

BETWEEN AN ORAL SERMON AND A WRITTEN COMMENTARY:
A CONSIDERATION OF RABBI JOSEPH BEN SHOSHAN'S POLEMIC
IN HIS *AVOT* COMMENTARY¹

*ENTRE SERMÓN ORAL Y COMENTARIO ESCRITO: UNA REFLEXIÓN
SOBRE LA POLÉMICA DEL RABINO JOSEPH BEN SHOSHAN
EN SU COMENTARIO SOBRE EL AVOT*

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Abstract: Rabbi Joseph ben Shoshan lived in fourteenth-century Toledo. His Hebrew commentary to tractate *Avot* has rarely been studied, but there is solid evidence for it stemming, at least in part, from oral sermons. This paper identifies the evidence, analyzes it, and focuses specifically on several of his polemics with the “would-be philosophers”. This term refers to the antinomian neo-Platonists, whose stance threatened not only the leadership and authority of the Jewish community, but its very existence. The article employs a multi-disciplinary interpretation of the text –linguistic, literary and ideological– situating it in its historical context.

Keywords: Hebrew commentary; Kabbalah; Maimonides; polemics; sermons; Joseph Ben Shoshan.

Resumen: El rabino Yosef ben Shoshan vivió en Toledo en el siglo XIV. Su comentario en hebreo sobre el tratado *Avot* apenas ha sido estudiado. Sin embargo, existen evidencias sólidas que apuntan a su derivación, al menos parcial, de sermones orales. Este artículo identifica y analiza dichas evidencias, centrándose, sobre todo, en su polémica con los “llamados filósofos”. Este término alude a los neoplatonistas antinomianos, cuya postura no solo amenazaba el liderazgo y la autoridad de la comunidad judía, sino su propia supervivencia. El presente trabajo se basa en una lectura multidisciplinaria del texto –lingüística, literaria e ideológica–, insertándolo en su contexto histórico.

Palabras clave: comentario hebreo; cábala; Maimónides; polémica; sermones; Yosef ben Shoshan.

SUMMARY

1. Introduction.– 2. Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's works.– 3. *Avot* commentaries as a distinct literary phenomenon.– 4. Between preacher and commentator.– 5. The oral element in Ben Shoshan's *Avot* commentary.– 6. Identifying the “philosophizers”.– 7. Conclusion.– 8. Bibliography.

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Abbreviations used: IMHM = Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan (ca. 1310-ca. 1380) was a prominent scholar from Toledo whose work has hardly been researched². Michael Shmidman was the only one to discuss him in his doctoral dissertation and in two subsequent articles derived from it, in which he treated specific elements in Ben Shoshan's *Commentary on Avot*³. Shmidman mostly discussed the ideological aspects of Ben Shoshan's polemic against Maimonides and against the philosophizers (*mitpalsefim*) of his time⁴. But while this is indeed a typical characteristic of the commentary, there are many other aspects that need to be discussed in order to fully appreciate it and properly integrate it into the array of fourteenth and fifteenth century Spanish commentaries⁵.

In his dissertation, Shmidman collected the few available extant remnants concerning Ben Shoshan's biography⁶. Part of the difficulty in reconstructing his life stems from the simple lack of information, but it is also difficult because another figure bearing the same name, Don Joseph Ben Shoshan, lived in Toledo some 150 years prior to the one discussed in this article, overshadowing him⁷. It is noteworthy that our Ben Shoshan was a Kabbalist and included some Kabbalistic comments in his *Avot* commentary⁸.

The *Avot* commentary contains certain indications that, at least in part, it was based upon oral sermons. This is particularly so regarding his polemic with the "philosophizers". If my hypothesis is correct, by this term he referred to a circle of neo-Platonic and antinomian scholars who threatened not only the community's leaders and their authority, but the very existence of the community itself. This was a slippery

² A. Hershman, *Rabbi Yizhak Bar Sheshet*, pp. 58-59, where he quoted Ribash's responsum §157, p. 128, where he describes Don Joseph ibn Shoshan as a "talmudist, philosopher, Kabbalist and a great pietist", pp. 158-159.

³ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*; idem, *On Maimonides' 'Conversion' to Kabbalah*; idem, *Radical Theology*.

⁴ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, pp. 19-122. And see below regarding the identity of the "philosophizers".

⁵ For example: its sources and the way they are used; reflection of his biography in the *Commentary*; Ben Shoshan's literary taste; the *Commentary's* rhetoric and its meaning; the literary structure.

⁶ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, pp. 11-18.

⁷ S. Finn, *Knesset Israel*, p. 510, distinguished well between the two, allocating an entry to each in his book. This was later discussed by Schloessinger, *Schoshan*; Hachohen, *Otzar Hagedolim*, pp. 309-310 (the former) and 310 (the latter). On the earlier Joseph Ben Shoshan, see also S.D. Luzzatto, *Almanzi, Avnei Zikaron*, p. 69; Brody, *Poems and New Letters*, pp. 8-9; S.T. Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tob*, vols. I-II, p. 215; vol. III, p. 225, n. 25; J. Yahalom, N. Katsumata (eds.), *Judah Alharizi, Tahkemoni*, p. 548, poem 56; p. 592, poem 168. The first Joseph Ben Shoshan built a spectacular synagogue in Toledo's Jewish quarter which, after the 1391 pogroms, was converted to a church. It is still standing today under the name of Santa Maria La Blanca. A literary reflection of that event is found in a lamentation published by C. Roth, *A Hebrew Elegy*, esp. p. 131, section 2; 142, l. 38. As great a scholar as the late Shmuel Verses (1915-2010) did not refer to Ben Shoshan's commentary. See Verses, *Studies* (doctoral dissertation). For decades, only the first, introductory chapter was available to readers. A copy of Verses' dissertation is found in the National Library and in the Mt. Scopus Library in Jerusalem. After his death, his nachlass was given to the National Library, including one full version of the dissertation. There are many differences between the first chapter and the full dissertation. A comparative consideration reveals what Verses omitted from this chapter, which seems to be a second, amended version, especially in light of the pencil deletion marks on the dissertation. However, the single chapter includes several clarifications that are missing from the dissertation. Substantial differences also exist in the table of contents of the dissertation (pp. 1-4) vs. that of the single chapter (pp. 2-3).

⁸ For example, p. 3 (in his father's name), p. 79.

slope, as the antinomian approach was very appealing to anyone who wished to decry observance of the commandments, on the one hand, and those who believed they had achieved a notion of God through intellectual experience, on the other hand. When certain members of the community, particularly some of the more educated ones, openly ceased observing the commandments, this posed a threat to medieval Jewish society, which was by definition a voluntary one. By behaving thus, they undermined and practically ruined the authority of the rabbinic leadership.

This article is based upon an interdisciplinary reading –linguistic, literal and ideological– setting the text in its historical context.

2. RABBI JOSEPH BEN SHOSHAN'S WORKS

Three decades ago, Kasher and Blecherowitz published Ben Shoshan's *Avot* commentary⁹ basing their work upon a single manuscript¹⁰. However, that work survived in three additional manuscripts, copied in Spain and in its cultural milieu during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a fact implying that it was well known in the area and was in demand even after the expulsion from Spain¹¹. Moreover, a summary of it was preserved in an additional manuscript¹². This finding suggests how well the commentary was received, so much so that whoever summarized it thought it would be valuable to a less educated public than the original target audience; hence he simplified and summarized it according to his taste and needs. To the best of my knowledge, this summary was never been studied.

In the *Avot* commentary, Ben Shoshan mentions another of his works, *Shushan Edut*¹³, a polemic against the Aristotelian approach to eternity *a parte ante*¹⁴. This work remains to be discovered. There is also a commentary for *Song of Songs* attributed to him¹⁵.

⁹ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*.

¹⁰ London - British Library, Add. 26922, copied in Salonika in 1534; in the IMHM of the National Library in Jerusalem, F 5453, below: S.

¹¹ The manuscripts, in chronological order, are: (1) Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, Heb 455, copied in Ocaña in 1488, IMHM mark F 5072 (below: A). (2) Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, Heb 769/17, copied in Tunis in 1496 by a Spanish exile, IMHM mark F 24845 (below: T). (3) Moscow Russian State Library Ms. Gūnzburg 943, IMHM mark F 48286, ca. fifteenth to sixteenth centuries (below: M). Only after a systematic review will it be possible to clearly determine the exact relations among these, and whether or not they are close copies made from the same original manuscript, reflecting the literary taste of a specific group, or whether there are significant differences indicating different sources (perhaps a draft and a final version?) or widespread dissemination thereof. These important questions are beyond the scope of this article.

¹² Oxford-Bodleian Library Ms. Mich. 265, IMHM mark F 18373, dated 16th century.

¹³ This phrase is a *hapax legomenon*, appearing only in Ps 60: 1. In the King James Version (1769) the form is *Shushaneduth*. In KJV from 1611 it is given as *Shushan-Eduth*, as it is in Webster's Bible and in the Jewish Publication Society Bible.

¹⁴ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*, p. 60.

¹⁵ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, pp. 14-15, suggests that the attribution is incorrect, stemming from the initials "מ"ש. There is indeed a commentary to Song of Songs attributed to Joseph Ben Shoshan: New York –Jewish Theological Seminary– Lutzki 1058, IMHM mark F 24260. According to the catalogue entry there, this manuscript is dated to the 16th century in cursive Spanish script. It is written in Hebrew and contains 12 leaves (1a-12b). One cannot determine which of the two Joseph Ben Shoshans is the author or whether it is perhaps by a third person of the same name. I have found at least two references that suggest an approach similar to that of "our" Joseph Ben Shoshan, the *Avot* commentator: (a) on the words *avert your eyes from me* (Cant 6:5) he wrote that "The great ones, who

3. AVOT COMMENTARIES AS A DISTINCT LITERARY PHENOMENON

Commentaries to the *Avot* tractate and to the extended version, *Pirkei Avot*, have been written since the thirteenth century, constituting a popular literary genre. At times these served not only as commentary but also as polemic, as I have shown elsewhere¹⁶. Due to its educational and hortatorical nature¹⁷, many of the *Avot* commentaries were essentially popular ethical literature¹⁸. Indeed, Joseph Dan, who has dealt extensively with medieval Jewish ethical literature, considers the *Avot* commentaries as one of the most common expressions of this genre¹⁹. There is ample evidence of weakness in and disrespect towards observance of the commandment in fourteenth century Spain, as a result of the dissemination of simplified and abbreviated versions of many of the major Jewish literary compositions of the twelfth (i.e., Maimonides 1138-1204) and thirteenth centuries, in order to make them more available and accessible to the Jewish masses²⁰.

As I have shown in the past, *Avot* commentaries generally stemmed from oral sermons that were later recorded in writing. This was a well-recognized phenomenon in Spain from the fourteenth century onward. In some commentaries it is fairly easy to identify their oral origin, mostly due to linguistic and stylistic indications²¹. In this article I wish to examine a polemical commentary in order to reveal and identify its oral origins. This finding is significant for understanding the social processes in the Jewish society of Toledo and its surroundings during the second half of the fourteenth century.

4. BETWEEN THE PREACHER AND THE COMMENTATOR

As a general rule, every preacher-commentator operates on a continuum, one pole being the text he is interpreting, the other being the time and place where

are compared with the eyes, are those secretly opposed (!) to God's Torah, because they pretend to be righteous but disobey God's commandments, and they are the reason the exile continues (7b); (b) On the words your eyes are pools in Heshbon (7:5) he writes, "meaning, the great ones are like the pool that swallows everything, in the same way as robbers and thieves. In Heshbon —meaning they make themselves seem good and important, Heshbon meaning importance (9b)". I intend to research this commentary in the near future. This manuscript merits a comparison with the *Torat Hesed* by Rabbi Joseph Yabetz, which includes numerous quotes from Rabbi Joseph Shoshan's *Song of Songs Commentary*, so as to determine the author's identity.

¹⁶ N. Ilan, *Canonization*.

¹⁷ M. Lerner, *Tractate Avot*.

¹⁸ See N. Ilan, *Genre* (in progress).

¹⁹ J. Dan, *Ethical Literature*, col. 625, section (9). Dan did not characterize or analyze the *Avot* commentaries. Zeev Gries discussed this enormous task in his article, "Rabbi Yisrael of Koznitz". In Appendix 1: "To the History of *Avot* Tractate Commentaries" (pp. 163-164), Gries offered several important comments that assist in integrating Ben Shoshan correctly into the commentary continuum. On p. 163 he states that most commentators did not deal with the comparison of the various versions or the determination of an authentic one. Ben Shoshan did so in ten different places (pp. 9, 15, 20, 55, 68, 72, 74, 94, 128, 133), being manifestly critical. His erudite language and phrasing indicate that his work was directed at an educated audience.

²⁰ C. Horowitz, *Jewish Sermon*, pp. 13, 16, 17; J.D. Galinsky, *On Popular Halakhic Literature*.

²¹ N. Ilan, *Dissertation*, esp. p. 52, n. 48; pp. 80-85; idem, *Shabbat Kallah Sermon*.

he works as a preacher, as well as the nature of his community²². Between those two poles there is an inevitable, irresolvable tension. We often find aspects of both commentary and preaching in the same work, and only the significance of each of them determines its nature. When the work's nature is clear, although it may occasionally deviate from it, it is only natural to ask what caused the author to depart from his usual way. It would seem likely that most deviations are from commentary to preaching and not vice versa. The reason for this is that the preacher has no real interest in or intention of interpreting the sacred text before him; the text is merely the platform upon which he constructs his theme, and he has no real commitment or obligation to the literal meaning of the verse or text. The commentator, by contrast, may in a moment of enthusiasm, distress, or other emotional reaction, leave aside his exegetical task and allow his heart to be heard; elements in his immediate environment or in his spiritual and intellectual world may lead him to act like a preacher for a certain time. These deviations are often an expression of distress: either that of the commentator-preacher, of his public/congregation, or both. In such instances, the text that was originally being interpreted and explained has become a means of establishing an independent argument, and is used as support, or even as a mere literary ornament. The focus shifts from the text to a specific phenomenon or event in the preacher's and community's lives. I believe this is the case with Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's *Avot Commentary*.

The *Avot* commentaries are an example of a wider phenomenon –the development of the oral sermon, followed by the written sermon, in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spain²³. Dan has shown that this literary and social phenomenon began developing because of a tendency to turn inwards, relying on traditional Jewish resources, unlike the trend within Muslim society, which borrowed from external philosophical resources from the Hellenistic tradition. At this time educated elites who shared an interest in these ideas formed themselves into various groups and conducted internal debates and polemics²⁴.

5. THE ORAL ELEMENT IN BEN SHOSHAN'S *AVOT* COMMENTARY

The recording of oral sermons in writing was an attempt to grant them eternity, a declaration that they have a value beyond the specific occasion on which they were initially delivered. No wonder, therefore, that the text undergoes some major changes when transformed from an oral sermon to a written text²⁵.

In two instances in Ben Shoshan's *Commentary* he clearly stated that he writes from memory, without having the source in front of him. His exact phrases were: *and I do not remember the phrasing*²⁶ and *if these are not the exact words, this*

²² The phenomenon of wandering preachers developed later, especially in Eastern Europe –see M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 47; idem, *Attempts to Control the Pulpit*, p. 100. In this context, Gries' criticism of Saperstein's book is important, as Saperstein did not attribute enough importance, and hence did not discuss thoroughly, the phenomenon of the Sabbatian preachers and wandering pietists; see Z. Gries, *Between History and Literature*, esp. pp. 117-119.

²³ C. Horowitz, *Jewish Sermon*, pp. 22-35. On Kabbalistic elements in sermons, see *ibidem*, p. 30, n. 57.

²⁴ J. Dan, *Introduction*, pp. 232, 236-239; idem, *Background*, pp. 243, 260, 263-264; idem, *Literature*, pp. 35, 40.

²⁵ M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 79-89. Important insights may be found in Z. Gries, *Homiletical Literature*. Cf. M. Shmidman, *Shem Tob*, esp. p. 282, n. 34.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

*surely is the main idea*²⁷. These phrases are typical oral expressions, which are at times spontaneous or rushed. They are not suitable to written expression, which allows for a second look and exact quotation.

In a different instance, Ben Shoshan deviates significantly from his path of commentary. When discussing the *Mishnah*, *Everything is anticipated, and permission (i.e., free will) is granted, and the world is judged with goodness, and all is judged by the majority of (a person's) deeds* (3.20)²⁸, he engages in an open, profound polemic with Maimonides, which continues for eighteen pages²⁹. This polemic is dual-faceted: Ben Shoshan is strongly criticizing Maimonides and some of his opinions (regarding the subjects of creation, free choice, Divine providence, reward and punishment), and at the same time explains that his deep disagreement stems from the misuse of Maimonides' opinions by the "philosophizers" of his own day. More than a century separated between Maimonides' death (1204) and Ben Shoshan's birth (ca. 1310), during which Maimonides' canonical status as a halakhic authority had become firmly established. Even those who disagreed with him could not ignore him. Ben Shoshan's main argument is that even if Maimonides was a decent faithful man, the fourteenth-century "philosophizers" who learned from his work corrupted it. Therefore Maimonides bears at least some vicarious liability, to use current legal terms.

After briefly explaining the expression "by the deed"³⁰, Ben Shoshan apologized for criticizing Maimonides. Due to the importance of this apology, I will quote it in full and analyze it³¹.

(1) Said Rabbi Joseph ibn Shoshan: I said *I will watch my ways from sinning with my tongue* (Ps 39:2) even to write in a book with ink, for *who am I and what is my life* (1 Sam 18:18) to talk about a matter of which the master of spiritual assignment, a river flowing wisdom (Prov 18:4), R. Moses Ben Maimon, of blessed memory, spoke. And even to thank and praise, and all the more so to argue the way I perceive matters, how do I dare and jump to speak my words. And Heaven forbid that I argue, but I would only fall flat and say: Would that I could kiss the floor around his feet and say to him, *My father, this is Torah and I need to learn [from you]*³². But since I have not merited to do so, and I see that heresy is constantly spreading, and the Torah is degraded in the eyes of cursed evil people who err in its commandments and who deviate from its ways, going astray after Aristotle.

(2) I call to witness heaven and the earth³³ that once, on the eve of the Sabbath, two students came to me, [who were] disciples of a noted and respected person³⁴. And they found me with the Pentateuch closed [in front of me], and asked me what I had been doing, and I told them I had just finished studying the weekly

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

²⁸ There are many versions to it, see S. Sharvit, *Tractate Avoth* p. 138, n. 15.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 76-94.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81. I have added punctuation to make the reading easier, and also divided the text into numbered paragraphs to facilitate the subsequent discussion. The version is based on Paris Bibliothèque Nationale Heb. 455 (A), which is 46 years earlier than the manuscript used by Kasher and Blecherowitz and in my opinion is better. There is a clear link between manuscripts T and A.

³² According to the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 62a, *Megilla* 28a.

³³ The expression is common in the Midrash and Talmud. See, for example, *b. Yevamot* 16a, *'Arakhin* 16b.

³⁴ The Hebrew term is **וְנִמְלֵךְ תְּבִיאָה**. I do not know the meaning of this expression. To date it is not mentioned in the Hebrew Academy's historical dictionary. I thank my friend Dr. Uri Melammed for bringing this to my attention.

portion, and they stuttered to one another. I made an expression as if to ask why they were stuttering, and they answered that they were surprised that a wise man such as myself was engaged in doing so, and I chastised them as much as I could. And their teacher was out of town at the time, and for his honor I kept my silence until he returned. And when he returned I told him of that incident, and he imposed upon them the ban if they would remain in town, and so they left. And this happened outside the kingdom of Castile³⁵.

(3) And when I went to Castile and I happened to be in a certain city, there was a certain youth from a big city and he ridiculed the honor of the Torah, using harsh words and rude gestures. And I told this to a certain person who could have chastised him, but he did not do so³⁶.

(4) And when I saw the extent to which the reins were loosened, and those errants who loosened wished to draw support and help from certain matters and reasons they found in the writings of the above-mentioned rabbi of blessed memory in his commentaries, in them was fulfilled the saying: *[When] a disciple is mistaken – his teacher is blamed*³⁷. Nevertheless, I would have held back my heart from thinking and my tongue from speaking against the words of the Rabbi, of blessed memory, until I remembered that my entire life I have heard them saying in Tulaitula (i.e. Toledo) that they had seen a missive written by the Rabbi, of blessed memory, in which he said as follows: *Towards the end of my days a certain man came to me and said certain things that made sense. And if this had not happened when I was elderly, I would have changed many of the rationales given in my work.* And everyone was talking about that the things which made sense as referring to words of Kabbalah³⁸. For in all the writings of the Rabbi, of blessed memory, there is neither mention nor even a hint of Kabbalah, but the Rabbi of blessed memory attempted with all his might to reconcile between the principles of religion and philosophy. And wherever he did not find a compromise between them he wrote that the philosophers were mistaken. In any event, this missive allows room to investigate certain distinctions in the arguments presented by the rabbi, and those who wish to draw distinctions may argue that *Perhaps these criticisms that I make of the Rabbi's works are among those things of which the Rabbi wrote that he would have changed them.*

³⁵ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, p. 69.

³⁶ This phrase is common in the rabbinic lexicon; see, e.g. *b. Sanhedrin* 103a. This story may also be found in M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, p. 70.

³⁷ This is not a common rabbinic phrase, and was first remarked upon at the end of R. Margalioth, *Essay*, p. 98, albeit there it says “a wandering student – associates it to his rabbi” Rabbi Abraham’s work was originally written in Arabic and, as the original is not extant, we cannot know for sure which Arabic word was translated here as “wrong”. In any case, there is a significant difference between *טויעה* (wrong, mistaken) and *תויעה* (wandering, vagabond, vagrant). About this idiom see Rashi at Num 31:21.

³⁸ During the Middle Ages through to the thirteenth century, the word *קבלה* was the translation of the Arabic word *naql*, and its only meaning was “tradition”. It was only from the fourteenth century onward that it was used in its contemporary meaning of Jewish mysticism. Its occurrence here is among the earliest in this meaning. See also in his commentary: “and if the late Rabbi of blessed memory opened his honorable eyes to Kabbalah, he would not have had the doubts he did” (44, l. 3-4); “And the Kabbalists have a highly respected reason, and it is mysterious, I may not explain it” (62, l. 5 from the bottom); “And this is the Kabbalists’ opinion” (75, l. 5); “Kabbalists always talk only about the created Glory, but they do not relate at all to the special substance” (84, l. 9-10); “Great scholars of our people and spiritually loyal to God escaped from this notion and denied it completely, and they are those tended towards philosophy (*mehqar*) and not toward Kabbalah, especially the great Rabbi Maimonides of blessed memory” (122, l. 16-18). Ben Shoshan used the word *Kabbalah* in both senses, and he once even used it to refer to prophecy (136, l. 4).

(5) And I am a worm son of a whale, a fox son of a lion, a mosquito son of an eagle³⁹, and in his day (i.e., that of my father) there was no Kabbalist to compare to him. And even though my honored father passed away in my youth, nevertheless [I heard] some ancient things that escaped his lips, of blessed memory. And after his ascent I studied many of the tractates he wrote in his hand concerning Kabbalistic matters, and there are many hints there concerning the intent of the Torah and the prophets. Until finally I attained a certain measure [of understanding], sufficient to sense those rationales that the Rabbi of blessed memory said he wanted to replace, as aforementioned. And after this entire apology I swear by God to anyone who reads this work that my meaning in what I write about the arguments of the late Rabbi of blessed memory is for Heaven's sake only, with no mixture of any other intention. And being a fool of all men⁴⁰, I do not exclude myself from what our sages said: *judge every man favorably* (Avot 1.6), and add to this warning my oath here.

These five paragraphs deserve a thorough review. The first is phrased in a manner common in other medieval works⁴¹, which repeats itself in other places in the *Commentary* discussed here⁴². Ben Shoshan clearly and elaborately states his inferiority to Maimonides, portraying himself as a student before his rabbi, who wishes to clarify some of the latter's arguments, as demonstrated in the fourth paragraph. This submissive tone recurs in the fifth paragraph as well. Some of the expressions are conventional, yet I believe that their usage is not a pose but rather expresses his own sense that the confrontation is not between equals. The final sentence of this paragraph is lacking in a predicate, beginning with the words *But since I have not merited to do so*, from which that referred to is missing. I suggest reading this as reflecting an originally oral form of expression, in which there is sometimes a difference between the psychological and grammatical predicate. A speaker often thinks faster than he speaks, affecting the coherence of his sentences, so that he may decide in mid-sentence to rephrase or to switch to another idea. Such is the case here. If my assumption is correct, this sentence was written out of great excitement—highly likely given the context—and was not properly edited. Despite its being in written form, this sentence undoubtedly preserves its original oral nature. This occurs only rarely in Ben Shoshan's *Commentary*, and finding it here fits well with my thesis.

³⁹ In Bar-Ilan University's *Responsa* CD (version 19, spring 2011) there are nine occurrences of this phrase, all later than Ben Shoshan. The source is *b. Bava Kamma* 117a, where it says "a lion that you said became a fox".

⁴⁰ Based on Proverbs 30, 2.

⁴¹ See, for example, Rabbi Israel Israeli of Toledo's *Avot* commentary on Rabbi Zaddok's dictum, "and do not make them a crown to brag with" (*Avot* 4.5). The quote is taken from manuscript Oxford-Bodleian 2354 (Opp. Add. Qto. 126), 114b. The bold words were in Hebrew in the original Judeo-Arabic text. The translation is mine:

וראיית רייס אל מפסרין ז"ל כאף טולא פי האדהי (!) אל משנה בכלאם פיה תווביד ותקריע לבעץ גדולי ישראל מן אל אעצאר אלדי תקדמת אל אן ואניא ואטנב פי האדל חצר חתא פאק פיה אל חד ואגלב מן מעשיות מן אל תלמוד, מואפקה למדהבה יקפ עליהא מן שא אל נצר פי שרחה להאדל מסכתא. ואני בער ולא אדע, קטן השועלים, תולעת ולא איש, פכייפ אנדפה לל תעורוך (!) אלא האדל פן, אלא אנא ראיית אן אדכל האדל מדכל אל כטה כדי ללמד זכות על הראשונים פאקול, וכבוד הרב עומד במקומו.

"I saw the head of commentators of blessed memory go into depth on this Mishnah, in a manner of speaking that holds rebuke and reprimand to some of Israel's greatest of previous and current generations. He carried on in this speech until he'd gone too far. He brought tales from the Talmud that suit his method, and whoever wants to review the commentary to this tractate will find them. And I am a fool who does not know, the smallest of fox, a worm and not a man. How dare I stand against his [words] this way?! But I saw fit to meddle in this approach to speak favorably on the first. That is why I will speak, and the honor of the Rabbi of blessed memory still stands".

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 36, 81, 84, 85, 86, 118, 134.

The second paragraph begins with an oath, after which the author relates an episode that happened to him personally. Its background is the Jewish law requiring one to read the weekly Torah portion *twice in Scripture* (i.e., *the Hebrew original*) *and once in translation* (i.e., *Onkelos' Aramaic Targum*)⁴³. The outcome of the story teaches us at least four things: (a) an attitude of disrespect [or even contempt] towards this law, which was meant to inculcate a minimal level of understanding [or, better, knowledge] of the weekly portion among the general community, which could not devote time during the week for a thorough study of the portion⁴⁴, (b) that this disrespect for the commandments was not limited to Castile where Ben Shoshan lived; he visited other places in Spain, where he was also considered a scholar⁴⁵. (c) The rabbi of these two students took drastic measures against them, presumably because he identified with Ben Shoshan's criticism; (d) The threat of the ban reveals that rabbi's limited power as he could not deal directly with the stance expressed by those two students.

This episode neither adds nor diminishes to Ben Shoshan's polemic with Maimonides and the "philosophizers". Rather, it is about sharing a personal experience, indicative of Ben Shoshan's general feeling of frustration and anger at attitudes of

⁴³ The source is *b. Berakhot* 8a-b, where Rav Huna bar Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Ami that "whoever completes his portions with the public, his days and years are prolonged"; cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 13.25. In the *Zohar*, *Terumah*, II:132b, the commandment received a mystic meaning as a tool for the operation of the divine powers, see Gershom Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, p. 124. A popular echo of the meaning attributed by the Kabbalists to this commandment may be found in R. Bahya Bar Asher's *Torah Commentary*, in discussing the verse, "Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon" (Num 32:3).

⁴⁴ Rabbi Yaacov Ben Abba Mari Anatoly, who lived in thirteenth-century Provence, and later in his life in Naples, Italy, wrote harsh words regarding disrespecting this commandment. His book, *Mammad Hatalmidim* (Lyck, Schnellpressenbruck von Rudolph Siebert, 1866) is a collection of mostly ethical sermons. At the end of his introduction, he wrote: "And counting the commandments is that which is required, not writing or anything else, and this is the sum of goodness in Israel, when God remembered His people. But when they returned to their misbehavior, God caused the wandering in the exile until we became known among the Gentiles for [not knowing] the wisdom and commandments that are in the Bible, since we do not learn what to answer the heretic as our Sages exhorted us. And the heretics say that we eat the shell while they eat the fruit, namely, that they try to investigate and understand the Bible according to their belief, and constantly preach in public, until they uphold the lie as if it were truth for a long time, and we almost turned away from the truth given to us by God. And this is because of our laziness in reading the Torah, reading it weakly like young boys, without understanding or investigation, until [even] the rabbis among our people rely upon reading the Bible portion twice and once in translation, as we were commanded by the Sages. But it was not reading alone that was meant by this, but their intention was that one review the Torah carefully every Shabbat and holiday, for these are days on which everyone is free to investigate and understand and learn and teach, and that was the meaning of sanctifying these days. And this is not what we do. But when we read the portion we swallow the words as if eating a bitter thing and it is disrespectful that we do so. And we thereby recite in vain one of the blessings of the Torah that was inserted into the order of prayer that testifies to this, namely: 'May God make the words of Torah delicious in our mouths'. And it is known that one who eats a delicious dish always tastes it, and does not just swallow it without feeling its flavor, and this is what is said in the blessing, 'that we and our offspring and our offspring's offspring shall all know Your name'. But knowing God's name is impossible when we read in such a way. Alas, our blessing is in vain, and our prayer is vain, and the sanctification of those days is wrong [as they do it] only to fill our bellies and desecrate our souls" (p. 9 [unnumbered]). Compare Abraham Shalom's words in *Neve Shalom*: "reading alone, without understanding, if a person does so all of his days he will not complete it, unlike what many of the common people might think, that when they cry out loudly with the cantillation notes even though they understand nothing, their reward is great". Cited in Breuer, *Keep your Children from Higgayon*, p. 256. I thank Prof. Michael Shmidman for sharing this quote with me.

⁴⁵ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, p. 117, n. 207; see also note 2 above.

contempt towards religious piety within the community. Such a move is typical of the oral sermon, in which there is a dimension of intimacy between the preacher and his congregation, particularly when the former enjoys authority, standing and experience with that congregation.

The third paragraph relates a more severe incident than does the previous one. First, it refers to a space in which Ben Shoshan felt at home, as we may infer from the tale, even though it did not occur in Toledo itself. Second, the cursing person did not just use swear words, but added to them vulgar physical gestures. Third, and worst, Ben Shoshan approached the authoritative figure within the town and the latter avoided assuming the responsibility Ben Shoshan thought he ought to.

This instance likewise does not contribute to Ben Shoshan's principled polemic with Maimonides and with the "philosophizers". Rather, these two stories reveal something of his emotional world and experiences, but it is evident from the *Commentary* that his beliefs are based upon a very learned and well-reasoned theoretical position. One may indeed argue that part of Ben Shoshan's approach stemmed, not from an intellectual analysis of the matters in question, but from certain experiences that seem to have been extremely meaningful and influential for him. In either event, those two anecdotes are not part of an organized presentation and reasoned analysis of differing approaches, but an expression of excitement and distress. Such anecdotes are more appropriate in an oral sermon, which may often begin with a personal story used by the preacher to teach the lesson he wishes to infer therefrom.

The fourth paragraph continues the personal touch, incidentally confirming the fact that Ben Shoshan lived in Toledo. He makes it very clear from his words that he intends to confront Maimonides' approaches, but also demonstrates his hesitation at doing so. He then cites an oral tradition he knew from childhood in his town (*my entire life I have heard them saying in Tulaitula*), according to which in his old age Maimonides tended towards Kabbalah and thought that some of the rationales he gave for the commandments ought to have been altered. According to that tradition, the only reason he did not pursue that change was his advanced age. Ben Shoshan seems to be aware of the problematic nature of this alleged report: neither he nor anybody he knew had actually seen the missive in question. However, Ben Shoshan nevertheless prefers to assume that, in arguing with Maimonides, he was addressing those rationales that Maimonides himself had considered changing; hence he was not objecting to Maimonides, but was rather promulgating the latter's "amended" approach. The tone is clearly one that is trying to be both clever and apologetic, one which I believe is also characteristic of an intimate conversation between a preacher and his audience.

In the fifth paragraph Ben Shoshan again humbly presents himself as nothing but a diminished version of his late father, who passed away when Ben Shoshan was still young. He nevertheless enjoyed certain opportunities to learn some Kabbalah from his father, whom he considered an authority in the field (*in his day there was no Kabbalist comparable to him*), particularly from those manuscripts of his which he studied after his death⁴⁶. Based upon what he heard and read, Ben Shoshan believed he knew what things Maimonides would have changed! However, he still feared someone might attribute to him improper motives, which is why he took an oath that *my meaning in what I write about the arguments of the Rabbi of blessed memory is for Heaven's sake only, with no mixture of any other intention*.

⁴⁶ In five other places he repeats explanations he heard from his father: pp. 3, 18, 62, 101, 149.

The internal structure of these five paragraphs is also deserving of note. The first paragraph and the end of the fifth paragraph exemplify a common rhetorical feature in rabbinical writing, in terms of both language and content, in which the preacher starts with a declaration of his modesty and submissiveness. The second and third paragraphs are different, in that there Ben Shoshan shared certain disturbing personal experiences with his audience. These two paragraphs stand out in terms of both style and content from everything that precedes or follows them in the entire *Commentary*⁴⁷. They also differ from the two anecdotes included that divide the *Commentary* and which serve a didactic function⁴⁸. The fourth paragraph and the beginning of the fifth present the reader with the theoretical foundations upon which Ben Shoshan bases his arguments against Maimonides, from which he was inspired to maintain the polemic notwithstanding his own inferiority. The authenticity of the rumor that in his old age Maimonides turned to Kabbalah is at best doubtful, as I demonstrated above and as Shmidman has observed⁴⁹; hence Ben Shoshan needed to refer to a more substantial source, such as his father. However, these sources and their authenticity cannot be dismissed, as Maimonides' words at the beginning of the *Introduction* to his *Avot Commentary* (*The Eight Chapters*) were a significant part of Ben Shoshan's cultural heritage: *Hear the truth from [he] who says it*⁵⁰—that is, the important thing is what is said, not who says it.

It would appear that the five paragraphs discussed here, which are the first of eighteen pages of profound polemic with Maimonides, preserve echoes of the original oral nature of the commentary, which was hitherto only known in its written version. Ben Shoshan did not state that the *Commentary* had derived from oral sermons, but I believe that a careful reading and attention to the irregularities of style and content lead to the conclusion that these are remnants of oral sermons.

This finding fits well with the nature and essence of any sermon: it often refers to contemporary problems that preoccupy the preacher and his audience. The danger posed by the “philosophizers” was so great that it was only natural that it be of concern to Toledan preachers of the fourteenth century—all the more so in the case of a scholar and community leader such as Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan, whose influence was felt throughout Castile and beyond the kingdom. The *Avot* tractate served as an excellent starting point for sermons and Ben Shoshan's *Commentary* fits this tendency and reaffirms it⁵¹.

In addition to all that has been said thus far, I wish to add another criterion suggested by Joseph Dan. He believed that:

As the didactic element in a commentary lessens, it testifies to a deeper unity between the preacher and his audience, and a feeling of folk popular intimacy between them. As the aesthetic element lessens and the didactic element intensifies, it indicates an ideological gap between the preacher and the audience, which carries a social meaning as well: the preacher represents an ideology, usually an elite one, which aspires to convince and influence the masses⁵².

⁴⁷ On the importance and meaning of a stylistic exception in a polemic context, see E. Reiner, *Overt Falsehood and Covert Truth*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 17, 101. In both he states he heard them from his father.

⁴⁹ See M. Shmidman, *Conversion* (n. 3 above).

⁵⁰ *Maimonides, Eight Chapters*, p. 5, n. 9.

⁵¹ On *Avot* Tractate as the main foundation for sermons in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spain, see N. Ilan, *Canonization*, p. 68-70, where I refer to Ben Shoshan's polemic with the “philosophizers”.

⁵² J. Dan, *Notes*.

Like every generalization, this one also needs to be examined so as to determine whether it is valid in every case. I believe that in the case of Ben Shoshan it is justified. Based on this criterion it is obvious that Ben Shoshan addressed his words in-house, preaching to the convinced, and that they were indeed spoken in an intimate setting, as the didactic element is insignificant. It is a tough, challenging text, written in a poetic language and hiding many surprises. These are all expressions of the aesthetic element, as Dan explained⁵³.

This trend is reconfirmed by the ending of his commentary to *a worthy disagreement* (5:18): *He who seeks the repentance of the evildoers, may He be blessed, will change their hearts and ours to believe in Him and His Torah and to choose the path of faith*⁵⁴. Ben Shoshan clearly shares here his inability to deal with the evil “philosophizers”. In his view, God alone is able to change their hearts. It is impossible, though, for him to say this to his opponents. His limitations can only be acknowledged among those who support him. Moreover, Ben Shoshan contrasted the evildoer’s hearts to *our hearts*. Who is this collective *we* to whom Ben Shoshan was addressing himself? I argue that it refers to his audience; indeed, I believe that the context here not only allows for this option, but demands it, as I have explained. Finally, the phrase *the path of faith* is taken from the biblical verse, *I have chosen the way of truth: thy judgments have I laid before me* (Ps 119:30, KJV), which is counterpoised to another verse from that same psalm: *I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love* (v. 113), which Ben Shoshan read regarding the “philosophizers”⁵⁵. This reading was not unusual, since Rabbi Joshua Ibn Shueib used it in a similar manner:

and whoever has faith in his heart and his heart does not hold a grudge will believe that God creates new things in the land as the times require. And concerning this David said, “I have chosen the way of truth”—meaning, I forever chose to believe what is accepted by belief, and did not only follow my eyes and mind. And why will we make riddles and fables to take the words of Torah and the Sages outside of their meaning?⁵⁶

6. IDENTIFYING THE “PHILOSOPHERS”

Yitzhak Baer was the first to write about the “Averroistic aristocracy” but did not identify its members, and his discussion remains general⁵⁷. Shmidman discusses the “philosophizers” minimally, but does not identify them either⁵⁸. He also argued that Ben Shoshan was the only fourteenth-century opponent of philosophy to distinguish between radical and moderate philosopher groups⁵⁹. This statement needs to be revised thanks to the research of Dov Schwartz, who revealed a group of intellectual

⁵³ J. Dan, *Status*, p. 144.

⁵⁴ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*, p. 153.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 77.

⁵⁶ Z. Mezger, *Ibn Shueib*, p. 132

⁵⁷ Baer used the term “Averroistic aristocracy” in the Hebrew version of his book, p. 141. It is missing from the corresponding place of the English version. See Y. Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, p. 236. See also in the English version pp. 240, 241, 263, 290, 360; vol. II, pp. 52, 137, 144.

⁵⁸ M. Shmidman, *Dissertation*, pp. 68-73.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

Neoplatonists in Spain, “after which the antinomian tendency became a real threat”⁶⁰. Schwartz demonstrated that these intellectuals were influenced by the philosophy of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), interpreting the legal parts of the Torah allegorically; the result was contempt towards the commandments⁶¹. The two anecdotes included by Ben Shoshan in his *Commentary* demonstrate how severe this contempt was.

Schwartz also showed that:

The approach towards “devotion” or “attachment [to God]” on the part of some of this group’s members had radical implications for the validity of religious law and its fulfillment. Their basic axiom is impressive in its simplicity and radical nature: the purpose of the Law is to bring about constant devotion; from the point that a person achieves that end, there is no need for him to observe the Law. Not all members of the group carried this perception to this logical conclusion, but some of them clearly hint at it⁶².

Ben Shoshan differed from members of this group, as they disagreed with the Kabbalah while he embraced it⁶³. He refers to the “philosophizers” in a score of different places in his *Commentary*, and thoroughly portrays their methods and approaches:

Those who count on their vain thoughts and rely on their wisdom and believe whatever they want and mock those who believe in prophecy and tradition⁶⁴ and who deviate from the way of the mind⁶⁵.

The outcome was, of course, contempt towards the commandments:

And he who is not fearful of sin does not learn to do and does not study for Heaven’s sake, so for him it will be enough to engage in dialectics and to behave arrogantly towards his peers, and he will not take notice of the principle of punctiliousness in observance⁶⁶.

⁶⁰ D. Schwartz, *Fourteenth-Century Neoplatonic Circle*. An important criticism of this was published by Ben-Shalom. Schwartz mentions Ben Shoshan in one footnote only (p. 23, n. 22), probably because he based his research on significant philosophical texts, and not on *Avot* commentaries, which are by nature more popular. J. Dan, *The Thousand Year Epic*, pp. 27-28, mentioned the “scholastic linkage” as a typical characteristic of the transition from Muslim culture to Christian cultural influences beginning in the thirteenth century. See also n. 22 above.

⁶¹ D. Schwartz, *Circle*, p. 18. “Jewish Averroism” started in Spain in the middle of the thirteenth century; see Idel, *Outlines*, pp. 208-209. At pp. 211-212 he referred to the “philosophizers” from a different perspective than that of Ben Shoshan. For more on the “philosophizers”, see J. Hacker, *Bibago*, pp. 151-158.

⁶² D. Schwartz, *Circle*, p. 193. See also what he quoted from Rabbi Shmuel Ibn Carca on p. 195. On the application of the ideal of intellectual devotion in the ascetic ethics, see Schwartz, *Ethics and Asceticism*.

⁶³ D. Schwartz, *Circle*, pp. 37, 41-45.

⁶⁴ I believe “Kabbalah” here means tradition; see n. 38 above.

⁶⁵ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan’s Commentary*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 70. At the beginning of the paragraph analyzed above, Ben Shoshan criticized the “damned evil people who have disobeyed the commandments” (p. 80). In a different context he criticized the “‘philosophizers’ of our people who seek excuses on the commandments” (p. 153). I discussed this in my paper, N. Ilan, *Canonization*, p. 70. I believe they were looking for excuses not to observe the commandments, not because they believed the commandments themselves were

He believed that their main fault was to overemphasize learning from books rather than by listening to an authoritative, suitable teacher⁶⁷. This naturally meant that they were lacking a reliable tradition:

And this is the way of the philosophers who are wandering off the way of the intellect, because he who wishes to climb the steps it will reveal the nakedness of his mind and the nakedness of his deeds⁶⁸, as happened to the philosophers, and that happened because they have no one to count on, and they have no known way, but they each choose their own way as they wish⁶⁹.

Ben Shoshan specifically criticized those who *did not study enough*⁷⁰ yet considered themselves serious, mature scholars.

7. CONCLUSION

In much of his research, Joseph Dan argues that the scholarly discussions of thirteenth-century Spain were not limited to an intellectual, economic or governmental elite, which were always of narrow compass. Rather, according to Dan, this was a widespread phenomenon. An intellectual elite challenges not only its members, but also those who wish to be affiliated with it⁷¹. It is therefore a phenomenon that spreads far beyond the scholarly or political elite, and was common in the synagogues. All of this is reflected in Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's *Avot* commentary.

His work is an interesting and important one on a number of levels. Shmidman discussed its theoretical importance over three decades ago. I have demonstrated here that a careful use of philological and literary tools, while taking the historical context into consideration, is useful in revealing that the original shape and form of the polemic parts are characteristic of oral sermons. Thus, the *Commentary* joins many other commentaries on *Avot* that likewise stem from oral sermons. This finding is well understood, considering the special status enjoyed by the tractate *Avot* since its inclusion in the Jewish Prayer Book⁷². More commentaries have been written about *Pirkei Avot* than on any other Mishnaic text, second only to the weekly Torah portion in the wealth of its secondary literature. The reason is obvious: these texts were accessible, and thus familiar, to the entire congregation, thereby justifying the effort to expound upon them, as they were read repeatedly in the synagogues. Ben Shoshan's *Commentary* is also helpful in attempting to follow in the footsteps of his polemic with the "philosophizers" who posed a strategic threat to Jewish communities

unnecessary, but because they believed that they, the "philosophizers", were beyond the need to observe them.

⁶⁷ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*, p. 13. There is a profound disagreement in Jewish culture in this regard. See J. Ahituv, *By Books and Not Writers*.

⁶⁸ Inspired by Exodus 20:23.

⁶⁹ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*, p. 32. Close to it: "to stay away from the ways of 'philosophizers' who count on their opinions and rely on their wisdom and deny", cf. J. Ahituv, *By Books and not Writers*.

⁷⁰ M. Kasher, Y. Blecherowitz, *Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan's Commentary*, p. 81.

⁷¹ Typical examples of this are the many works by ultra-Orthodox people that use numerous footnotes. They include only citations, and it is obvious that they do so in order to give their work an academic touch.

⁷² I discussed this at length in my article N. Ilan, *Canonization*.

in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Spain. Ben Shoshan's *Commentary* is an early one, which sheds light on the development of polemic and the limited ways to deal with the antinomian threat.

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