

THE QUALITY OF RABBINIC LEADERSHIP IN THE GENERATION OF EXPULSION

EL CARÁCTER DEL LIDERAZGO RABÍNICO EN LA GENERACIÓN DE LA EXPULSIÓN

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Abstract: Not a few Jewish historians have strongly criticized the spiritual and intellectual leaders of Spanish Jewry in the years leading up to the expulsion of 1492, as expressed by the following statement in a 1995 academic book by Norman Roth: "An important characteristic of fifteenth-century Spanish Jewry was the almost complete lack of leadership". This article will challenge some of the underlying assumptions of this claim, especially pertaining to the failure of these leaders to foresee and prevent the expulsion, and the charge of intellectual mediocrity in the areas of Jewish law, philosophy and Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). Passing briefly over the best-known Jewish leader of the generation, Don Isaac Abravanel, about whom much has been written, the second part of the article will focus on Rabbi Isaac Aboab, based largely on material from his sermons, much of which remains in unpublished manuscripts.

Keywords: Aboab; Abravanel; backshadowing; "conversos"; disputed question; expulsion; inquisition; kabbalah; martyrdom; Netanyahu; philosophy; response; Seneor; sermons; syllogism; Spanish Jewry.

Resumen: Algunos historiadores judíos han criticado duramente los líderes espirituales e intelectuales de los sefardíes en los años previos a la expulsión de 1492, como pone de manifiesto Norman Roth en una publicación de 1995: "Una característica importante de los sefardíes del siglo XV fue la falta casi total de liderazgo". Con el fin de cuestionar algunos de los presupuestos subyacentes, este artículo pone en tela de juicio algunas de las asunciones fundamentales de esta afirmación, especialmente en lo que respecta al supuesto fracaso de esos líderes en prever y prevenir la expulsión, y a la acusación de mediocridad intelectual en los ámbitos de la ley, la filosofía y la cábala judías. Después de un breve acercamiento al líder judío más conocido de esa generación, Don Isaac Abravanel, sobre quien ya se ha escrito mucho, la segunda parte del artículo se centra en el rabí Isaac Aboab, basándose sobre todo en sus sermones, muchos de los cuales proceden de manuscritos todavía sin publicar.

Palabras clave: Aboab; Abravanel; conversos; disputas; expulsión; inquisición; cábala; martirio; Netanyahu; filosofía; responsa; Seneor; sermones; silogismo; sefardíes.

SUMMARY

1. Introduction.— 2. Criticism of pre-1492 Spanish Jewish leadership.— 3. Reassessing the quality of Rabbinic leadership.— 4. The sermons of Isaac Aboab.— 5. Conclusions.— 6. Bibliography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Jewish discourse has often been overly generous in describing spiritual leadership. Often it borders on hagiography, liberally bestowing superlatives to the point where all praises seem debased. By contrast, much modern Jewish historiography has been extremely critical of Jewish leaders in the Middle Ages. Thus we learn from Graetz that after the death of Maimonides, *the Jews stood without a leader, and Judaism without a guide*, leaving the Jewish people helpless against the onslaught of the 13th-century papacy, spearheaded by Innocent III. And if Graetz is old-hat, consider the following astonishing passage by an eminent historian of medieval Europe, Norman Cantor:

There was one courtly, rabbinical, literary, mercantile elite, and all Jews beside this immensely wealthy, prominent, fortunate, learned elite were the silent exploited masses. Exploited and repressed, I think, not only by the Gentiles, but also by the dominant court Jews. Every time I read or hear about medieval Jewry, I think of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and her unforgettable picture of how the Jewish masses of Hungary were sold into Nazi gas chambers by the Budapest Jewish community leaders, so many of whom survived to become American business men or indeed Israeli officials. (...) The rich, well-born and learned Jews often survived even pogroms and moved easily on to havens in other countries, while the masses in bad times sank even further into poverty, misery, and martyrdom¹.

From their rhetoric and substance, one would be hard-pressed to prove that these lines were written by a professional historian. But rather than linger on this overblown picture and its highly problematic use of an analogy with the Holocaust, I prefer to approach the question of Jewish leadership by focusing on a specific historical setting: the generation of the expulsion from Spain, about which a relatively recent work has asserted, *An important, and hitherto little-emphasized, characteristic of fifteenth-century Spanish Jewry was the almost complete lack of leadership*².

2. CRITICISM OF PRE-1492 SPANISH JEWISH LEADERSHIP

Several leading modern historians, mostly from a previous generation, have subjected the leaders of Spanish Jewry during its last generation on the Iberian peninsula to a two-pronged attack. The first charge impugns their perspicacity and their political judgment. Given all the warning signs, how could they not have foreseen the approaching disaster of 1492? As Benzion Netanyahu put it,

¹ N. Cantor, *Aspects of Jewish*, p. 182. Cantor returned to this theme in his monumental compendium of misinformation, N. Cantor, *The Sacred Chain*, pp. 180-181: "By the second quarter of the thirteenth century the days of Ashkenaz were numbered. Anyone could see the future was gloomy, indeed hopeless (...). Ashkenazi rabbinate did nothing (...). It is the syndrome of waiting quietly for the holocaust. Thus the Orthodox rabbinate failed to exercise leadership on behalf of the Jews in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz as they were to do again in twentieth-century Poland. Meanwhile the rabbinate drugged itself into comfort with the narcotic of the Cabala, an otherworldly withdrawal into astrology and demonology". For the earlier passage, see H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. III, p. 495.

² N. Roth, *Conversos*, p. XVI, and see also similar formulations on pp. 53, 278, 302-303.

common sense, it would appear, should have indicated to the Jews that, with such a fierce campaign being conducted against the Marranos in the name of their Jewishness, the Jews could not possibly escape involvement. But the Jews seem not to have sensed this (...). The blindness manifested by the Jews in the Diaspora for developments laden with mortal danger is nothing short of proverbial³.

In less value-laden terms, Haim Beinart wrote –whether in surprise or dismay– that *few Jewish leaders showed any premonition of the approaching danger*⁴. These are fine examples of what Michael Bernstein has called (in a literary context, particularly with regard to the Holocaust) “backshadowing,” defined as,

a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they should have known what was to come*⁵.

Second, there is a charge of general intellectual mediocrity. According to some modern experts, this was a generation that produced no shining stars in any field of Jewish cultural endeavor⁶. Spanish rabbis of this generation made no contribution to the responsa literature, we are told by Menachem Elon, because *the progressively worsening political situation, the persecutions and riots (...) prevented the creation of questions and responsa under such conditions*. Julius Guttmann reached a similar conclusion from his own perspective: *The frightful pressure under which Spanish Jewry, the foremost bearers of Jewish philosophy, lived during the fifteenth century precluded any productive or original philosophic work*. As for Kabbalah, the generation of 1492 shows the dynamic, creative energies of earlier centuries spent; in Gershom Scholem’s words, *the literature of the fifteenth century [in Spain] reflects an unmistakable flaccidity of religious thought and expression*⁷. The conclusion suggested by these evaluations seems unavoidable: the generation of the expulsion, in facing its crisis, had the misfortune of being served by mediocre leaders who were simply not up to the challenge.

³ B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 45; B. Gampel has raised this issue in his own context in *The Last Jews on Iberian Soil*, pp. 1-2, p. 210 n. 40.

⁴ H. Beinart, *Order of the Expulsion*, p. 87. Beinart goes on to note one exception, R. Judah ibn Verga, who “expressed his foreboding with a symbolic act” according to *Shevet Yehudah*, chap. 62, p. 127. But his translation of the passage in that article obscures the fact that Judah’s symbolic act is said to apply to three categories of *conversos*, not of Jews; furthermore, this kind of foreknowledge claimed in a later text –“before the Inquisition came, he knew all it would do”– is always suspect of being a “prophecy after the fact”.

⁵ M. Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions*, p. 16 (italics in original).

⁶ “There is, therefore, no question but that the fifteenth century saw a complete breakdown and virtual collapse of the high level of Jewish learning which had characterized Spanish Jewry from the earliest days” (N. Roth, *Conversos*, p. 13), but contrast the detailed information on pp. 53-54. Yom Tov Assis recently articulated what he calls “the view held by most scholars” as follows: “The last century of Jewish life in Spain was on the whole a period of decline... Many leaders were either dead or baptized. Inevitably, the years following the massacres were very meager in literary production. Apart from poetry and ethics, many themes of Jewish learning were almost completely neglected during the years after 1391”. Y.T. Assis, *Spanish Jewry*, p. 309 (I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this article for this reference).

⁷ M. Elon, *Ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri*, vol. II, p.1235; J. Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, p. 275; G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 244. Contrast the much more positive assessment by Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 426.

It is not my primary purpose either to polemicize against scholars, such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph whose work I deeply admire, or to defend the rabbinic leaders of Spanish Jewry, but rather to examine the basis on which the charge of mediocrity has been leveled. For it seems to me that it is based on assumptions that are fundamentally unhistorical. Let us consider each of the charges in turn.

3. REASSESSING THE QUALITY OF RABBINIC LEADERSHIP

The accusation of political obtuseness, an inability to see the handwriting on the wall, a *blindness (...) for developments laden with mortal danger*, sounds more like the representation of the Diaspora experience in radical Zionist ideology than a proper historical assessment. It is always easy to read history backward: from what eventually happened to what should have been obvious. Before the fact, even the most astute and canny contemporary observers, faced with contradictory indicators and questionable precedents, confront an opaque wall. What seems so clear in retrospect appears at the time to be open-ended, ambiguous, and obscure.

Should Jewish leaders have seen the expulsion coming? The evidence indicates that virtually everyone in Spain, including powerful courtiers and influential churchmen, were taken by surprise. At the very least, it is clear that the Catholic Monarchs carefully concealed their intentions until the last moment, permitting Jews in Granada and the surrounding territories conquered to remain in their places until December 8, 1494, and signing four-year contracts with Jewish tax farmers in January of 1492. Indeed, one reconstruction suggests that the King and Queen themselves decided hastily, only a couple of months before the Edict was issued⁸. If on January 1, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella had no concrete plans to expel the Jews from Spain, or deliberately disguised those plans, why should the Jewish leaders be condemned for not having foreseen it?

Historical precedent? We neatly group the medieval expulsions from Western Europe into a series: England in 1290, France in 1306, perhaps in 1322, and in 1394, Spain in 1492. The Jews of Spain knew about these earlier expulsions. But it was apparently only after their own that they began to recognize a pattern⁹. Before the fact, they understandably –and perhaps quite properly– thought of themselves in a totally different category from their Ashkenazi colleagues. For whether we look at total population, political influence, access to the court, social integration and prestige, longevity of presence in the land, there were ample grounds to support the claim that Spanish Jewry was uniquely rooted in the Iberian peninsula and would not suffer the fate that had befallen the communities to the north.

⁸ On the Capitulations of Granada specifying the terms of surrender, see O.R. Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, p. 349, par. 4. On the four-year contract, see S.W. Baron, *History of the Jews*, vol. XI, p. 238 and p. 403, n. 59 (suggesting the possibly duplicitous intent). For the argument that the monarchs decided upon the expulsion precipitously, see S. Haliczer, *The Castilian Urban Patriciate*, pp. 35-58. There is a division among historians rather analogous to the “intentionalist” and “functionalist” interpretations of the Nazi “Final Solution,” but even from the intentionalist position, it does not follow that the intentions of the rulers should have been obvious.

⁹ The expulsion from France in 1322 has been called into question; see E.A.R. Brown, *Philip V, Charles IV*, pp. 294-329. Concerning knowledge of earlier expulsions, see M. Saperstein, *A Sermon on the Akedah*, 1996, pp. 259-260. For the pattern of expulsions recognized after the fact, see I. Abravanel, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. III, 262b-263a, on Deuteronomy chap. 28; J. Hacker, *Kroniqot Hadashot*, p. 201 n. 1; Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, p. 59.

What about the local expulsions on the Iberian peninsula? Netanyahu himself, discussing the expulsion from Andalucía in 1483, refers to *Ferdinand's abilities at concealment and subterfuge* whereby the King and Queen *appeared as if they came to the rescue of the expelled* and supported their claims and financial interests¹⁰. But rather than taking this as evidence that the naive Jews were duped by the duplicitous Ferdinand, it may be taken to indicate that the monarchs themselves did not view this as the first step leading to the general expulsion, but rather as a tactical decision to solidify support in the South. When in 1486, local officials expelled the Jews from Valmaseda, Rabbi Abraham Najara wrote in protest to the Monarchs, who responded with an order to permit the Jews to return¹¹. There is no reason why this rabbi, or other contemporary Jewish leaders, should have seen the Crown as already plotting the end of Spanish Jewry¹².

Should they not have seen, as Netanyahu argues, that the establishment of the Inquisition and the *fierce campaign being conducted against the Marranos in the name of their Jewishness* pointed to a clear and present danger for themselves?¹³ But it was not at all clear and present, and Spanish Jewry's regnant "theory" of the Inquisition, which Netanyahu contemptuously dismisses, was not implausible. Whether one understands the Inquisition primarily as a religious institution or as a social and political one, it was plausible to interpret it as devoid of direct threat to the Jewish community¹⁴.

Religiously, it attacked the "Jewishness" of the Marranos only because they were defined as Christians. The "Jewishness" of the Jews was in a totally different category, protected by long-standing Church doctrine. It was not generally argued that Judaism is by its very nature a pollution of Spanish culture, only that contact with Jews could influence the "conversos" in a negative way¹⁵. The solution seemed to be in the direction of segregation, or at worst punishment of specific communities of

¹⁰ B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 48, p. 277, n. 32b.

¹¹ S. Haliczer, *Castilian Urban Patriciate*, p. 55, based on L. Suarez, *Documentos*, pp. 313, 317-319. Cf. also H. Beinart, *The Expulsion of the Jews*, pp. 21-22, on the role of Abraham Seneor in reversing this expulsion.

¹² Cf. also C. Carrete Parrondo, *Sefarad 1492*, pp. 49-54.

¹³ B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 45. "Common sense," we are told, should have led the Jews to foresee the danger. It is rather extraordinary how none of the Jews then living, according to Netanyahu, seem to have had any "common sense".

¹⁴ The scholarly dispute over the nature of the Inquisition is, of course, integrally bound up with the dispute over the nature of the "conversos". For reviews of the literature, see B.A. Lorencé, *The Inquisition and the New Christians*, pp. 13-72; J. Kaplan, *Ba'ayat ha-Anusim* pp. 117-44; J. Martínez de Bujanda, *Recent Historiography of the Spanish*, pp. 221-247; and, in a more popular form, A. Gopnik, *Inquiring Minds*, pp. 70-75. For a political interpretation of Inquisition, see B. Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain*, p. 4, and in exhaustive detail, idem, *Origins of the Inquisition*, e.g. pp. 918-920; E. Rivkin, *How Jewish Were the New Christians*, vol. I, p. 108; M. Cohen, *Towards a New Comprehension*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ Stronger attacks against Jews and Judaism were, of course, in circulation; a blatant example is Alonso de Espina's *Fortalitium Fidei*. See Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 283-290; B. Netanyahu, *Origins of the Inquisition*, pp. 814-847; A. Meyuhas Ginio, *The Fortress of Faith*, pp. 215-237; S. McMichael, *The End of the World*, pp. 224-273. It should be noted, however, that this book, completed in 1460, was printed outside of Spain (Strassburg, by 1471, Basel, ca. 1475, Nuremberg, 1485, Lyons, 1487). Even sophisticated Jewish leaders might not have known of it until quite late, if at all. (Netanyahu's conclusion that for Espina, "mass extermination" and "annihilation" was the "preferred solution to the Jewish problem in all the countries of Christendom" (*ibidem*, p. 835) is yet another instance of his projecting back on the fifteenth century the experience of the Holocaust, not to speak of pushing sources considerably beyond what they say).

Jews that had encouraged “conversos” to Judaize, not in total expulsion. The assertion in the edict of expulsion that the Inquisition could never accomplish its task so long as Jews remained on Spanish soil could hardly have been anticipated.

Socially, the same is true: the Inquisition attacked “conversos” accused of “Judaizing” because, as Christians, they were theoretically entitled to advance in Spanish society in accordance with their merits, thereby threatening the established centers of “Old Christian” power. But the Jews themselves did not constitute such a threat; their influence in Spanish society was not growing but waning at the time of the expulsion¹⁶. It was not argued that Jews per se were taking over Spanish society and had to be stopped.

For both of these reasons, it was plausible for Jewish leaders to perceive the Inquisition as not constituting a direct threat. Just as some “conversos” favored establishment of the Inquisition in their belief that it would separate the genuine New Christians from Judaizing heretics, so Jews were not necessarily indulging in self-delusion when they concluded that their position was not affected by it. So long as they did not violate the ground rules of toleration by inducing conversion to Judaism, so long as they obeyed the law of the land by testifying before the Inquisition when summoned¹⁷, they had no obvious reason to fear that they would be the next object of attack¹⁸.

And what if these Jewish leaders had been able to “foresee” the expulsion?¹⁹ What could they have done? Call for mass emigration in 1491, or 1480? Even in the unlikely case they would have been heeded, the result would not have been significantly different: a shift in Jewish population to new arenas. Was there anything Spanish Jewish leaders could have done to prevent the expulsion? Despite their resources, the influence of Jewish courtiers was limited. Abravanel describes his efforts to convince the Catholic Monarchs to revoke the Edict, and it is difficult to imagine what more could have been attempted: Christian allies in the court were mobilized, a vast sum of money was pledged, various kinds of appeals were made²⁰. At the same time, other leaders were acting to facilitate the large-scale emigration

¹⁶ This has been persuasively argued by S. Haliczer in *The Expulsion of the Jews*, pp. 39-47.

¹⁷ On the Jewish obligation to testify before the Inquisition: S.W. Baron, *History of the Jews*, vol. XIII, p. 37.

¹⁸ Making an explicit analogy, Netanyahu similarly condemns the Jews of Germany for having “failed to foresee Hitler’s rise to power at any time during the period preceding that rise” (B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 45). It is here that the author’s revisionist Zionist subtext becomes most apparent. One might have thought it was time to stop blaming Jewish leaders for unprecedented disasters they were powerless to prevent. Note the quotations from Abravanel and Arama cited by B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 276, n. 27, and used to document their “blindness” to the approaching tidal wave. To the contrary, they may serve to indicate that there was no good reason to suspect that the position of Spanish Jewry. Cf. B. Gampel, *The Last Jews on Iberian Soil*, p. 2. Netanyahu’s condemnation of Spanish Jews for not being prophets –for having “failed to notice (...) the mountainous wave which was approaching to overwhelm them” (1968, p. 45)– is no more convincing as history than it is as metaphor: those living by the seashore cannot see a tidal wave until it is too late.

¹⁹ For a possible adumbration of a disaster lying ahead, see the passage in a sermon by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov quoted in M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 82. But this passage expresses deep skepticism about the ability of the Jewish courtiers to accomplish anything significant on behalf of their people. Needless to say, later accounts of “premonitions,” such as the passage cited above in n. 4, and the story that Isaac de Leon appeared to his widow in a dream a year before the expulsion and ordered that the cemetery in which he was buried be plowed over, have no evidentiary value for the period before 1492. See J. Ha-Kohen, *Emeq ha-Bakha*, p. 99.

²⁰ See B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, pp. 54-55, with references to the sources.

through negotiations in Portugal and Istanbul. There is little that suggests a paralysis of leadership at this crucial juncture. And if, as Haliczzer has argued, the Catholic Monarchs themselves were pressed to expel the Jews by powerful social forces they could not successfully resist²¹, then the relative impotence of the Jews would have been even more pronounced.

The star witness in the case for the failure of leadership has been Abraham Seneor. One can hardly imagine a more devastating image than that of the most powerful Jewish courtier in Spain, *Rab de la corte* and *chief judge* of the *aljamas* of the Jews in Castile, accepting baptism with his illustrious son-in-law under the sponsorship of the king, queen, and a leading cardinal. Perceived as having committed the ultimate betrayal, it is not surprising that Seneor would be described by historians as *not among the pious and a man of no great stature (...) disliked by the leading Jews of Spain especially because of his religious laxity and meager scholastic attainments*²².

But these negative accounts are based on post-expulsion sources²³. If we look carefully at documents written before the conversion, we find a rather different picture: a Jewish leader described by his contemporaries as the enduring scepter of Judah, *our exilarch*, who was not afraid to use his considerable influence in the court on behalf of his people. Baer concludes that *He faithfully exercised his political functions so as to promote the welfare of his people for sixteen years, and up to the very day of his baptism (...) worked untiringly for the sake of the Jewish cause*. Together with Abravanel, he tried to persuade the monarchs to revoke their edict. And one tradition, recorded by Capsali, maintains that he converted because of a threat by the queen that the alternative would be a bloodbath against the Jews²⁴. If this is true, then the act might legitimately be understood as the ultimate self-sacrifice. If not, then

²¹ See the article cited above in n. 8.

²² For the negative evaluations of Seneor, see Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 314; B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 52. For a thorough and balanced treatment of Seneor in historical context, see E. Gutwirth, *Abraham Seneor*, pp. 169-229. The characterization of Seneor as "chief judge", cited above, appears in a document on p. 200; cf. pp. 208-217 on the nature of this position.

²³ The main source states that Isaac de Leon, in a pun on Seneor's name, called him *Sone or*, hater of light, "for he was a heretic, as is proven by eventual apostasy;" see A. Marx, *Expulsion of the Jews*, p. 250, and idem, *Studies in Jewish History and Booklore*, New York, 1944, p. 85; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 314; H.H. Ben-Sasson, *Dor Golei Sefarad al Atsmo*, p. 458, n. 105. Cf. the attack, made in a polemical context, by Judah ben David Messer Leon, cited in H. Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, p. 103. See also J. Hacker, *Kroniqot Hadashot*, p. 222 and n. 131; this source explains the motivation not as philosophical skepticism but as the "evil inclination". The disparity probably indicates that in the absence of solid information about the circumstances of conversion, writers used the opportunity to blame it on whatever factors they wanted to criticize. The propensity to resort to negative plays on the names Seneor and Meir (*ibidem*, p. 228) also suggests a lack of substantive information.

²⁴ For the letter praising Seneor from 1487, see Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 315; Ben-Sasson, *Dor Golei Sefarad*, pp. 205-206; cf. also the description cited by Ben-Sasson there on p. 207. Baer's positive description of Seneor's activities: *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 314, 341-342, 400-402; cf. also M. Kriegel, *La prise d'une décision*, pp. 56-57. In his comprehensive review of Seneor's career, Gutwirth gives a more nuanced assessment of Seneor's representation of Jewish issues in the political arena, suggesting that in some cases Seneor may have been acting to defend the interests of his own economic and social class rather than the Jewish community as a whole (pp. 218-219). But a main thrust of his article is to criticize the tendency to evaluate Seneor's entire career retrospectively in light of the conversion (p. 228). For the exculpatory interpretation of Seneor's apostasy, see E. Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, p. 210; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 436; B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 281 (buried in n. 71); S.W. Baron, *History of the Jews*, vol. XI, p. 240. Note also E. Gutwirth, *Abraham Seneor*, p. 206, on Seneor's behavior soon after the edict was proclaimed, plausibly indicating an initial intention to leave Spain.

the decision reflects the psychology of an 80-year old man faced with expulsion from the only country he knew. Yet it also shows that he was not universally disliked, for if he were, how could a tradition like this have been circulated and given credence?

The only thing that might have prepared Spanish Jewry for the disaster of 1492 was a total abandonment of its historical and political traditions, an attempt to forge broader alliances with those social elements whose interests were opposed to the unification of the kingdoms, centralization of power, the suppression of religious and political liberties. Perhaps someone might have foreseen that the strong centralized state could be a greater source of danger to the Jews than forces from which Jews were ordinarily protected by royal authority. Some passages in the later writings of Abravanel might perhaps suggest this insight, achieved in retrospect²⁵. But it was an insight that would not be fully confirmed until our own century. To blame fifteenth century Spanish Jews for not foreseeing the unprecedented is an exercise not in historiography but in polemic²⁶.

Turning to the second charge, of intellectual mediocrity, we find here too a number of historical problems. First, there is an issue of selection. It is never superfluous to repeat the reminder that our evaluation of the leaders of Spanish Jewry is based almost entirely on those who wrote books. In the late fifteenth century, in the infancy of printing, no "book" written by a contemporary Jew in Spain had widespread influence on Spanish soil²⁷. The Jews in the generation of the expulsion were influenced not by what their leaders wrote, but by what they heard them say, and this is, for the most part, lost to the historical record²⁸. In every Jewish community of Spain, sermons were delivered each Sabbath during the crucial years leading

²⁵ On the royal alliance as the axiom of Jewish political ideology and behavior, see Y.H. Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506*, esp. pp. 38-39. Abravanel's arguments that a king is not necessary, and that the best government is provided by those appointed to positions of authority for limited periods of time, who make decisions in large groups, and who are divided into groups that have specialized authority and function, all lead to the goal of preventing the concentration of power and ensuring that it will be exercised only in the most diffuse manner. Perhaps this reflects the conclusion that the Jews had been sacrificed to the interests of centralism in Spain and that kings could be a source of danger as well as of protection.

²⁶ Cf. Peter Gay's formulation about German antisemitism during the Wilhelminian decades, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, pp. 169-170, concluding: "To reproach Germany's Jews of that [Wilhelminian] epoch with failing to see what was, after all, scarcely visible or wholly invisible is an exercise in the unhistorical".

²⁷ The Hebrew books printed in Spain were classical texts, not the works of contemporary writers. See P. Tishby, *Defusei Eres [Incunabulum] Ivriyim*, p. 522 and bibliography on p. 530, and more generally, Israel Ta-Shma, *Li-Yedi'at Matsav Limmud ha-Torah*, vol. II, p. 263. (The situation was different in Italy, where Judah Messer Leon's *Nofet Tsufim*, published at Mantua in 1475 or 1476, became the first Hebrew work printed during the lifetime of its author; see I. Rabinowitz, *The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow*, p. XXX.) Books written by the leaders of Spanish Jewry were printed in the sixteenth century in countries to which the Jews had immigrated. These books cannot therefore be taken as clear evidence of their authors' influence in Spain itself.

²⁸ Occasionally we encounter reports in a written work of what an author remembers having heard from his teacher, a preacher, etc. I. Abravanel, *Ateret Zeqenim*, p. 12b: "I heard a man who thought himself to be wise, and is so considered by our masses, preach to a large audience" (I am grateful to Eric Lawee for this reference); *Commentary on the Torah* (above, n. 9), 2:253b on Exodus chapter 25, citing things he heard from Joseph ibn Shem Tov. I. Caro, *Toledot Yitshaq*, p. 40a, citing his brother Ephraim. Abraham Saba, *Tseror ha-Mor*, Genesis, p. 24b, citing Isaac de Leon. I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 16d, citing Joseph Jeshua (cf. Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 248); I. Aboab, *Be'ur Perush ha-Ramban la-Torah* (see below, p. 106), Genesis, 6b, 12a, 20b, 36d; Exodus 17b, 19b etc., citing his unnamed teacher (Isaac Canpontion?). J. Yabetz, *Or ha-Hayyim*, p. 21a, citing Joseph Hayun: see J. Hacker, *R. Yosef Hayun*, p. 275. Abraham Saba reported a sermon (including the open-

to the summer of 1492. Of these thousands of sermons, many were undoubtedly uninspired, conventional, hackneyed, devoted to standard conceptual and exegetical problems bearing no direct relevance to the period. But there were undoubtedly some that attempted to interpret the bewildering events of the present, to provide guidance, encouragement, comfort to Jews faced with staggering uncertainties.

To mention only some of the material we know from contemporary reports: a rabbi named Levi ben Shem Tov of Saragossa delivered three sermons in 1490 exhorting his people to obey the edict compelling Jews to testify about Judaizing “conversos” before the Inquisition; Rabbi Solomon of Albarracin, banished from his own city because of his sermons, preached so powerfully in Teruel that he dissuaded Jews from converting and convinced them to leave Spain; Abraham Saba preached a sermon on the destiny of the Jewish people and Christendom *at a gathering of sages in Castile, and they praised it*; Abraham Zacuto delivered a eulogy for his teacher Isaac Aboab in Portugal, in February of 1493²⁹. Such material, of obvious importance in evaluating the leadership of Spanish Jewry, was never written in a form intended for future readers. Without it, assessment of the “quality of leadership” is bound to be precarious.

Our data is limited not only by what was written, but by what has been preserved. It stands to reason that a generation disrupted by the cataclysm of a sudden, unexpected universal expulsion will lose a greater proportion of its manuscripts than a generation living in quiet times. Despite the concerted effort by the Spanish émigrés to save their books, the extant literature of the period is filled with references to books that have been lost, either in Spain or in Portugal³⁰. How much do we know of Ephraim Karo, father of the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*? He died at a relatively early age; but his teachings are cited by his brother Isaac and by his son Joseph, who apparently had access to written material, a collection of legal decisions or responsa that is not known to be extant³¹. Indeed, there is a whole list of distinguished rabbis and heads of

ing biblical verse) delivered generations earlier by Hasdai Crescas during a drought, see E. Gutwirth, *Towards Expulsion*, p. 61.

²⁹ Levi ben Shem Tov, see M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 85, n. 12; Rabbi Solomon of Albarracin, Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 436 citing A. Floriano, *La aljama de judios de Teruel*, p. 17f; A. Saba, *Tseror ha-Mor*, Genesis, end of *Va-Yishlah*, p. 50a; cf. Exod. p. 29b, Deut. p. 6d; A. Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem*, p. 226a. Jacob Yabetz refers to his own sermons, none of which have been preserved; J. Yabetz, *Hasdei Ha-Shem*, pp. 22-23; the work was written in the second year after expulsion.

³⁰ On the effort to save books and the inevitable loss nevertheless, see J. Hacker, *The Intellectual Activity of the Jews*, p. 106. For material written but lost, see M. Benayahu, *Derushav she-le-Rabbi Yosef ben*, pp. 51-52 on the lost works of Garçon and pp. 42-43 on the lost sermons of Abraham Shamsulo and of Shem Tov Gamil (or Jamil) of Tudela (on the latter, see J. Toledano, *Me-Kitvei Yad*, pp. 403-409; E. Gutwirth, *De Castellnou a Tlemcen*, pp. 171-182, with further references n. 6). Abraham Saba describes three of his works, including commentaries on the Torah and Scrolls and Avot, lost in Portugal; see Dan Magor, *Le-Toldotav shel R. Avraham Saba*, pp. 227-228; A. Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, pp. 8-9. Abravanel refers to his lost work *Mahazeh Shaddai*; see B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p. 85. For lost works by the courtier, philosopher and preacher Joseph Isaac ibn Shem Tov, see H. Wolfson, *Isaac ibn Shem Tob's Unknown*, p. 490. Inquisitional documents refer to the burning of some 6000 volumes on Judaism and sorcery at Salamanca in 1490; many of these were presumably written by Jews. E.N. Adler, *Lea on the Inquisition*, p. 527. Abraham Saba, in the passage noted above, describes a confiscation of all Jewish books in Lisbon at the time of the forced conversion of 1497. A source cited by Hacker, above, speaks of Kabbalistic manuscripts that “sank in the sea”.

³¹ On Ephraim Karo, see R.J.Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 85; B. Landau, *Le-Toledot*, p. 19, n. 5.

academies about whom hardly anything is known, either because they did not write at all or because their books have been lost³².

This is probably the reason why the generation of the expulsion made little contribution to the established corpus of responsa literature. One may doubt that it is, as Elon suggests, because the challenges of the times made it difficult for the rabbis to concentrate: since when do hard times, or even persecution, prevent Jews from writing *she'elot* and *teshuvot*? Nor can the problem be the ability of the rabbis. Could a generation of halakhists whom Joseph Karo spoke of with deep respect have been unable to produce responsa? It seems far more likely that the texts of responsa written by the Spanish rabbis simply did not reach the centers of Italy or the Ottoman Empire where they could be collected, organized, printed, and incorporated into the recognized body of precedents³³.

Similarly, the upheaval caused by the expulsion is undoubtedly responsible for the loss of communal registers and minute books *pinqasim*, which are such a valuable source of information about the leadership of communities in Italy, Poland, Amsterdam, and elsewhere. Spanish *pinqasim* are known only from occasional references in other literature—a loss of enormous historical magnitude³⁴.

There is a second fundamental problem with the assessments of intellectual mediocrity cited. Scholars in our time writing histories of Jewish philosophy or Kabbalah can readily identify those who appear to be the truly profound, probing and original minds, who blaze new paths for others. It does not at all follow, however, that these individuals are necessarily the most effective religious leaders of their own generation. Those who centuries later appear to be the deepest thinkers of an age may have had little to say to most of their contemporaries. Ordinary Jews need leaders who can make ideas accessible to them, relate them to the structure of their traditional values and apply them to the array of contemporary challenges. This is not an exaltation of mediocre minds; it is, rather, a suggestion that leadership in a specific historical context may require abilities and qualities different from those that impress intellectuals of a later age, and that brilliance may lie in communicating with a wide audience as well as in exploring uncharted territory³⁵.

³² See the document published by Alexander Marx (above n. 23), pp. 250, 254, 259-261, nn. 11-21. Paramount among them is Isaac de Leon, renowned as Talmudist, Kabbalist, and public figure, but known primarily because of brief citations by others and mention in the celebrated Inquisitional trial of Alfonso de la Cavalleria: J.H. Weiss, *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav*, vol. V, pp. 234-235; A. Marx, *Expulsion of the Jews*, p. 260 n. 15; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 374-375, 491-492 n. 17; M. Idel, *Iyyunim be-Shitato*, p. 262; I. Ta-Shma, *Li-Yedi'at Matsav Limmud*, pp. 271-273; cf. A. Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin*, p. 76b; J. Ha-Kohen, *Emeq ha-Bakha*, p. 99 (see above, n. 19). Some additional material about the Spanish rabbis is provided in eulogies by Joseph Garçon: see, e.g., Benayahu, *Derushav she-le-Rabbi Yosef ben Meir*, pp. 118-120, on Samuel Franco and pp. 122-123 on Jacob ibn Habib; J. Hacker, *Li-Demutatam*, pp. 47-59. Also A. Gross, *Centers of Study and Yeshivot*, vol. I, pp. 399-410; D. Boyarin, *Ha-Iyyun ha-Sefaradi*; and I. Ta-Shma, *Li-Yedi'at Matsav Limmud*, pp. 261-278b on these scholars and the Castilian academies in general.

³³ See the discussion of Aboab's responsa below.

³⁴ E.g. *Shiv'ah Einayim* (Leghorn, 1745), p. 56b, "It is written in the book of minutes called *registo* (sic)".

³⁵ Some combined effective leadership with profundity; Maimonides and Crescas are paramount examples. Yet their influence as leaders was not because of their technical philosophical work. It was not Crescas's critique of Aristotle that made him such an important leader for Aragonese Jewry in the generation of 1391, but rather his efforts to reconstruct the devastated aljamas and possibly his preaching; see Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 83-85, 110-130. (Indeed, the power of Crescas's philosophical thought was not appreciated by Jewish philosophers even two or three generations later; see the words of Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov cited by H. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*,

Conscious of these considerations, we can begin to evaluate the quality of leadership by criteria appropriate to the historical setting. What we should expect from religious leaders is not the ability to foresee the future or chart new intellectual paths, but rather the ability to address the cultural, intellectual, ethical and spiritual problems besetting their people in a manner that both demonstrates the relevance of the common tradition to these issues and strengthens a commitment to this tradition. By this measure, I believe there is abundant evidence that Spanish Jewry in its final generation produced figures of considerable stature.

It is hard to conceive of any definition of leadership that would exclude Isaac Abravanel from the very highest level. He is one of the handful in Jewish history who combines political influence at the pinnacle of what was possible for Jews, deep concern for the welfare of his people, and prolific writings of major cultural significance. His literary oeuvre can be seen as a summation of the entire cultural tradition of Sephardic Jewry in Spain, cutting across the lines of philosophy, Kabbalah and Talmudism to forge a comprehensive yet accessible synthesis. Because Abravanel is so well known, detailed investigation of others is at present a more important task³⁶.

The thought of certain figures –Isaac Arama, Abraham Bibago, Abraham Shalom, and Abraham Saba– has been investigated in monographic studies³⁷. But even within the limitations of those who wrote substantial extant works, there are other leaders –Isaac Aboab, Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, Joel ibn Shu'eib, Isaac Karo, Joseph Yabetz, and Israel the author of the sermon manuscript called “Dover Meisharim”– who warrant more detailed and comprehensive investigation than has been given them. I will illustrate with the example of Isaac Aboab.

4. THE SERMONS OF ISAAC ABOAB

Aboab's stature as one of the most important Talmudists in the generation of the expulsion is attested by many. Himself one of the outstanding disciples of Isaac Canponton, his own disciples included Jacob Berab, Joseph Fasi, Moses Danon, and Abraham Zacuto. Joseph Karo's *maggid* singles out Aboab's *yeshivah* as pre-eminent in the recent past, promising Karo that *your academy will be even greater than that of My chosen one, Isaac Abravanel*; Levi ibn Habib, rabbi of Jerusalem and fierce opponent of Berab, described Aboab as *the greatest of his generation*³⁸. Aboab's commentary on *Orah Hayyim* of the legal code *Arba'ah Turim* was an important source for Karo, who refers in his own commentary to a question disputed in the Aboab *yeshivah*. He also

p. 33, and D. ben Judah Messer Leon, cited by H. Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, p. 286, n. 25). Therefore, the absence of a thinker of the stature of Crescas in the generation of the expulsion does not necessarily mean that the quality of leadership was mediocre.

³⁶ The substantial literature on Abravanel, in addition to Netanyahu's biography, need not be reviewed here, but note especially the important work of J.-C. Aftias, *Isaac Abravanel* and of E. Lawee, *Isaac Abravanel's Stance*, with reference to earlier articles. On the tendency to incorporate both philosophy and Kabbalah, see S. Regev, *Ha-Mahshavah ha-Ratsiyonal-Mistit ba-Hagut Yehudit*, pp. 155-189.

³⁷ S. Heller-Wilensky, *Yitshaq Arama u-Mishnato*; C. Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*; A. Lazaro, *The Theology of Abraham Bibago*; H. Davidson, *The Philosophy of Abraham Shalom*; A. Gross, *Iberian Jewry*.

³⁸ For the view of Aboab by Karo's "maggid", see *Maggid Meisharim*, p. 2b; quoted in L. Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 113. *She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-RaLBaH*, Lemberg, 1865, 2: 24d, no. 122 end.

wrote a commentary on *Yoreh De'ah* and Novellae on the Talmudic Tractates *Betsah*, *Ketubot* and *Kiddushin*³⁹.

In addition, we are told that he wrote responsa in the *thousands and myriads: he made them proliferate, but we do not know who will gather them*⁴⁰. Two of these responsa were published in the eighteenth century (at the end of *Shiv'ah 'Einayim*. Both deal with a trustee who sold the portion of a house belonging to orphans, who in turn challenged the validity of the sale when they reached maturity. Aboab shows considerable independence in his decision, writing,

The Talmudic statement [b. Gittin 52a] that trustees may not sell real estate applied to their time, when real estate was the basis of their livelihood, and their primary responsibility pertained to it. Today, however, when our livelihood is based primarily on moveable property, which is better than real estate in every respect, and it is well known in our time that there is no work more demeaning than [that involving] real estate [cf. b. Yebamot 63a], we should change the law in accordance with the place and the time... In this position of mine, I do not rely on anyone else, for I have not found it in any other decisor. However, together with my other arguments, this is what the law should be⁴¹.

Even if such independence of legal reasoning was relatively unusual in his work, if the actual number of his responsa was anywhere near 1000, the loss of such a substantial corpus has deprived us of what would undoubtedly be a major resource for Spanish Jewish life in its final generation.

Aboab's interests and talents were considerably broader than the world of the Talmud and Jewish law. His biblical commentary—a supercommentary on Rashi and Ramban—enters fully into the arena of biblical exegesis⁴². One could not prove from this work that the author was a distinguished halakhic authority at all, nor could one document a solid grounding in either philosophy or Kabbalah. It shows little in the way of an intellectual agenda, other than to guide the reader through some of the problems in the classic commentaries of the two masters. More than anything else, it gives the impression of Torah study “for its own sake.”

³⁹ For Aboab's halakhic works, see J. Weiss, *Dor Dor ve-Dorshay*, vol. V, p. 235; M. Elon, *Ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri*, p. 1080, n. 276 and p. 1091 n. 117; Jacob Katz, *Halakhah ve-Kabbalah*, p. 41, n. 28 and p. 61; and the relatively recent publications of his works: *Shitat ha-Qadmonim al Masekhet Betsah*, end of introduction; *Tur ve-Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim, Hilkhot Shabbat*, p. 2. On an important work that emerged from his academy, see D. Boyarin, *Mehqarim be-Farshanut ha-Talmud*, pp. 165-184, esp. p. 171, n. 31.

⁴⁰ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, esp. the introduction by Solomon ben Mazal Tov, p. 2b, alluding to Ps. 39:7. The statement may imply that unlike most collections of responsa, based on copies made by the author (or an amanuensis) before they were sent, in this case the collection of copies had been lost and all that existed were the originals sent to many different questioners who were, after the expulsion, widely dispersed.

⁴¹ *Shiv'ah 'Einayim*, Leghorn, 1745, pp. 54a-58b; quotation from p. 55a. Cf. the use of this responsum by Gutwirth, *Abraham Seneor*, p. 214.

⁴² This work was first published at Istanbul in 1545. The 1972 *Encyclopedia Judaica* article (2:93) by Zvi Avneri (reproduced without change in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd. edition, 2007, 2:267-268) states that while the supercommentary on Ramban (Nahmanides) has been printed, Aboab's supercommentary on Rashi has been lost. This statement seems to me to be based on a misreading of the introduction to *Nehar Pishon*, in which Solomon ben Mazal Tov mentions among Aboab's works “his commentary on the commentary of ... Rashi z”l [his memory for blessing] on the Torah and on the commentary of ... Ramban z”l on the Torah”. The printed work reveals that it is as much a discussion of Rashi as of Ramban; it is probable therefore that the above statement does not refer to two separate works but to one.

Particularly important for our purposes are Aboab's sermons⁴³. To be sure, the evidence of his preaching is less than ideal. Most of the material preserved in the book published as *Nehar Pishon* is a summary, apparently written by the preacher's son from his father's notes and from notes taken by disciples, and not a full transcript of anything that was said⁴⁴. Unlike the sermons of Aboab's younger contemporary Joseph Garçon⁴⁵, these sermons are not identified by date or place of delivery, only by the Torah lesson, life cycle, or holiday occasion. Nevertheless, we get from these texts clear evidence that Aboab took preaching as a serious responsibility, reflecting on the techniques and conventions of the art, occasionally preaching twice on the same Sabbath (at morning and afternoon services), delivering wedding sermons and eulogies as well as the expected sermons for the Sabbaths immediately preceding Passover and the Day of Atonement⁴⁶.

Some of these sermons seem to be intended for the broadest kind of audience. Consider the following passage from a manuscript sermon on the lesson *Be-Shallah*:

There are many obstacles that hinder a person from studying God's Torah, as is known, but I will subsume them under two categories. The first is the magnitude and the extent of Torah. People say, "How long will it take me to read every verse in the 24 books [of the Bible], and the entire Mishnah, and the entire Talmud, totaling 60 tractates?" This consideration keeps people from studying. God therefore said to Israel that Jews should always study Torah, for its reward is sustained and established by God even for one who reads only a single book. That is why the Sages said, "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task" [Avot 2,16], meaning, even if you have read only a little, I will give you your reward, unlike laborers who are not paid until they finish the job⁴⁷.

Rather than the conventional complaint about the decline in the standards of Torah study, here we find a rabbinical scholar reaching out to the simple Jew, showing empathy for the difficulties and frustrations of Torah study, and encouraging those

⁴³ The collection of Aboab's sermons called *Nehar Pishon* (derived from Gen. 2,10-11) was first published in Istanbul, 1538 and then in Zolkiew, 1806 (subsequent references, unless otherwise indicated, are to the latter edition). In both of these editions, the sermons are arranged in what seems to be a totally random order. By contrast, in London MS Or. 10701, they are arranged in the order of the Torah lessons, with the sermon on Genesis 2:10-11, which provides the title for the collection, coming first. This manuscript contains nothing that is not in the printed edition, and lacks some material that is in the printed edition (see below, n. 68); furthermore, the manuscript contains some passages with obvious textual errors. It is not easy to imagine why a printer using a manuscript with sermons in an intelligible order would have jumbled the order to produce what we have in print. The relationship between the MS and the *editio princeps* still needs clarification. Oxford Bodleian MS 952, by contrast, contains important homiletical material that is not in the printed edition.

⁴⁴ On the sermons as copied by Aboab's disciples, see Jacob b. Isaac Aboab's statement on the final page of the Zolkiew edition; cf. M. Pachter, *Sifrut ha-Derush* p. 15. There are, however, internal indications that the apocopation was the work of the preacher himself (e.g. I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, pp. 27c, 33a).

⁴⁵ See the articles by Benayahu and Hacker cited above (notes 30 and 32), and M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 199-216.

⁴⁶ For sensitivity to homiletical art, see I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, 5b [reshut] 28a, 38d; London MS fol. 102b; I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 13b [reasons for silence]; cf. M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 63-64. Preaching twice on the same Sabbath: idem, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 31. Some indications of having addressed an actual audience remain in the written text: I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, pp. 23c, 23d, 38d, 40d.

⁴⁷ Oxford Bodleian MS 952, f. 7b.

who will never be scholars to set reasonable goals and find satisfaction in what they are able to achieve.

Or the following passage, in which Aboab is discussing the actions of Jacob's sons following the rape of Dinah:

It is human nature that when people quarrel, whether over words or deeds, and come for reconciliation between themselves, if they are truly sincere, they will say, "Even though this and that occurred between us, and such and such happened, it makes no difference." If the reconciliation is insincere, they say, "Never mention again what happened," while the aggrieved party holds on to his anger and bides his time until an opportunity comes for revenge. So it was with the sons of Jacob. They calculated to themselves how it would be possible to take vengeance against Shechem. When Shechem and his father Hamor came to ask for Dinah, they said, "Even though you have done this shameful thing to our sister, we will overlook this insult and give her to you in marriage, provided that you circumcise every male." That is why they believed them. And this is the meaning of the verse, *The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor with guile* (Genesis 34,13). What was the guile? That they said, *that he defiled their sister Dinah* (ibid.) [implying sincere reconciliation], and subsequently killed them⁴⁸.

Here we have an insight of some psychological depth, expressed in a form that any listener can understand and identify with, used to explain a problematic verse. As in the previous passage, it is a preaching style intended to endear the preacher with a popular audience.

On the other hand, some of the printed sermons seem to have been addressed to rather sophisticated and learned audiences. The level of philosophical material in some of these sermons can be quite high. Elsewhere I have published a passage in which Aboab cites Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which Aquinas identifies a problem in Ibn Rushd's commentary⁴⁹. According to Steinschneider, this work by Thomas was translated into Hebrew by Abraham Nahmias, apparently in 1490 in the city of Ocaña⁵⁰. If so, it appears that Aboab, who lived not far from Ocaña in Guadalajara, acquired a manuscript of the translation, studied at least part of it, and incorporated a section of it into his sermon between the completion of the translation in 1490 and his death in 1493. The entire passage seems more characteristic of a lecture at the University of Paris than the conclusion of a sermon by a Spanish Talmudist, a rather amazing clue to the expectations of at least one kind of Jewish audience and the intellectual breadth of an important rabbi.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem* (from a different sermon). See I. Abravanel, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. I, p. 348, question 6, on the problem in Gen. 34,13 and the inadequacy of the conventional interpretations. Like Aboab (and like A. Saba, *Tseror ha-Mor*, Genesis, p. 48b), Abravanel interprets the last phrase of the verse not as the Torah's explanation of the reason for the *guile*, but as the content of what they spoke; his understanding of the "guile" is different from Aboab's (p. 352b-53a).

⁴⁹ *Nehar Pishon*, p. 32d, cited in M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 79-80. For the substance of this passage, see T. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, vol. II, p. 556, on *Metaphysics* 10:1034b-1035a, paragraph 624. Cf. A. Bibago's discussion in a sermon from about the same time of the dispute between Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd on the origin of forms, which he relates to a dispute in the aggadic (rabbinic lore) literature over the creation of the angels: A. Bibago, *Zeh Yenahamennu*, p. 6d.

⁵⁰ M. Steinschneider, *Die hebraeischen Uebersetzungen*, p. 485.

More significant than the mere citation of these authors is the way they are used. Occasionally, Aboab will refer to an extreme philosophical idea that cannot be accepted. He argues against the “philosophizers” (perhaps referring to Gersonides) who deny God’s knowledge of particulars⁵¹, and refers with disdain to *the destroyers of our religion who teach that after death the soul will be unified with the Active Intellect or with God*⁵². For the most part, however, Aristotle and other philosophers are cited by Aboab (and the other contemporary Spanish preachers whose works we know) not in order to refute them, or to contrast their teachings with those of Torah. On the contrary, they are usually cited as established truths, self-evident principles, universally accepted doctrines, that can be used as building blocks for subsequent assertions⁵³.

Where there is an apparent contradiction between the Torah and philosophical truth, Aboab often sets out to resolve it.

It is said that this Torah lesson about the creation of the world is contradicted by principles derived from reason and logical demonstration; therefore we will speak at greater length in order to show that the subject of the *parashah* agrees with the intellect and science⁵⁴.

He realizes that material in the Torah that appears to contradict reason—for example the use of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language about God—may make it more difficult for thinking Jews to believe, and that these problems must be addressed and resolved in philosophical terms⁵⁵.

Also noteworthy is his use of philosophical tools, particularly drawn from philology and logic, to solve exegetical problems. For example, noting the redundancy of an extra verb “to be” at the end of Leviticus 27,10 Aboab begins,

To resolve this puzzle, you should know that there are two terms in the language of the Christians that the translators did not know how to render properly until recently. The first is in their language *ente* and in ours it is *nimtsa*; the second in their language is *essentia* and in ours *heyot*. In addition, you should know that things that exist (*nimtsa'im*) can exist in reality or in the imagination⁵⁶.

⁵¹ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 17a.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 23b: such unification would submerge the individual identity of the soul.

⁵³ For examples, see M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 80-82.

⁵⁴ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 5a. Cf. Abraham Bibago's sermon on creation, published as *Zeh Yenahammenu* (above, n. 49). After arguing that it is permissible to discuss the matter in public (p. 2c), he launches a strong attack against the “Averroist” double-truth position, which he identifies with “Christian scholars”: “They state the arguments against (creation *ex nihilo*) and resolve the problem by saying that they are true, but in the way of nature; however, faith is above nature. This is foolishness, for we cannot say ‘Two is half of four in nature, but above nature two is more than four’. Faith does not pertain to matters that are beyond any doubt impossible” (p. 4b). Also, the passage from Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov cited in M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 80-81.

⁵⁵ “There are things in the Torah that may lead a man to have doubts about the existence of God, heaven forbid” (I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 38d).

⁵⁶ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 2d. On Aquinas's *De Ente et Essentia*, see J. Bobik, *Aquinas On Being and Essence*. This passage is extraordinary in reflecting from the pulpit on problems of philosophical translation from Latin into Hebrew. Cf. Steinschneider, *Die hebraeischen Uebersetzungen*, pp. 484-485 for the terminology reflected here (“ha-heyot u-vi-leshonam essentia (...) ha-nimtsa u-vi-leshonam ens”). For an alternative (Italian) tradition, in which *metsi'ut* is used as a translation for *essentia*, see G. Sermoneta, *Un Glossario fi losofi co ebraico-italiano del XIII secolo*, pp. 256-257. For

This distinction enables the preacher to explain both the strange wording of the verse and a statement of Maimonides about it.

Philosophy influences not just the content but also the modes of thought and forms of argumentation in some of Aboab's sermons. Like other contemporary preachers, he will resort to the use of syllogisms to set forth his argument, a homiletical technique about which Hayyim ibn Musa had complained decades earlier⁵⁷. Many Jews apparently found this mode of thinking that many found convincing, and that could be readily followed in an oral discourse. Clearly a new manner of Jewish preaching, it reveals the influence of Aristotle's works on logic that had recently been translated into Hebrew. Like other Jewish preachers of his age, Aboab also used in his sermons the form of the "disputed question," one of the characteristic modes of medieval scholastic discourse, a striking innovation in Jewish homiletics. Aboab employs the disputed question form in discussing repentance, a particularly problematic doctrine in the generation of the expulsion, investigating in one sermon *whether repentance is efficacious* and in another *whether repentance is a root of the Torah*⁵⁸. This scholastic form of argumentation also seems to have had a genuine appeal for many Jewish listeners, and Aboab shows how it was accommodated naturally into Spanish Jewish preaching.

Aboab was not averse to discussing Kabbalistic material in his sermons. The limited evidence for the use of Zoharic quotations and Kabbalistic doctrines in public preaching at this time has led some scholars to conclude that with rare exceptions Kabbalah was not incorporated into sermons before the late sixteenth century⁵⁹. Aboab provides another example indicating that this generalization may reflect the paucity of the sources rather than the realities of pulpit discourse. Thus he cites the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Genesis 4,12 (Cain's punishment) and on Leviticus 4,22 (the sin of the *nasi*), summarizes Kabbalistic interpretations of Genesis 32,26 (the wounding of Jacob) and Numbers 12:3 (Moses' humility), presents a Kabbalistic understanding of the sefirotic significance of repentance and a Kabbalistic explanation of why the new month is not mentioned on Rosh Hashanah⁶⁰. There is no indication that the discussion of such material from the pulpit is in any way daring. It is rather a way of enriching the preacher's presentation.

a broader discussion of Christian influences, see D. J. Lasker, *The Impact of Christianity on Late Iberian Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 175-190, and A. Ackerman, *Jewish Philosophy and the Jewish-Christian Philosophical Dialogue*, pp. 371-390. Cf. also the example of Aboab's use of technical logic, citing Aristotle and Ibn Rushd, in a eulogy, cited in M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 81-82.

⁵⁷ For examples of syllogisms in the sermons of Aboab and contemporaries, see *ibidem*, pp. 83-84; for ibn Musa's complaint, see the passage cited in M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 386.

⁵⁸ On the form of the disputed question, see M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 84-86, with references to Aboab in p. 85, and an example pp. 311-317.

⁵⁹ See references, *idem*, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, p. 299, n. 17. Israel Bettan had already noted Kabbalistic references in Arama: I. Bettan, *Studies In Jewish Preaching*, pp. 184-185 n. 145.

⁶⁰ Oxford Bodleian MS 952 f. 20b, an f. 16b (see M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 328, 315); I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, pp. 41d, 49b-c; Oxford MS. f. 17b (M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, p. 318), 21a (*ibidem*, p. 329). To be sure, mere citations from the Zohar do not in themselves make the case for the dissemination of Kabbalah in sermons, as the Zohar was sometimes quoted as just another work of midrash. This cannot be said, however, about a passage such as the final passage cited above: "The answer to this, according to the masters of true doctrine (*hakhmei ha-emet*), is that Rosh Hashanah is the *sefirah Malkhut*, and on it we pray that that *sefirah* will be complete, for then it sits in judgment. That is why we do not mention the new month on Rosh Hashanah, for the new month teaches about the effluence that *Malkhut* receives from the *sefirot* above it, and then we do not know what will be" (Oxford MS, fol. 21a). Aboab also quotes from the Kabbalist Joseph Gikatila, *Sha'arei Orah* (M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 320, 330).

Despite the rather theoretical nature of the material cited thus far, Aboab was by no means oblivious to problems of social import. His awareness of tensions between Christians and Jews is reflected in several passages. *The Gentiles vilify us and say, "You have no share in the world to come"* a remark that appears to cause special hurt⁶¹. They want us baptized⁶². Predictably, Aboab found little to praise in the Christian religion, conceding that they shared with Jews the goal of worshipping the true God, but insisting that *they err in the means and paths they take, making light darkness and darkness light*⁶³. At the same time, Jews should be careful to avoid behavior that might engender Christian contempt for Judaism.

Since we live among the Gentiles, we must be careful in speaking with them that your "Yes" means yes and our "No", no, careful not to trick them or to do them any injustice or wrong, for this is how our Torah and our God are forgotten in their speech⁶⁴.

He was not afraid to speak out about social justice among Jews. Discussing the problem of loans to the poor in the context of the Biblical legislation (Deut. 15,7-9), he makes a specific contemporary application:

This problem pertaining to loans has arisen many times, especially where I live. Because the Torah forbids the taking of interest when a loan is given to a Jew, no one wants to lend to him. Since the impoverished Jew cannot get an interest-bearing loan as a Gentile can, he cannot find the money he needs, and he dies of hunger. Thus the commandment turns into a transgression. I am tempted to say that it should be considered a greater sin for someone to refuse to make the loan than it is for someone to make the loan and take interest, for in the first case there is danger and in the second there is not (...) I have dwelt at length on this because I see wretched Jews crying out and not being answered, because of our sins, in this time of dearth⁶⁵.

This is a rather extraordinary passage. Jewish ethical and homiletical literature is filled with denunciations by moralists of businessmen who fail to observe properly the prohibitions against loans on interest; rabbis frequently emphasize the seriousness of these laws and urge that Jews consult with competent authorities who will keep them from improper loans⁶⁶. Rarely do we find a leading rabbinic figure saying, in effect, that the transgressions entailed in taking interest are less serious than depriving the poor of what they need to survive. While some Jewish lenders might conceivably have endorsed this position allowing them to take interest, in violation of a Torah commandment, it is extremely unlikely that the potential profit from small,

⁶¹ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 45d.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 34c. Elsewhere, Aboab refers to Christians as "our enemies", or "those who hate us": p. 31b-c.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 8b.

⁶⁴ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 55a. The phrase *nishkah toratenu ve-elokenu be-fihem* at the end is somewhat strange; it seems to suggest the idea of *hillul ha-Shem*: that unethical behavior on the part of Jews will discredit the Torah and the reputation of God as worshipped by Jews in the minds of Christians.

⁶⁵ Oxford MS, f. 16a; M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 313-14. For possible datings of the reference to "this time of death", see *ibidem*, p. 295, n. 9.

⁶⁶ See examples in M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 101, 138-39.

risky loans to the poor would have generated support for Aboab's position from a powerful wealthy class of Jews. This statement rather bespeaks a leader of deep social consciousness and the courage to resist possible criticism from other rabbis.

In short, the works of Aboab, and especially his sermons, provide evidence of a rabbi who could draw on all the intellectual resources of contemporary Jewish culture—expertise in Jewish law, biblical study, philosophy, Kabbalah, and social consciousness—and bring them together in communicating with his people. But what about the great historical issues of the day? Here we are likely to be disappointed. As is characteristic of the genre, what we find is general and allusive rather than concrete and specific. The assertion that the present generation, “because of our sins”, cannot see God's providence as the generation of Moses did⁶⁷ may well fit the dark months of 1492, but it is too commonplace a sentiment to have historical value.

A parable cited from Midrash on Psalms states, “A father and son were walking on a road. The son, tired and weak, asked the father if they were far from the city [their destination] or near it. The father said, ‘Remember this sign: when you see a cemetery, that will indicate that we are near the city...’. Thus when we see calamities draw near, it is a sign of the coming of the Messiah.

This has been cited by historians as an example of an immediate response to the expulsion, and indeed it may be. But the messianic dimension is almost entirely absent in these sermons. If the passage is indeed authentic and not a later interpolation, it may be nothing more a topos of response to sorrow⁶⁸.

There are also references to martyrdom. In one sermon, Aboab says:

The soul that does not cleave to its body does not feel it when they separate it from that body, for it is cleaving to God. That is why man has been compared to an upside-down tree with its roots above. One should therefore cleave to God, cleave to one's true root, and then he will not feel it even when they take his life⁶⁹.

This appears to express the tradition that the martyr feels no pain despite the tortures of execution, a tradition known in this generation from the somewhat later “Megillat Amraphel”⁷⁰. Yet in a different passage the preacher seems to be clarifying his position and repudiating the radical claim:

⁶⁷ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 17a.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 9a; cf. M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 84, with references in n. 9. The context is the response by Cain to God's pronouncement of his punishment; on the motif of Cain in this generation, see *ibidem*, p. 202 and n. 5. The passage containing the parable is not in the London MS of Aboab's *Nehar Pishon*. If the manuscript is primary, then those who brought the sermons to press might have added it as a response to the expulsion. It is also possible that the manuscript was written later and the passage removed because the expulsion did not lead to the messianic advent as anticipated.

⁶⁹ I. Aboab, *Nehar Pishon*, p. 23c. The comparison of the human being with the tree, transforming the rhetorical question of Deut. 20:19 into a proposition (cf. M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 371, n. 25), is superimposed on the Kabbalistic motive of the inverted tree as a symbol of the sefirotic realm and therefore related to the supernal *anthropos*. Cf. the source cited by M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ G. Scholem, *Hagiot Hadashot*, p. 153; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 430–431. The idea that the martyr feels no pain is attributed to Meir of Rothenburg by his disciple in *Sefer Tashbetz*; see G. Scholem, *Hagiot Hadashot*, pp. 441–442, and D. Tamar, *Le-Ma'amaro shel MaHaRaM*, 33 (1958), pp. 376–377 and 34 (1959), p. 397; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews*, vol. II, p. 508, n. 4 notes

This is like someone who accepts death as a martyr. There is no doubt that he will feel distress at the time he is being put to death, for the body is affected by it. But insofar as he imagines that by this death he attains true communion [with God], his mind will rejoice⁷¹.

Without information about the date or circumstances of delivery, it is impossible to be certain what resonance these passages about martyrdom would have had among the listeners who heard them. They indicate, however, that the experience of the martyr was being addressed as an actual issue at a time when Jews could witness the burning of those relaxed into the arms of the secular powers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Was the vision of a man like Isaac Aboab inadequate to the great historic challenges of his age? His extant writings provide little clear evidence of a profound mind or a charismatic personality⁷². He did not have the stature of Samuel ibn Nagrela or Moses Maimonides, who could both dominate their specific environment and produce work of enduring value. These writings do, however, suggest a leader of considerable talent, rooted in Spain yet capable of leaving it as an old man and preparing the groundwork for accommodation elsewhere⁷³; expert in the traditional Talmudic literature but fascinated by philosophy and open to the teachings of Kabbalah; capable of communicating to Jews who lacked more than a rudimentary Jewish education and to the most sophisticated intellectuals; passionate about both the nuances of halakhic interpretation and the large issues of social responsibility. How many others, who are little more than names to us or whose names we do not even know, were leaders of similar caliber gracing the Spanish Jewish communities during their final decades? That is a question to which historians may never be able to give a fully adequate response.

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the Christian analogues of this doctrine; cf. also R. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 438, 473, and A. Drage, J. Tabor, *A Noble Death*, p. 138.

⁷¹ Oxford MS. f. 20a; M. Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, p. 325.

⁷² Note, however, the legendary account of the impression he made on the king of Portugal, reported by R. Joseph b. Moses Trani, *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, part 2, no. 16; and cf. M. Joseph Bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael*, vol. II, pp. 793-794.

⁷³ Our knowledge of Aboab's efforts to negotiate entry for Jewish refugees into Portugal is based on Immanuel Aboab's account of his family's traditions in his *Nomologia*; the passage is quoted by M. Kayserling, *Geschichte der Juden in Portugal*, pp. 108-109; cf. M. Orfali, *Ba-Ma'avaq al Erkah shel Torah*, p. 262. There does not seem to be more contemporary corroboration for this. Undoubtedly, the eulogy of his disciple Abraham Zacuto would have clarified matters.

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