1 Zaddik

I

Each year, during the spring season, large crowds gather to take part in the pilgrimage to the grave of a new Jewish saint, or *zaddik*, Rabbi Chayim Chouri. The pilgrimage itself takes place in the municipal cemetery of the city of Beersheba, located in Israel's southern Negev region. People come from all over Israel: they arrive by bus, taxi, or private car; some even come part of the way on foot, walking the last mile or two from the outskirts of the city. When they arrive they join the hundreds, and later thousands, who are packed around the rabbi's tomb. This is, to say the least, an extraordinary event.

There are a great many ancient "holy places" in the Holy Land—to cite just a few, the graves of the biblical Patriarchs in Hebron, the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai near Safed, and, for that matter, the Western Wall, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Each of these (and there are a great many others) is a legendary, fabled site, richly hallowed in myth and spiritual tradition. What makes this particular grave in the Beersheba cemetery so interesting is that it is a *new* holy place. Rabbi Chouri, who had been a leading rabbi among the Jewish communities of southern Tunisia, emigrated to Israel in 1955; two years later he died and was buried in the Beersheba cemetery. Since then his tomb has become a shrine and the focus of a yearly pilgrimage. During the day thousands of persons crowd around the rabbi's grave, and the cemetery is transformed by their presence and becomes the site (to use Victor Turner's term) of a "multivocal event" that reverberates and has meanings on a series of different levels. In short, this pilgrimage is the kind of marvelously complex social event that attracts attention and invites explanation and interpretation.

To be more specific, the activities that make up this now yearly celebration pose a series of both historical and anthropological questions. The list of queries is lengthy, and they become increasingly more

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complicated. Who was Rabbi Chouri, and what was the process by which he became a *zaddik*? Who takes part in this pilgrimage, and why do they come? What is meant by such terms as *saint* and *pilgrimage* in Jewish religious tradition, as well as for those who take part in the celebration? Why are certain distinctive cultural features expressed in the great performance that unfolds during the day, and what meaning does this event have in the lives of those who flock to the cemetery?

Some of these questions are comparatively simple to answer, while others are much more difficult. Most of this book is devoted to formulating answers to these and a number of other related topics. Broadly speaking, these are the themes pursued throughout this study—tracing the process by which a new saint and shrine literally have been created, and then conceptualizing and interpreting this set of events within the social, cultural, and political contexts of contemporary Israeli society.

This first chapter sets the stage. It combines threads that are, at once, biographical, historical, and cultural. Rabbi Chouri is the central figure, and he is presented in the background of his time and place.

II

Chayim Chouri was born in Jerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia, in 1885. For many centuries Jerba was a home for both Muslim Berbers and Jews. The Jewish legends trace their Jerban lineage back to the fifth-century B.C.E., before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem; their own "marvelous synagogue," the Ghriba, is said to have been built from Temple stones and a door transported from Jerusalem by refugees who had reached the island and founded a holy community there. This myth is important, for it suggests the character of Jewish life on the island. Particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Jerba was famed as the "Jerusalem of Africa," and within its synagogues rabbis and scholars were trained who served the Jewish communities throughout North Africa. Chayim Chouri was born into this sacred ambience, and his life was deeply shaped by his Jerban upbringing.

What was life in Jerba like at the turn of the twentieth century? Fortunately, Udovitch and Valensi's fine ethnographic study, *The Last Arab Jews,* provides a poetic glimpse of the "inner life" of the Jews who lived there. During the first half of the twentieth century the Jewish population ranged from between 3000 and 4000 persons; most con-

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centrated within the larger of the two Jewish villages, Hara Kabira, while the smaller Jewish settlement, Dighet or Hara Sghira, reputedly included within it the descendents of *Kohanim*, or "priests." Occupationally, many Jerban Jews were concentrated in the wool trade as dyers and merchants, others were craftsmen and peddlers, and still others worked as artisans in precious metals. Living in their own nearby villages, the Jerban Berbers were primarily agriculturalists and herders, and members of both groups met in the local periodic markets where goods and services were exchanged. However, what distinguished this small Jewish community was not its skilled artisanry or overland trading networks, but rather, its exceptional concentration upon religious life and learning: there were eleven synagogues in Hara Kabira, five in Hara Sghira, and together they formed the center of Jerban Jewry's "theocratic republic." Deshen, who has written extensively on the Jews of Jerba and southern Tunisia, makes the point that "there was hardly any male social activity completely beyond the context of the synagogues and traditional learning" (1982, 126), and Udovitch and Valensi draw the conclusion that a "penchant to magnify the slightest aspects of religious life" was a "distinctive feature of Jerban Judaism" (1984, 13). Jewish life in Jerba, in short, was governed by orthodoxy and tightly orchestrated by daily, monthly, and yearly religious rituals.

As one would expect, learning and a learned elite guided everyday life.

> Intimate knowledge of the Law and rigorous execution of its prescriptions seem to be the main preoccupation of these communities, and orthodoxy their dominant characteristic. . . . What endowed the two communities with their vitality is not the strength of political institutions or of official administrative organs, but rather the participation of each individual in the life of the community, and the respect and reaffirmation of each individual for its collective norms. For this purpose, public opinion confers higher authority on a single rabbi and confides in him the responsibility for interpreting the law, for arbitrating conflicts, and for serving as a general guide to the community in matters both sacred and profane. (1984, 40-41)

This concentration upon learning was all-encompassing. "Participation in the study of Talmud during the evenings was popular, on the sabbath the sages gave public sermons of various kinds and levels, and also small groups met together to study" (Deshen 1982, 126). Most

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striking in this regard was the emphasis given to publishing original sacred books and learned journals; Udovitch and Valensi conclude that during the past 100 years "the Jewish community of this island has produced close to five hundred published books. . . . In addition to books, for two decades, beginning in the mid-thirties, there were between three and five monthly journals published and written in Jerba" (1984, 84). Men who were artisans and merchants, as well as rabbis who were legal specialists and scholars, wrote and published these complex expositions on problems of talmudic interpretation. Printing of sacred books flourished in Jerba not so much because of the presence of Hebrew printing presses, but rather the reverse was true: presses were imported in order to publish the stream of sacred commentaries produced by members of this tiny community. This was, without doubt, the refinement of an exceptional cultural specialization.

With these features in mind we can now return to our central figure. Late in his life, when he was already in Beersheba, Rabbi Chouri wrote a brief autobiography. Although a great deal is left out, the document describes the main events of his life. His parents made their home in Hara Sghira, the smaller of the two Jerban Jewish villages. Chayim's father was born there, while his mother came from the mainland town of Gabes. He was born late in their lives, the first son following four daughters. The birth of a male child had been keenly awaited; in fact, the failure to produce a male offspring had almost led to the divorce of the future rabbi's parents. Chayim's "miraculous birth," following his mother's plaintive prayers for a son, was consequently an especially joyous and blessed event. As a youngster he was spoiled and admired by his older sisters; in the memoir he recalls that at mealtime he was served rice, while his sisters were content with the watery soup that the rice had been cooked in (Matzliach and Chadad, n. d., 15).

Like all of the Jewish males in Hara Sghira, Chouri began his religious studies at an early age. This was a period of particular cultural flowering; one of his contemporaries, Rabbi Moshe Khalfon Hacohen, would soon begin his massive work of legal codification, and the Jerban synagogues and *yeshivoth* ("religious academies") were intense centers of scholarly work (Udovitch and Valensi 1984). The young Chayim showed special promise—he came under the personal guidance of Rabbi David Hacohen, a leading local scholar, and he was also a favorite of the then head of the religious court, Rabbi Zaken Moshe

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Mazuz. He received his *smichah,* or "ordination as a rabbi," at the age of eighteen, and continued his studies for another two years. "I was then asked to teach students in Gabes," he writes cryptically in his memoir. For the next fifty or so years Rabbi Chouri divided his time between Jerba and Gabes.

Chouri's rabbinic career developed rapidly. He remained only briefly in Gabes—he missed his home and the intensity of the Jerban seminaries—and shortly thereafter he returned to Hara Sghira. His special talents were gaining wider recognition. Gifted with a sonorous voice, he was well-known as a *chazan,* or "cantor," and his dramatic Sabbath sermons and homilies drew crowds of women as well as men ("women crowded into the women's loft of the synagogue to hear him"). Moreover, his reputation as a talmudic sage and teacher also brought him a growing number of students. While still a young man, he was appointed to the three-member religious court in Hara Sghira; this was certainly a mark of high esteem from his rabbinic peers. Then, in the mid-1920s, the position of chief rabbi of Gabes became vacant and was offered to him. He was reluctant to again leave his beloved Jerba, but following prolonged negotiations ("I will only teach twenty-five students, in one class, and in a new building") he finally accepted the post.

Ninety miles from Jerba, and with its population of approximately 3000 Jews, Gabes was the largest Jewish community in southern Tunisia. The chief rabbi also served the many small communities of Jews sprinkled across the south Tunisian countryside. As Chacham Bashi, or chief rabbi, Chouri was responsible for overseeing all of the local communal institutions, as well as representing the Jewish community before the secular state authorities. For nearly three decades he was actively engaged in the daily life of Jews throughout this region. He appears to have been an energetic executive and initiator of projects; he organized and supported numerous charitable institutions both in Gabes and Jerba, arranged for the building of a special inn for Jewish travelers, and was especially active in printing and distributing a lengthy list of religious books written by himself and his Jerban colleagues. ("In all of Tunisia no one could match him in his ability to print, bind, and finally sell religious books.") Apart from these projects, Rabbi Chouri was also involved in a wide range of other activities. He continued to teach advanced classes of students in Gabes, and his Sabbath and Holy Day sermons, often delivered in Jerba as well as in Gabes, always

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drew large crowds. He took a special interest in those who had fallen upon hard times and was known for his ability to develop close ties with persons from all walks of life. The rabbi's spiritual powers were famous; an old photograph shows him seated on the ground, his right hand placed upon the brow of a supplicant who had come to him for his blessing. Above all, he was a popular figure. "It was enough to write the words 'the rabbi is here' on the synagogue entrance, and all would come to welcome him."

Gabes and southern Tunisia seemed to be an insular area, remote from turbulence and social upheavals. Still, the long period of French colonial rule brought changes even to rural zones such as these. For example, with improving health care and economic conditions the Jewish communities grew in size, and the entrance of secular French culture also challenged the entrenched religious orthodoxy. Moreover, a series of more momentous changes soon began to unfold. During the Second World War German divisions moved into Tunisia, and for a brief period of time (November 1942 until May 1943) the Germans and the Vichy French ruled Tunisia. This was a difficult, frightening period for the Jews. Both in Tunis, the capital and largest population center, and in other cities throughout the country, Jews were harassed and often attacked by the German occupiers. Hundreds of Jews were brought to so-called labor camps where they were forced to work for the occupiers; many others were rounded up, registered, and required to wear a yellow Star of David, money was exorted from them, and Jewish communal buildings were frequently vandalized (Abitbol 1982). German military detachments also reached Gabes, and as head of the Jewish community, Rabbi Chouri was responsible for negotiating with them. His diplomatic skills were often tested by the German threats; they demanded corvées of forced labor, ransom in gold or precious jewels, as well as lodging and food. Rabbi Chouri was successful in these difficult encounters—although there were repeated threats and demands, in Gabes and in the nearby towns the Jews were not preyed upon by the German occupiers.

For the Jews of Tunisia the most significant changes began to take place following the establishment of Israel in 1948. Even earlier, already in the early 1920s, a Tunisian Zionist movement had been formed, and in the decades that followed a small number of Tunisian Jews had made their way to Palestine. The enthusiasm for immigration grew as the news of Israel's creation spread throughout the Jewish communi-

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ties; in addition, the clashes that then broke out between Muslims and Jews in Tunisia also led many to decide to leave for the Jewish state. The city of Tunis became the main center of immigration activities; the Jewish Agency, who organized the immigration, had its offices there, and the immigrants were registered and sent out from the capital city. Many of the Jews of Gabes and Jerba joined in this immigration movement—sooner or later practically everyone was caught up in the fever to leave. Indeed, by the mid-1960s nearly all of the Jews of southern Tunisia had left the country. True to their ancient traditions, the Jews of Jerba were among the last to leave. Udovitch and Valensi titled their study of Jerban Jewry *The Last Arab Jews,* but even there, in what had for centuries been the "Jerusalem of Africa," the Jewish community dwindled to several hundred families.

Rabbi Chouri took an active part in the immigration movement. He had long been identified as a Zionist; in fact, in his youth he had been a member of a Zionist group in Jerba. However, as chief rabbi of Gabes he felt obliged to remain in the town as long as other Jews were still there. At the same time, he encouraged members of his own family to leave for Israel. Beginning in 1948, his four sons emigrated, and later his wife and daughters joined them. Rabbi Chouri remained in Gabes until 1955. By that time most of the Jews had emigrated from Tunisia, and he, too, decided to leave and join his family. He was driven by car from Gabes to Tunis, where he boarded a plane and flew first to Rome and from there, finally, to Tel Aviv. His family and close friends met him at the airport: photos show him descending from the plane followed by bemused Israeli officials who seem to be taken aback by the enthusiastic crowd that had gathered to greet "their rabbi."

Rabbi Chouri's wife and most of the children had in the meantime settled in Beersheba. For a short time following his arrival he stayed with his eldest son, himself a rabbi and teacher, in Bnai Brak, a small orthodox religious town close to Tel Aviv. Soon thereafter he joined his family in Beersheba; they lived together in a modest home on the edge of this bustling new town, and he spent his time in quiet study, prayer, and visits with friends. As previously in Gabes, his home in Israel became something of a center for the local Tunisian community. Two years after his arrival in Israel, on May 28, 1957, he fell ill and died. Rabbi Chouri was seventy-two-years-old at the time of his death.

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These are, in broad outline form, the main contours of Rabbi Chouri's life. They delineate a person of considerable learning, energetic leadership, and great personal warmth. His activities as chief rabbi of Gabes, plus his continuous contacts with the small rural Jewish villages as well as the Jerban communities, made him a well-known, widely-respected person. He had performed marriages, delivered sermons, eulogized the dead, welcomed visitors, and delivered legal judgments continuously over a period of nearly five decades. Certainly he was a popular figure—he was simply "haRav," "the rabbi," for the 8000 or 9000 Jews who had lived in the towns and villages of southern Tunisia.

It is also important to add several personal notes. Rabbi Chouri was married twice. His first wife died, leaving him with two daughters. He later remarried and had eleven children with his second wife, but only six of them—four sons and two daughters—survived to become adults. Finally a word regarding his physical appearance. Photographs show him to be a broad, imposing figure, full bearded and possessed of deep-set eyes and a broad nose. Dressed in a sash, and with a turban on his head, his regal gaze set him off from others. As he aged, his beard turned white and his face became wider and softer. The total effect was, indeed, that of a *zaddik*, or "saintly person."

Rabbi Chouri's death was briefly reported in the Israeli press, and his funeral was attended by a small group that included family members and Tunisian Jews who came from all parts of Israel. He was buried in the Beersheba municipal cemetery, in a grave-plot set along the western edge of the large field that had been turned into the city's cemetery. It was at first a plain burial site, although later, as we shall see, it was considerably enlarged and adorned.

In Jewish tradition it is customary for family members and friends to gather at the grave on the anniversary of the deceased's death. The following year members of the Chouri family and a small handful of friends again gathered at the grave site; several of his rabbinic colleagues recalled the rabbi's deeds during his life, and one of his sons then recited the *kaddish* prayer. They came again the next year and the year thereafter, each time in larger numbers. Seven years after his death, in 1964, the newspapers estimated that a crowd of 10,000 persons took part in the celebration. In this way the *hillula* of Rabbi Chayim Chouri became established and, over the years, grew enormously in size. He was on the way to becoming "the saint of Beersheba."

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III

Before continuing, it is important to explain and clarify several of the terms that are being used, as well as the overall context of the event. The term *pilgrimage* has been employed when referring to the crowds of persons who journey to the rabbi's grave on the anniversary of his death. In the previous paragraph, however, a different word—*hillula*—was introduced. What do these terms mean? What is the difference between a *pilgrimage* and a *hillula*? In addition, what is meant by the term *zaddik*, translated here as "saint"? How, if at all, do saints enter into Jewish religious traditions?

The term *pilgrimage* is rendered in Hebrew as *aliya l'regel*, literally, "going up by foot." The reference is biblical and depicts the Israelites who three times each year (on the festivals of Pesach, Shevuoth, and Succoth) "went up by foot" to Jerusalem to celebrate at the Temple. The commandment clearly stated: "Three times a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose, in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles" (Deuteronomy 16:16). The pilgrims (in Hebrew, *oleh regel*) were mainly men, although women also took part in the festivities, and during the exuberant Second Temple Period they came not only from nearby Judea and Galilee, but also from more distant diaspora communities. For example, Philo of Alexandria writes that "countless multitudes from countless cities come to the Temple at every festival, some by land and others by sea, from east and west and north and south" (Encyclopedia of Judaica 1971, Vol. 13, 511). As described in the Bible, these celebrations were impressive and joyful, combining thousands of persons in song, dance, prayer, and animal sacrifice. In Jerusalem itself the Temple priests organized the performances and rituals. "The essence of the pilgrimage was the entry of the individual, or the group, into the Temple to worship there and the offering of the obligatory sacrifices" (Ibid., 511). These were enthusiastic, sacred moments: the great crowds and pageantry combined to produce a sense of brotherhood as well as the knowledge of having fulfilled a religious commandment.

The Roman conquest of Judea, the destruction of the Temple, and the expulsion of the Jews in the year 70 A.D. brought an end to this specific tradition of pilgrimage. In this particular form it is a practice that has never again been revived; during the period of Roman

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rule, as well as under later Muslim and Christian control, small bands of Jewish pilgrims continued to travel to Jerusalem on the festivals or other holidays, but with the Temple destroyed these were occasions for mourning rather than joy. The pilgrims might pray at the Temple ruins, but these were the spontaneous acts of believers rather than the organized processions of biblical days.

Nevertheless, over many centuries the journeys of Jewish pilgrims did continue, albeit in different form. During the Middle Ages, the term referred primarily to individuals and small bands of Jews who traveled to the Holy Land from diaspora Jewish communities located in the Middle East and later in Europe. Jerusalem, ever-romantic and compelling, was a primary goal for these pilgrims, but festivals and celebrations were not their main object. Some of these travelers (*masaot* in Hebrew) were lively men who sought adventure, while others were mystics inspired by the vision of directly experiencing the sacred soil of the Holy Land. Once they had arrived in Palestine they journeyed to biblical sites such as the Cave of the Patriarchs near Hebron, or to places reputed to be the graves of famed rabbis and scholars (Vilnai 1963). Indeed, a high point of their travels was the moment when they might lie directly—prostrate themselves—upon these graves and pray for Israel's redemption (*l 'hishtateyach al kivrei kdoshim*). They spent days and often nights in prayer and reflection at the grave sites. Sometimes they were alone, but on other occasions they joined small groups of local Jewish residents who regularly went out to these holy shrines. The pilgrimage, in other words, was expressed both in the journey to the Holy Land and in travels and prayer at particular holy places.

Although there are certain obvious similarities with the pilgrimage, the tradition of *hillula* is considerably different. The origins of the *hilluloth* (plural) are to be found in both the apparently ancient Middle Eastern tendency to sanctify the graves of "holy men" and also in the specifically Jewish mystic practices that were inspired by the Kabbala, that collection of mystical writings fashioned by the rabbinic *mikubalim* of Safad in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In regard to the former, gatherings or pilgrimages to "holy places" are an antique tradition everywhere in the Middle East and North Africa. The *ziyara*, a pilgrimage to the grave of a *wali*, a miracle-working saint or holy man, for many centuries has been incorporated within Muslim belief and practice throughout this region of the world.

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> The graves of saints are visited as sacred places for worship. . . . It was believed that through the pilgrimage to the grave, prayers said there, and votive offerings, one could obtain his intercession on behalf of the petitioners. . . . Thus the distressed man, the woman in her domestic sorrows, in illness, poverty, etc., turns to the grave of the saint." (Goldziher 1971, 281)

Pilgrims or those in distress might visit the shrine on any day of the year; in addition, popular celebrations involving crowds of believers commonly took place on the anniversay of the *wali's* birth (*mawlid*). *Ziyaras* were festive occasions, combining prayers at the graveside with feasting, informal markets, and various entertainments.

These frequent, convivial events were incorporated into the traditions of the various groups living in the region—Jews and Christians as well as Muslims. Indeed, in not a small number of instances the same shrine was "claimed" by both Jews and Muslims, each of whom called it by a different name and held their festivities on different days (Ben Ami 1984; Voinot 1949). In this sense (as well as in others) the Jewish tradition of *hillula* both parallels and was modeled after the Muslim *ziyara*.

Hilluloth also have their specifically Jewish origins. The word itself is Aramaic and literally means "festivity," "celebration," and even more specifically, a "wedding celebration." The usual translation to English is "memorial celebration." The inspiration for the *hillula* was drawn from the same mystic religious sources that led to the Kabbala and the Zohar, books of Jewish mystical belief and practice. What is involved are, again, "holy men" in "holy places." Deshen depicts the events graphically.

> The *hillulot* originally focused upon the death of especially pious men, a death that was seen to be a mystical union between the soul of the deceased and the God-head. . . . According to the rabbis, the anniversary of the death of such powerful persons provided a unique opportunity to discover hidden sacred secrets. For this reason the anniversary was marked by study, introspection and prayer. (1977, 110)

The *hillula* might be conducted in a home or a synagogue where the faithful gathered to study and pray. More frequently, however, the place of gathering became the grave itself: the *hassidim*, or "followers," gathered at the grave of the holy man and remained there in study and prayer throughout the day and night.

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Over time this tradition developed new and quite different meanings. The element of study declined, while popular expressions of joy and pleas for intervention expanded. The grave was conceived of as belonging to the *zaddik*, a pious man or saint, and the site itself was thought to possess special powers. Indeed, the grave became a shrine, a place where mystical forces were concentrated. Some of the *hilluloth* attracted large numbers of pilgrims.

> According to popular thought the belief developed that the *zaddik* (saint) in whose memory the celebration was held would intervene with God on behalf of his followers. Accordingly, persons who suffered from physical or mental illnesses might undertake a pilgrimage to the site of the *hillula* in the hope and belief that their suffering would be lessened. (Deshen 1977, 110-111)

Food and drink also became important elements in this popular celebration; a *hillula* is marked by a "memorial feast" at which the participants drink and eat in a holiday spirit. *Hilluloth* tend to be exuberant, joyful events—"wedding celebrations"—during which a sense of exaltation and mystical union becomes pervasive.

To summarize briefly, a *hillula* is a certain kind of pilgrimage. The celebration marks the anniversary of the death of a pious man or *zaddik*, and it typically (but not always) takes place at his grave. Some of those who attend may pray or study, but many also come to the grave to ask for the *zaddik*'s help or intervention. Historically, these *hilluloth* became an important feature of what can be thought of as "popular Jewish religious expression"; while the rabbinic authorities, the guardians of orthodoxy, might oppose or criticize these celebrations, they were enthusiastically accepted by a great many persons.

This brings us to a key point: the crowds that flock to the cemetery on the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Chayim Chouri are attending a *hillula*. Indeed, the placards that announce the event describe it in these terms: *Hillulat Harav* Chayim Chouri. The events of the day need to be understood within this framework of meaning and practice.

In addition, the concept of the *zaddik* needs some further explication. In previous pages the term was translated to mean a "pious man or saint." A more literal translation might be a "righteous man," or in Hebrew, *Ish zaddik*. All three of these translations are correct—a *zaddik* is a person known during his lifetime to have been pious, saintly,

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and righteous. A second Hebrew term is often used together with *zaddik* —the word *kadosh*, meaning a holy person, is frequently interchanged with *zaddik*. *Ha'kadosh* or *ha'zaddik*, means a holy, saintly, righteous person, almost always a male, and in most instances a rabbi or other learned person.

Like the Muslim *wali* and the North African *marabout*, the *zaddik* is not just pious and righteous, but in addition he also exercises special powers. Principal among these are the capacity to influence events; a *zaddik* possesses *baraka*, loosely translated to mean "grace," "blessing," "spiritual force," and "charisma." Bilu puts it succinctly: "The saints were charismatic rabbis, distinguished by their erudition and piety, who were believed to possess a special spiritual force" (1987, 285). It is this "special force" that permitted them to effectively pronounce blessings upon the sick or distraught, and most important, to intercede with God on behalf of those who pray to them for assistance. This capacity to intervene is surely a major defining feature: the believers appeal to the *zaddik* to use his power and influence in order to grant their requests or resolve their dilemmas. These special capacities were recognized and made legitimate in classical Jewish tradition. The Talmud decrees that "the saints are to be considered greater than the ministering angels," and again, if *zaddikim* "desired they could create a world."

Dreams and visions are important modes of discourse between the *zaddik* and those who appeal to him for help: the believers typically relate that they saw the saint in a dream, and that he instructed them regarding the actions to take so that their wishes would be realized; or how, in moments of extreme trial and danger, the saintly presence mysteriously appeared and guided them to safety (Bilu 1987, 307). While for those who gather at the shrine there is no doubt that the *zaddik*'s powers exist, there also is no clear explanation of the specific ways in which these forces are martialed and made effective. Kabbalists and others may have speculated upon these weighty matters, but they were of little concern to the believers: for them the critical matter is that the *zaddik* has, for whatever reasons and according to whatever unknown processes, powers that are miraculous. This is, in fact, the central point: as various commentators have correctly emphasized, the ability to perform miracles is the true sign of the *zaddik* (Ben Ami 1984; Bilu 1987). This capacity to influence events in wondrous ways—to heal the sick, avert danger, or protect the innocent—is what

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distinguished the *zaddik* from all the others. To put it differently, the graves of most righteous Jews remain simple burial places, but for those who are believed able to perform miraculous acts their graves may become powerful holy shrines.

These beliefs and practices spread widely and deeply among Jewish communities throughout the Muslim world: to cite several examples, Syrian Jews regularly conducted *hilluloth* at the graves of famed local rabbis, just as in Palestine Jews also prayed and feasted at the graves of holy sages (Zenner 1965; Vilnai 1963). However, it was among North African Jewish communities in particular that the veneration of saints had its most exuberant growth; *zaddikim* and their *hilluloth* were a major focus within North African Jewish religious traditions. This obviously is a critical point, and it needs to be spelled out in some detail.

To begin with, Islam as it evolved in the Maghreb placed special emphasis upon saints and their powers, both spiritual and temporal. Maraboutism was, as a large number of excellent studies have shown, a major motif and generating force within Moroccan Islam in particular (Eickelman 1976; Geertz 1968; Gellner 1969; Westermark 1926). The main contours of this religious power are succinctly defined in the following passage:

> The most striking feature of North African Islam is the presence of marabouts. . . . They are persons, living or dead, to whom is attributed a special relation toward God which makes them particularly well placed to serve as intermediaries with the supernatural and to communicate God's grace (*baraka*) to their clients. . . . A concrete indication of this is the proliferation of maraboutic shrines throughout the Maghreb. . . . In Morocco's rural areas, one rarely loses sight of the squat, whitewashed, and—in the case of the more popular ones—domed maraboutic shrines. In towns, more lavish shrines with green-tiled roofs are often found. (Eickelman 1976, 7)

These shrines were typically the reputed graves of deceased marabouts: they became pilgrimage points, and the more famous among them grew into pilgrimage centers, small towns where persons came throughout the year to pray at the graveside and receive the blessings of the saint's living descendents. Each of the saints had a yearly festival (*musem*) during which time the shrine would be packed with enthusiastic crowds. This fervor and belief in the saints' miraculous powers was periodically criticized by the orthodox Muslim theologians—and yet

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for many North Africa Muslims maraboutism was a vital center of their religious belief system.

Given this vibrant setting of symbol and action, it is hardly surprising that many of these cultural understandings and practices were also shared by the Jewish minority. There were, quite literally, hundreds of holy sites—nearly all of them the real or reputed graves of famed rabbis—where Jews went regularly to pray for the *zaddik*'s intercession; Ben Ami, the Israeli folklorist who has done the major documentary work on *zaddikim* in Morocco, lists more than 600 Jewish saints and their shrines, including dozens that were claimed by both Muslims and Jews (1984). The shrines were typically located within the Jewish cemetery, although in some cases they were in a "special spot, for example, a cave" located close to the cemetery (Goldberg 1983, 65). A *zaddik*'s grave was usually covered by a simple roof in order to "distinguish it from other graves," but these decorations were nowhere as elaborate as the tombs of famed marabouts. Practically every Jewish community, no matter how tiny or remote, had its "own *zaddik*," and in some places several local saints and shrines were recognized. The identity of the saints varied: some "were well-known historical figures, at times founders or descendents of veritable dynasties of tzaddikim . . . while others, of unclear historical identification, seemed to be legendary figures" (Bilu 1987, 286). A number of the saints and their shrines became particularly famous; the best example is the grave of Rabbi David u-Moshe located near Agouim in the Moroccan High Atlas mountains. Thus, as Ben Ami has shown, not only were the graves of *zaddikim* to be found in virtually every Jewish community, there was a kind of hierarchy of saints in which some attained regional and almost national levels of fame (Ben Ami 1984).

Believers and those in dispair or urgent need often visited the *zaddik*'s grave throughout the year. However, the yearly *hillula*, performed on the anniversary of the saint's death, brought together great crowds of persons.

> In the case of the more renowned saints thousands of pilgrims from various regions would flock around the tomb in a formidable spectacle during which they feasted on slaughtered cattle, drank arak (*mahia*), danced and chanted, prayed and lit candles. All these activities, combining marked spirituality and high ecstasy with flesh and blood concerns, in a relaxed, at times frivolous, picnic-like atmosphere, were conducted in honor of the *tzaddik*. (Bilu 1987, 286)

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These festivities often lasted several days; camping in tents or other makeshift quarters, the pilgrims joined together in prayer, song, feasts, and dance in and around the holy shrine. These were high points of the year, occasions for entire families and communities to celebrate together.

Several additional points need to be briefly mentioned. First, although many of the saints were historical or mythical figures, the process of identifying or "creating" new *zaddikim* continued during this century; for example, Ben Ami lists a number of new saints and sites that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s (1981, 171). This is obviously important, since among other things it indicates that these traditions remained powerful in the lives of many North African Jews. Second, even though much of the documentation presented here refers to Morocco, *zaddikim* and their *hilluloth* were also prominent within Tunisian Jewish communities. To be more specific, Udovich and Valensi have described the great *hillula* that took place each year at the Ghirba synagogue in Jerba, and Jerban Jews and others also took part in the *hillula* of Sidi Youssef al-Ma'rabi at Al-Hama, near Gabes (1984, 75, 125).

Finally, a brief comparative note is in place. Belief in the wonder-working *zaddik* is not limited to the Jewish communities that developed within Islamic civilizations, but was present as well in the traditions of European Jews. Saints, and to a lesser extent, *hilluloth*, were also found among the Ashkenazic *hassidic zaddikim* who emerged in Poland and Lithuania during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Scholem has shown, within this mystic, revivalist Jewish religious movement emphasis was placed upon the personality of the *zaddik*, the saint and leader who gathered around him a following of *hassidim*, followers and enthusiasts (1954, 325-50). The *zaddik*, who achieved contact with God through mystical means, could also perform miracles; in Scholem's words, he combined "the magician's claim to work miracles with his amulet, or through other magical practices, and the mystical enthusiasm which seeks no object but God" (Ibid, 349). To be sure, *zaddikim* in Poland and Morocco were by no means identical—but they spring from some of the same sources and express certain common features.

IV

The question, of course, is how Rabbi Chouri became a *zaddik*. During his lifetime he surely had been a learned, pious, and popular

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leader of his people—but a *zaddik*? What was the process by which he became known as a saint, and how was his grave transformed into a shrine where large throngs celebrated his *hillula*?

The details, as far as they can be accurately reconstructed, are as follows. (Some of the facts were presented earlier, but it is important to repeat them again so that the entire process can be properly understood). Rabbi Chouri died in the late spring of 1957 at the age of seventy-two. His funeral was attended by a small crowd of family members, old friends, and fellow Tunisans. He was buried in an ordinary grave site in the Beersheba municipal cemetery. It appears that no special attention was given to selecting the site of his grave; although the rabbi's tomb is not entirely surrounded by other gravestones, it is also not separated from the rest of the graves in the cemetery. This is a significant point, as we shall shortly see.

The *hillula* then burst ahead with astonishing speed. A year after the rabbi's death a group of family members and friends gathered at his grave. One of the rabbi's sons recited the *kaddish* prayer for the dead, and brief talks were given in his memory. Then, at some time during the following year, the idea of organizing a *hillula* to honor the rabbi was first broached. This idea was discussed by the rabbi's sons and his son-in-law, as well as among members of the local Beersheba Tunisian community. The sons and son-in-law took the initiative. Three of the sons were then working in local factories or other businesses and the fourth was attached to a *yeshiva* in another town; the son-in-law was himself a rabbi who was then living in Beersheba. A close friend of the family was employed in the Beersheba municipal offices, and he was particularly enthusiastic and helpful. This tiny group, together with several other local Tunisians, began to plan the first *hillula*. A report in a local newspaper described the festival's rapid evolution.

> The year following the Rabbi's death the idea of organizing the "*hillula* of the Negev" and of making a pilgrimage to the grave on the anniversary of his death, began to take shape. The first year some tens of persons came, just a small group of his relatives and acquaintances. But then, the very next year, large crowds began to stream there. By the following year and ever since then, it has become fixed as a tradition. (*Hedi HaDarom* 1966)

Was it really all so quick and simple? Did this now-massive yearly pilgrimage with its thousands of participants begin with just a few family members and fellow enthusiasts? The answer clearly seems

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to be yes: the *hillula* was initiated by a mere handful of dedicated persons, and then almost immediately it "began to take shape" and become established.

The rabbi's sons and a few friends provided the impetus and the energy. The basis for their appeal to take part in a new *hillula* was clear. During his lifetime Rabbi Chouri had been widely known and revered by several generations of South Tunisians; most of them had immigrated to Israel, and by the late 1950s probably as many as 1000 Tunisian families were living in Beersheba and a number of nearby small towns and agricultural villages. Rabbi Chouri had visited these places while he was still alive, and during his brief years in Beersheba he had also taken an interest in the affairs of former Tunisians living in Israel. The plan to have a new *hillula* honoring "their rabbi" was therefore welcomed within the Tunisian community. As the second and subsequent anniversaries of his death grew closer, the Chouri family and their friends invited their fellow Tunisians to attend the observance. The message was spread by word of mouth at the local Tunisian synagogues, at festive events and in casual conversations. They also invited the leading Tunisian rabbis to take part, and let it be known that these well-known dignitaries would attend.

In addition, already at this early stage some local Moroccan Jews began to take an interest and attended the rabbi's *hillula*. In contrast with the Tunisians who are a relatively small community, Moroccan Jews are a large *edah*, or "ethnic group," both in Beersheba and in other towns and villages throughout the Negev region and all of Israel. As we have seen, the *hillula* tradition was popular and widespread in Morocco, and it took little time for these Moroccan Jews to eagerly take part in Rabbi Chouri's rapidly developing memorial celebration. Like the Tunisians, so, too, for the Moroccans the *hillula* struck responsive chords of nostalgia and mystical enthusiasm. In effect, these Moroccans were on the way to "adopting" Rabbi Chouri; it was their growing participation that over the years has transformed this small family gathering into a much more massive event.

The Tunisian sponsors were also successful in enlisting the interest and assistance of several Beersheba city officials. Through their friend in the municipality (himself a fellow Tunisian) they requested help from the city authorities in publicizing the gathering and helping to keep order during the day. At an early stage the city officials agreed to assist with the technical details of organization. The then mayor of

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the city, David Touvyahu, attended the celebration in the cemetery. A photo taken in 1960 shows Touvyahu standing stiffly next to the rabbi's grave, his head covered with a cloth fedora, surrounded by bearded Tunisian rabbis and a joyous congregation. Touvyahu's patronage of the *hillula* was unusual for its time. He was a member of the reigning Israeli Ashkenazi political and cultural elite, and in those days it was not fashionable (as it has since become) for national leaders to take part in Middle Eastern ethnic festivals. Beersheba was at that time already beset by ethnic political-party factionalism, and he may have seen his attendance as a way to gather support among the growing number of North African voters; or perhaps he was intrigued by this unusual event that was developing in his city. Whatever the reasons, his presence and sponsorship no doubt also contributed to the *hillula*'s success.

Looking back, it is fair to conclude that members of the Chouri family played the role of impressario and cultural entrepreneur: during the first years they busied themselves with inviting dignitaries to the celebration, organized a public committee that improved and beautified the site, saw to it that posters announcing the *hillula* were distributed throughout the region, and so forth. Several of the brothers, and in particular the youngest, Yosef, have continued to perform these duties. Several months before the *hillula* Yosef sends out notices, contacts the authorities regarding improving the fence around the grave site, and invites leading rabbis to attend the Sabbath prayers prior to the pilgrimage. Moreover, the Chouri brothers are exceptionally busy during the *hillula* itself: throughout the day they stand next to the grave and pronouce blessings, sell candles and magical string, and generally concern themselves with the smooth running of the day's events. The fact that the *hillula* has grown only increases their worries and duties.

Yet if they are "entrepreneurs," this has over the years been a part-time vocation at best. Yosef, the most active of the brothers, was for many years employed in a factory in Beersheba; his organizational activities on behalf of the *hillula* were performed after work. (More recently, since 1982, he has been working in the Beersheba *yeshiva*, or religious seminary, that bears Rabbi Chouri's name.) All of the others who have devoted themselves to the *hillula*—brothers, brother-in-law and friends—have been voluntary, part-time activists. *Devotion* accurately expresses their activities: they are all modest, direct men, and while their personal social status may have grown with the *hillula*,

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they have not gained tangible economic or political advantage. The entrepreneurial tasks have not, in other words, given them much in the way of clear benefit.

These remarks lead to a broader conclusion. There certainly is an organizational component to the pilgrimage, but it is modest at best. The *hillula* is not a "promotion" (to use the advertising jargon) nor does it rest upon shrewd direction. Fundamentally it is, or represents, an outpouring of genuine belief and emotion; from the outset it has been a naive, spontaneous event, generated from complicated well-springs that include (at the least) both belief in mystic powers and a desire to publicly demonstrate identification with one's ethnic group. This is why it has attracted thousands of participants. The printed posters announcing the event are a helpful reminder, but a great many persons would come whether or not they saw the placards. In brief, the *hillula* may have been initiated by a few persons, but its wide appeal rests upon much broader social and spiritual bases.

This conclusion is strengthened by considering again the matter of the rabbi's place of burial. It will be recalled that Rabbi Chouri was buried on the edge of the cemetery next to other graves. As was emphasized previously, this site was selected without much deliberation. However, as the *hillula* grew in popularity, it became clear that the location posed a great many problems. The hundreds and later thousands of persons taking part in the pilgrimage poured over the surrounding graves; in some cases families complained that graves of dear ones buried nearby were being damaged or defaced. It proved difficult to control the crowd, even after a fence was built around the tomb. Moreover, once the grave was perceived to be a holy place the entire site seemed inappropriate: there was not enough space to expand the shrine properly and thereby make it more impressive and dignified. For this reason as well, the Chouri family wished to transfer the shrine outside of the cemetery and rebury the *zaddik* in a separate plot across the road. The family presented a written request to the Israeli rabbinic authorities that permission be granted to move the bodily remains and the grave several hundred yards westward to a new location that would be slightly higher and stand alone. The response was negative, however: the rabbinic authorities ruled that reburial was not proper since it was forbidden by biblical injunction. Moreover, they added, how would the souls of those buried close to the rabbi (and thereby benefiting from his personal power) respond if their beloved rabbi was taken

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away from them? This settled the issue: the shrine was not moved, although a number of additional improvements were later made to the original burial place.

The point is that neither the Chouri family nor their friends imagined that the grave would become the focus for a giant *hillula*. When the rabbi died no one thought that his grave would become a holy shrine. Had they known that Rabbi Chouri was to be a *zaddik* they would have more carefully selected the place of burial. The entire process was—to repeat the phrase once again—naive and spontaneous.

This brings us, inevitably, to the final question: why Rabbi Chouri? Why did he become a *zaddik*?

The question is difficult, and the answers are speculative. They fall into two parts. First, already during his lifetime Rabbi Chouri was famed and revered: his accomplishments as a talmudic scholar and teacher, as well as his close personal ties over many years with many persons, made him a popular as well as respected figure. His physical appearance and demeanor also expressed a saintly quality. In other words, he fit rather easily into the mold of a *zaddik*.

This is persuasive reasoning; but it is not entirely convincing. Rabbi Chouri's scholarship may have been productive, but he can scarcely be numbered among the great talmudists. The fact that he was a popular figure also does not distinguish him from several others among his Tunisian rabbinic peers. Moreover, there is little to indicate that during his lifetime he was known to possess miraculous powers: he was consulted by those who suffered from misfortune or in regard to community issues, but there is no indication that his wisdom or personality were believed to have special or supernatural qualities.

Then why did *he* become a *zaddik*? This brings us to the second part of the answer. Rabbi Chouri's fame grew after his death. This is the common pattern in the North African Jewish tradition—in most instances the *zaddik* was recognized as possessing mystical powers following his death. The tales of miraculous acts performed by him were told after his death and while his *hillula* was growing in size. The time or period was instrumental in this process. That is, Rabbi Chouri was the first of the rabbis of wide reputation to have been buried in the Beersheba cemetery. Had he not been the first (several others have since been buried there) then his *hillula* might not have developed its large following, and his fame would at best have been minor. For a variety of reasons (these are discussed in the chapters that follow) the

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time was propitious for new Israeli *hilluloth* to be established. Even the date was well timed—the late spring season corresponds with a wide range of festivities including Israel Independence Day and the Lag B'Omer pilgrimage to Meron—and the new Chouri *hillula* was easily included in what has become an intensive festival period. Finally, the success of his celebration was also aided by the absence or dearth of pilgrimage sites in the Beersheba region. This is a curious but highly relevant fact: whereas the north of Israel is rich in holy places, there are few such traditional shrines in the southern part of the country. The northern Israeli towns of Safad, Tiberias, and Hatzor could boast their saints and holy places (the graves of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Meir Baal Haness, and Choni Hameagel respectively) but where could one turn in the south? This was also a factor in creating this new "*hillula* of the Negev."

Rabbi Chayim Chouri became a *zaddik* following his death. The tales of miracles that he performed and the special powers that he possessed have grown since his burial in the Beersheba cemetery. Who does not know how he saved the Jews of Gabes from the hated Germans by performing wonderful miracles or how he appears in dreams and gently explains to believers how they can rid themselves of some ailment or affliction? Such tales (and many others) are now collected in books and repeated in conversations. From year to year the stories become more numerous and, indeed, more fabulous. They will undoubtedly continue to do so for many years to come.

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