterns, as well as the map, gives a key measure of the extent to which Islam was "globalized" in the early twentieth century. Another example of an unexpected turn in my agenda came when I discovered a fatwa that forced me to adjust the standard geopolitical framework for assessing the transfer of technologies into Muslim polities. It was normal for jurists to make distinctions between "the abode of Islam" and "the abode of war" when ruling about the adoption of new things. But when examining a 1909 fatwa about

the Ottoman Empire's railway project, which aimed to connect Damascus to Mecca, I found a legal rationale for banning non-Muslim engineers from entering the Hijaz. In an era when fatwas generally favored the spread of technological innovations from Europe to the colonies, protectorates, and states where Muslims lived, the Hijaz emerged as a special, exalted space that was subject to a unique set of restrictions. The third example of an unexpected turn came while analyzing fatwas on telegraphy. I discovered that the key question concerned the acceptability of telegrams as legal evidence in a court of law. This led to my writing a new chapter about the status of material evidence in Islamic legal proceedings.

The Library Team did wonders to facilitate my research. I submitted multiple requests for sources that were extremely difficult to find and procure. Again and again, the librarians at Wiko thanked me for giving them what they called "nice challenges". And again and again, they succeeded in delivering to me rare materials in multiple languages, not infrequently obtained from special archives or overseas collections. I have never enjoyed such formidable assistance, and I am especially grateful for it.

The workshop that I co-organized, with Barry Flood, was very stimulating. Both of us have an interest in the relationship between Islamic law and artifacts, which we approach from different disciplines. So we decided to use the fortuitous coincidence of our coming to Wiko the same year to initiate a broader, pioneering dialogue on the topic. The result was an international workshop where a select group of art historians and legal experts, who rarely if ever talk to each other, traveled from the United Kingdom, Israel, the United States, and Canada to present papers. Several historians of Islam from Freie Universität as well as curators of Berlin's Islamic art collections joined us, too, as commentators or participants. The event was successful in that it helped everyone present to understand the promise of venturing, whether as experts on Islamic law or as experts on the material cultures of Muslim societies, across a disciplinary divide. Daniel Schönplflug's support and Vera Kempa's assistance were instrumental to the success of this event.

Multiple exchanges with Fellows during and after my colloquium were extremely helpful. I benefitted especially from an informal presentation that I gave to the Russian Law group, over lunch, a few days later. I discussed with them a fatwa about the juridical status of Russia as an empire that accommodated Islam and funded Muslim institutions. A lively discussion ensued, and I obtained a couple of reading suggestions that helped me to understand better the historical context that gave rise to the fatwa.

Informal conversations with Fellows, especially over lunch following one of the Tuesday colloquia, were very stimulating, too. I learned so much about the beauty of bird coloration, Einstein's disappointments in Prague, robots coining new words to communicate with other robots, the compromises of constitutional courts, nightmarish plays, blood sacrifices, the theses that Luther did not hammer on the Schlosskirche's door, and many other fascinating topics. Once I sat at a French table together with a sociologist, where for an hour an economist asked a classical archaeologist to entertain one after another theory relating to military strategy during the Battle of Marathon. Each inspired theory was quickly dismissed with facts. Now that I am back home in Nashville, fixing the toilet and unpacking the attic, I have caught myself thinking back on this and other amusing conversations that took place during the year of my Fellowship and realizing, with some nostalgia, how much I miss the enlightening exchanges that could only have taken place at the Wiko.