

POETRY AND SOCIETY IN THE WORKS OF ABRAHAM BEN ḤALFON (YEMEN, 12TH CENTURY)

by

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Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages, at least that extant in the form of the early *piyyûṭ* and that written under the influence of Arabic poetry and culture, is to a large extent social poetry in the sense that it was written mainly for liturgical purposes, namely for public prayer. The main concerns of the *piyyûṭîm* were national issues, such as persecution, exile and redemption.

Spanish sacred poetry maintained the same essential trait, although new philosophical and ethical contents were introduced which took it beyond the narrow confines of the national themes to a wider universal level of Man in relation to his God. This transition made it much easier for the poets to incorporate their spiritual thoughts; indeed, their personal poems often give expression to their specific philosophies, beliefs and opinions. This is certainly the case for the great poets such as Shelomoh Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevy.

The new secular poetry certainly developed in a specific social context and for a very defined social reason, that being the portrayal of Jewish court society. In Baghdad, the poems of Abraham Hacoheh were designed to praise and glorify members of the Natira Family (Scheiber, 1953; 1980), and the works of Rab Haye Gaon praised the greatness of the leaders of the Qairawan community and showered blessings on them (Brody, 1936, pp. 27–42; Fleischer, 1977, pp. 240–244). And, of course, Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat wrote in Cordoba for the needs of the vizier in the government of the Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III—lamentations over his relatives who had passed away, songs of praise and songs that described a court life that was not run according to the traditional Jewish pattern, at least not that followed since the destruction of the Second Temple (Ashtor, 1960, pp. 103–172). It is true that even in the secular poetry we find great poets, such as Shemuel Hannagid, Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevy, who managed to

break their commitment to the social connection and create for themselves as they wished. But in the final resort, secular and sacred poetry of the Middle Ages was derived from a certain social background and from needs which determined its content, purpose, the position of its spokesmen and even its forms and meters. To this day we have not departed from Weiss' (1952) accurate definition of this secular poetry as being court poetry in court society.

It is, however, known that the Spanish school of sacred and secular poetry broke out of the Iberian Peninsula and expanded in practice to all those countries in which Arab culture ruled, and even to other countries such as Italy. Earlier or parallel flourishings of Hebrew poetry, under the influence of Arabic poetry outside Spain, faded as the influence of Spanish poetry became felt, but they were sufficient to prepare the ground for the absorption of the latter. At all events, two cardinal questions facing a researcher of medieval Hebrew poetry *outside* Spain are: Did the secular poetry also develop in a court context, and to what extent was the sacred poetry informed by the specific customs and needs of the Spanish liturgy that shaped it? It is true that these questions should also be asked with respect to the second period of Spanish poetry, that written in the domains of the Christian kingdoms following the invasion of the Almohads in 1140 and the collapse of Jewish communities in southern Spain. Either way, it is clear to us that as a rule there were no court societies in those countries, nor were the liturgical customs identical to those of Islamic Spain. Another question, then, arises: What resultant changes were there in medieval secular and sacred poetry outside Spain?

The *dīwāns* of various poets outside Spain, such as El^cazar Habbabli, Yosef ben Tanhum Hayyerusalmi and Aharon Hakiman provide valuable insights in this respect. This study, however, will investigate the matter as reflected in the poetry of Abraham ben Ḥalfon, a Yemenite poet who apparently lived in the second half of the twelfth century.

It is well known that Yemenite poetry is highly influenced by Spanish poetry, in both the secular and sacred spheres (Tobi, 1976a; 1979). Nevertheless, anyone studying Yemenite poetry, particularly the works of the later writers, the most important of whom was Rabbi Shalom Shabazi, will realize that it is in a class of its own. It is in fact a sub-school in that extensive body of Hebrew poetry that was written under the influence of Arabic poetry; but it developed its own special traits, both synchronistically in comparison with contemporary poetry and diachronically in comparison with itself and with schools of poetry that no longer existed. One—perhaps the main—factor that caused the

unique development of Yemenite poetry was its adjustment and adaptation to the comprehensive and decisive influences of Spanish poetry for the purposes of Jewish society in the Yemen. This did not happen in one or two days, nor even over a year; rather it was a process extending over centuries, reaching its full formulation in the works of Shalom Shabazi in the 17th Century. There was almost nothing new after him in the poetic school of Yemenite Jewry. Be that as it may, except in Italy, no clearly distinguishable and near independent sub-school of Spanish Hebrew poetry, which was itself greatly influenced by Arabic poetry, developed anywhere outside Spain. It is thus the uniqueness of Yemenite poetry that leads us to deal with it in answering the above questions. To our best knowledge, Abraham ben Ḥalfon was the first Yemenite poet who contributed to the specific formulation of Yemenite poetry, thus beginning a poetic trend which in the course of time led to the uniqueness of Yemenite Hebrew poetry. It is for this reason that we are taking him and his poetry as the subject matter of our study.

The poet, Abraham ben Ḥalfon, is one of those obscure poets about whom we know almost nothing apart from their names and works. This is not the place to go into all the details associated with the clarification of his precise time and place.¹ Suffice it to note that my research strongly indicated that he lived in the city of Aden in the second half of the twelfth century, a fact of some importance for the study of his poetry as a social creation. In the modern research of medieval Hebrew poetry, Simḥoni (see Davidson, 1929, p. 58) was the first to refer to his work; Davidson published in his memory a large anthology of his works containing 45 poems (Davidson, 1929), and later both he and others published some additional poems and *piyyûṭim* of his (Davidson, 1935; Ish-Shalom, 1947; Tobi, 1976b; Bet-Aryeh, 1977).²

The Aden community in the second half of the twelfth century was decidedly one of merchants. Its life is clearly portrayed in the Geniza documents published by various researchers (Chapira, 1935; Assaf, 1946; Ashtor, 1939), particularly S. D. Goitein, who even prepared the famous and as yet unpublished "India Volume", in which most of the documents touch on the Aden community from the tenth through thirteenth centuries. The community was headed by *negîdîm*, apparently members of a family originating in Persia, and in the Geniza documents they are

1. Attempts were also made, without much success, to clarify where and when he lived, but there was no certainty even as to whether he was a Yemenite.

2. The present author is preparing a comprehensive edition of ben Ḥalfon's poems. Details concerning his time are discussed in the introduction of this edition. The work is supported by Research Unit of Haifa University.

termed *Sārê haqqehillôt* ('Ministers of the Communities'). They rose to this position by virtue of their economic standing, serving as "merchants' agents", that is, the representative (*wakīl*, pl. *wukalā'*) of the foreign merchants who came to Aden to trade, particularly with distant India.

The information which we have so far regarding the *negîdîm* of the Jews does not indicate that they had also served their governments in an official capacity, as did Ḥisdai Ibn Shaprut and Shemuel Hannagid. They were, however, very close to the regime by virtue of their wealth and economic influence. Indeed, their appointment as *negîdîm* was approved by the regime. The life which the Aden merchant community led was similar in many respects to that of other nearby Jewish communities on the Indian Ocean coast, as well as to that of the Jewish communities in Egypt, as reflected in the poems of Yehuda Halevy. In essence, this was not real court life, with positions of political power, but certainly one of rich merchants with wide horizons of interests, who frequently visited other countries far and wide and maintained close contacts with Jewish and gentile merchants both locally and elsewhere.

Abraham ben Ḥalfon lived within this society and wrote both secular and sacred poetry for it—a fact which accords his poetry its special character within Yemenite poetry as a whole. By the fifteenth century, and possibly earlier, Yemenite poetry had completely broken all connections with court society or merchant society with its open life-style, for the simple reason that such society ceased to exist after the fall of the Ayyūbī dynasty (1173–1229). From then on Yemenite poetry was restricted almost entirely to national and religious subjects, even when written for social occasions that had no liturgical connection. In effect, Yemenite poetry was virtually paralyzed until the end of the fifteenth century, and all that was written were *piyyûṭîm*, on a small scale, for use in prayer. Only with David ben Yasha^c, who lived in the second half of the fifteenth century, was any revival in Yemenite poetry noticeable, including the secular sphere, and then of course there was the work of Zeḳarya al-Ḍahīrī in the middle of the sixteenth century. This renaissance, which produced fine literary results such as *Sēper hammūsār* (Ratzaby, 1965) and other works, could not, however, continue because the social reality had altered and its spiritual needs had undergone consequent changes. Yemenite poetry continued to draw on its Spanish counterpart, but its borrowings were confined mainly to forms, single motives and expressions rather than central matters, and it was from here that the school of Yemenite poetry grew.

Abraham ben Ḥalfon, however, preceded all these events. His secular poetry was characterized by the society in which he lived—one of

merchants, ministers and *negîdîm*. As was the wont of self-respecting medieval poets who lived in the shadow of leading personalities, he himself placed his poems in a *dîwān* and dedicated it to "The Hon. Baruk" (Davidson, 1929, p. 77, No. XXXI). Moshe Ibn Ezra did likewise when he dedicated his *Sēper Hā^cānāq* to Abraham Ibn Muhājer (Brody, 1935, p. 277), as did the various authors of the *maqāmāt* who dedicated their works to different personalities, either out of respect and esteem for them or with the intention of securing their patronage. Yehudah Al-Ḥarīzī, the greatest of the writers of *maqāmāt*, even dedicated one copy of his book *Tahkemônî* to the most famous of the Yemenite *negîdîm*, Shemaryah ben David (1202–1217) (Steinschneider, 1879, p. 410). The practice of collecting the works of a poet and dedicating them to a distinguished personality had long ceased in Yemen, and even the term *dîwān* no longer has the meaning of a collection of the works of a specific poet, but rather means an anthology of the writings of a number of poets, poems that used to be recited at social events outside the synagogue. Otherwise, the Yemenites used the term *dîwān* in its widely accepted sense, namely as a collection of a poet's works, only with respect to the poets of Spain and to Abraham ben Ḥalfon.

We do not have the complete text of Abraham ben Ḥalfon's *dîwān*, nor does it exist as a separate volume; rather, there are only copies of groups of poems or of single poems. The *dîwān* must have included both secular and sacred poetry, although it cannot be determined whether the inclusion of both types was done by the poet himself or by later copyists. Either way, this is a trend characteristic of Yemenite poetry, blurring the delineation between secular and sacred poetry by, on the one hand, introducing national and religious motives into secular poetry, and, on the other, by not according any respectable position to the *piyyût* in the synagogue and refusing in practice to introduce it into the normative liturgy. We thus find that Yemenite editors of the *dîwān* of a given Spanish poet did not distinguish between his secular and sacred poetry and included both in the *dîwān*,³ while the Spanish tradition, obviously under the influence of Arabic poetry, generally determined that a *dîwān* should contain only secular poetry.

Of the range of secular poetry types, Abraham ben Ḥalfon wrote in only one: panegyrics. And, as a rule, these poems were written to mark specific events in the lives of the people in question: wedding celebrations, circumcisions or a safe return from a journey. It is highly

3. See, for example, the section *Šîrôt vetišbāḥôt in Tiklal Qadmônîm* (1964, pp. 230b–250b).

doubtful, according to the internal evidence, that they were written for important personalities, according to the pattern of poet-patron relationships so well known in Spanish poetry. It is more likely that our poet was a friend of the celebrant and saw fit to offer him a poem of congratulations and good wishes on the occasion. Nevertheless, these poems are written in a panegyric style, with all the hyperbolic phraseology extolling the greatness and the talents of the recipient. Furthermore, these poems borrow unreservedly from the motifs of Spanish poems of the love, nature and wine types. In the works of Abraham ben Ḥalfon we have no independent poems of these types, which were characteristic of court society. In other words, the *society* was not court society, nor was the poem a court poem, but the influence of court poetry can be clearly distinguished.

At the same time neither the works of Abraham ben Ḥalfon nor Yemenite poetry in general are to be regarded as epigonous, devoid of uniqueness. We have already intimated in this paper that Yemenite poetry contained religious and national motifs, and this is so with respect to our poet. Love, for instance, is never treated as a subject in its own right as in Spanish erotic poems; the poet mentions it only in the context of wedding poems, that is, within the realm of what is permissible according to Jewish law and tradition, and not in an atmosphere of a wine feast in the court of a nobleman's palace; even then there frequently is an additional level of allegorical significance—the love of Torah and wisdom. This does not, of course, prevent the poet from using erotic motifs, known to us not only from Spanish erotic poetry but also from the biblical Song of Songs and even the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Ben Ḥalfon was certainly influenced by Yehuda Halevy in writing poems of permitted love, especially wedding songs; but the view of the Torah and Wisdom in general regarding the image of a woman and the description of a man's desire for her was apparently tinged by an Arabic Sufi influence. There is, for example, the *Maqāma of Yemīmāh*, elevating the personality of Maimonides, with Yemīmāh symbolizing Divine Wisdom. According to Schirmann's reasonable assumption, this poem was written by Yosef bar Yehuda, who died in the East in 1227 (1966, pp. 385–391). It is similarly well known that the allegorical image of woman symbolizes in Yemenite poetry of all generations *Keneset Yisrāʿēl*, Eretz Israel, Torah and Wisdom. Indeed this is one of the most characteristic aspects of this poetry, for example *ʿAhābat hadassāh* by Rabbi Shalom Shabazi (1966, pp. 238–239).

In other words, Jewish society in the Yemen in the second half of the twelfth century, and certainly in ensuing periods, was unable to spawn a

truly secular poetry, beyond the formal, negative definition of it as non-liturgical poetry. This could have been the result of the influence of Maimonides, who opposed poetry in general and *muwaššah* poetry in particular because of the licentiousness in it (Shirmann, 1935). But Jewish society in the Yemen could not itself give birth to a poetry that ran counter to Jewish law and the traditions of Jewish life. The position of the Jews in the Yemen during the Islamic period was not so firm that they could set up a society in which both Jewish and Islamic moral codes were breached. But the fact that the secular and often licentious Spanish poetry constituted the model or paradigm for the writing of poetry that was religious and pious by nature, in its sanctification of the profane, reveals the great impact which erotic poetry had on Jewish poets.

We can thus define Abraham ben Ḥalfon's secular poetry as occasional poetry written under the influence of Spanish secular poetry. Secular poems of other types, such as philosophical poems, wine songs and short panegyrics, are few in number and inferior in importance, and even they do not reflect the life of secular court society.

A unique secular poem in Abraham ben Ḥalfon's *dīwān* is "*Ya'ālôt hen ubānôt nišpenû,*" which describes a giant fish that appeared on the coast of Yemen (Ish-Shalom, 1947, pp. 192–193). In terms of the subject matter, it recalls the famous poem "*hālakkôšēl velannôpēl teqûmāh*" by Shemuel Hannagid, which also describes a giant fish seen by the passengers of a ship on which the poet was also journeying (Yarden, 1966, pp. 261–266). In terms of its type, this is a nature poem, but the nature is not that found in the palace gardens. What we have here is an exception in terms of both Spanish and Yemenite poetry, i.e., a description of an extraordinary natural event. Either way, as far as Yemenite poetry is concerned, this poem should be seen as the harbinger of those many hundreds of long poems that were written in the wake of historical events or special natural happenings, such as the falling of a comet, wars, famine years and the like. These poems, apart from serving as historical sources of great importance for the history of Yemenite Jewry, also possess an epic dimension, the lack of which is so much felt in Spanish poetry.

As noted above, sacred poems were also included in the *dīwān*. It should first be stressed that there is not even one poem that was written for recitation in the prayer context, that is, in the liturgical realm from *Bāreḳû* before the *Yôšēr* or the *Ma'ārīb* up to the end of the *Amīdāh*. This is for the simple reason that the Jews of Yemen stubbornly refused to introduce *piyyūṭim* into the prayers, either as a replacement for

something else or as an addition. This is not the place to discuss the origins of this refusal and whether it was influenced by the *Geʿōnīm* and Maimonides, who objected to *piyyūṭīm*, or was rather a result of the conservatism of Yemenite Jews, who maintained their forefathers' tradition as handed down from the rabbinical period and were disinclined to accept innovations. This would seem to be the reason why Yemenite poets wrote so many "*piyyūṭīm*"—non-liturgical sacred poems that were intended not for normative prayer in the synagogue but for socio-religious occasions outside the synagogue. It is true that this was not an innovation of Yemenite poets, as there was already the example of Dunash ben Labrat's famous *zemer* for the Sabbath "*Derôr yiqrā*" (Alloni, 1947, pp. 57–59). In the Yemen, however, this became a main principle, a substitute for liturgical *piyyūṭīm*. Abraham ben Ḥalfon wrote various *piyyūṭīm* for different occasions: Sabbath *Môṣāʾê šabbat*, *Rôš ḥōdeš*, *Ḥānukkāh*, *Pûrīm*, *Hōdeš taʿānūt*, the fifteenth day of Ab and *Šābûʿôt*.⁴ He also composed a *piyyūṭ* for Grace after Meals, but it is doubtful that it served as a substitute for the grace itself, having probably been intended rather to embellish it. It is possible that he also wrote *piyyūṭīm* for *Pessaḥ*, *Sukkot* and *Šemīnī ʿašeret*, but we have no evidence of this.

Surprisingly enough, in the poet's *piyyūṭ* tradition there is no work for Yom Kippur (nor *Rôš haššānāh*), despite the fact that Yemenite Jews used to recite many *piyyūṭīm* on that day—after the prayers, not during them. In fact most of the *piyyūṭīm* written by the poets of the Yemen prior to the sixteenth century were composed for Yom Kippur. They even developed special types within the context of *naḏḏ al-rahāmīm*, that special order of *selihôt* and *piyyūṭīm* for the fast day that apparently originated in Babylonia in the period of the *Geʿōnīm* (Tobi, 1976a, pp. 315–316). All the *piyyūṭīm* of Rabbi Daniyyel beribbi Fayyumi, who lived in the middle of the twelfth century, that are extant—only four in number—are designed for Yom Kippur (Tobi, 1983). The inevitable conclusion is that Abraham ben Ḥalfon wrote no *piyyūṭīm* at all for the synagogue, not even for the recitation after the prayers, let alone within them, such as Yom Kippur *piyyūṭīm*. Even those *piyyūṭīm* that he wrote for various festivals were not intended to be recited in the synagogue, but rather during the festive meals held on them according to age-old Yemenite custom. We are thus in a position to say that the many songs for weddings and circumcisions should be viewed in a similar light, namely that they were designed for the accompanying festive meals.

4. This *piyyūṭ* for the fifteenth of Ab should be discussed separately in detail and in connection with the *minhāgīm* of Yemenite Jews and other Jewish communities.

The conclusion is that both the secular and the sacred poems of Abraham ben Ḥalfon—although influenced in a literary sense by those of Spanish Jewry—were written according to the social needs and customs of Yemenite Jewry in the middle of the twelfth century. This principle, which we have already found in the works of the early Yemenite poets known to us—Daniyyel beribbi Fayyumi and Abraham ben Ḥalfon of the twelfth century—was preserved and strengthened in Yemenite poetry over the generations.

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