In 1869, the Jews of Sanaa warmly welcomed Joseph Halévy to Yemen, a man whom they believed to be Jerusalem’s latest emissary to their lands. Part preachers, part schnorrers, such envoys had become familiar visitors to Jewish lands in both the East and the West. Yet Halévy almost immediately began to raise eyebrows. Although none disputed his deep Jewish learning, his offers to pay for copies of pre-Islamic inscriptions made some suspect that the welfare of the Jerusalemite community was not his most fundamental concern. Hayim Habshush, a Yemenite coppersmith, was intrigued. He was already a collector of ancient inscriptions, which he used to make magical amulets. He was also interested in tracking down the ten lost tribes, who were rumored to be living hidden away in the Arabian deserts. Realizing that this rabbi was not who he seemed, and thinking him to be a mystic and magician, he hoped to become his disciple and gain knowledge of occult secrets. Habshush was quickly hired by the mysterious rabbi, but, once in his service, he discovered that the rabbi possessed an entirely different kind of knowledge.

Joseph Halévy was not from Jerusalem, but he was indeed a learned rabbi who, aided by a photographic memory, had mastered Talmudic literature and was able to hold his own in traditional Jewish society. Habshush, however, discovered that he had been wrong to see Halévy as a magician. On the contrary, Halévy prized rationalism and rejected Judaism’s traditions of mysticism and magic. He had been previously employed by a Jewish organization, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, that sought to better the condition of oppressed and impoverished Jews by uniting them in a shared commitment to modernity. To this end, he had served as a teacher and administrator in schools in the Ottoman Empire and Europe and had also undertaken a mission to Abyssinia to save its Jews from both poverty and conversion to Christianity. But Halévy had come to Yemen with a different agenda. He had been sent there by the French academy to locate and transcribe pre-Islamic inscriptions, not to save its Jews. Despite the secular nature of his mission, Halévy had been chosen by the French thanks in part to his rabbinic training. Yemeni historians frequently refer to the nineteenth century as “a time of corruption.” Famine and disease decimated a population already wracked by continual conflicts between warring tribes. A foreigner’s only hope of avoiding such violence was to attach himself to Yemenis who played no part in intertribal struggles. As clients of Yemeni tribes, Jews were not directly involved in such conflicts and their geographic dispersion across Yemen made them well-placed hosts for a foreign would-be explorer. Indeed, over the centuries, several Jerusalemite rabbis had taken advantage of precisely this system to facilitate their travel in Yemen. A Jerusalemite rabbi, the French academy reasoned, had the best chance of safe
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remote from his hometown of Sanaa, he too feels himself to be a foreigner, grappling with values and customs very different from his own. The questions surface time and again, and most tragically when he and Halévy stumble upon a Bedouin Jewish family, bound by codes of tribal honor, who are about to kill their daughter for becoming pregnant before marriage. As lone travelers surrounded by weapon-carrying Jews with very different mores from their own, they are at a loss as to whether and how they should intervene. Hābushsh considers offering to perform an abortion to save the woman. Then he considers how he might save her by marrying her and taking her away from the only family and community that she has known. And could it be, Hābushsh wonders, that his deep attraction to this beautiful woman is skewing his judgment? Does it matter that the “help” he has to offer is also self-serving?

Hābushsh’s travelogue was written at a moment when travel had become faster, aided in part by the rise of European and Ottoman imperialism, and Jews were becoming aware of the diverse practices of world Jewry. Hābushsh’s position as a “native guide” to a European traveler, and as a traveler himself to unfamiliar parts of his own land, placed him in a unique position to reflect on the ramifications of this exciting and fraught new era. His reflections serve as a remarkably prescient, nuanced, and deeply humane attempt to critique and celebrate the opportunities of discovery and self-discovery offered by such explorations.

Hābushsh is particularly sensitive to the question: Ought travelers intervene to correct the injustices that they see or are they instead bound to avoid imperialistically imposing their values on others? Hābushsh does not limit these discussions to non-Yemenites. In rural regions