

## The Rise of Non-Elitist Religious Literature in Late Medieval Spain and its Reflection in *Menorat ha-Maor* of Rabbi Isaac Aboab

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Jewish religious works written in the Iberian Peninsula were characterized by elitist writing until the end of the thirteenth century. Scholars of different religious orientations addressed their works to the elite class of sages and scholars. At the end of the Middle Ages, starting from the early fourteenth century there was a clear turning point in Jewish literary activity in Spain. It was expressed by non-elitist writing for two notable groups: writing for the general public that had limited knowledge (but was capable of using Torah literature presented and accessible to it in Hebrew) and writing that was intended for beginning students. The first part of the article deals with the extent of the phenomenon and its characteristics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and even among the exiles after the Expulsion from Spain. The second part presents the phenomenon, regarding the writing for the general public, as reflected in Rabbi Isaac Aboab's *Menorat ha-Maor*. The study of the book and its characteristics allows for a better understanding of the background and development of the phenomenon from a social and religious point of view. This part of the article deals with different aspects like the gap between available literature and social needs, the purpose of the sermon in society, the need of preachers for auxiliary literature, and also didactic aspects of Jewish literature at the end of the Middle Ages.

**KEYWORDS:** Religious literature, sermon; Ethical literature; Homiletic literature; Didactic literature; Teaching methods; Education; Spain at the end of the Middle Ages.

EL DESARROLLO DE LA LITERATURA RELIGIOSA NO ELITISTA EN LA ESPAÑA MEDIEVAL TARDÍA Y SU REFLEJO EN EL *MENORAT HA-MAOR* DE RABBI ISAAC ABOAB.— Las obras rabínicas escritas en la Península Ibérica hasta finales del siglo XIII se caracterizaron por una tendencia elitista, manifestada por los eruditos de diferentes orientaciones religiosas. Ellos dirigían sus obras a la clase de élite cuyos miembros fueron sabios o eruditos. A partir del siglo XIV aconteció un cambio decisivo en la actividad literaria rabínica en España. Los autores comenzaron a confeccionar libros con carácter no elitista destinados para la ilustración de dos grupos notables: El público judío no-rabínico que tenía cono-

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cimientos limitados de la ley y la sabiduría rabínica (pero fue capaz de leer la Torá y utilizar la lengua hebrea); estudiantes en el comienzo de su carrera rabínica. La primera parte del artículo describe la extensión del fenómeno y los caracteres en que esta fue manifestada entre los judíos en los siglos XIV y XV en España y entre los exiliados después de la expulsión de España. La segunda parte presenta el fenómeno como se refleja en el *Menorat ha-Maor* de R. Isaac Aboab. El estudio del libro y sus características permite una mejor comprensión de los antecedentes y el desarrollo del fenómeno desde un punto de vista social y religioso. Esta parte del artículo aborda diferentes aspectos, como la brecha entre la literatura disponible y las exigencias sociales, los diferentes usos y abusos del sermón en la sociedad, la necesidad de formar predicadores de la literatura auxiliar y, por último, los aspectos didácticos de la literatura judía al final de la Edad Media.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Literatura religiosa, sermon; literatura ética; literatura homilética; literatura didáctica; métodos de enseñanza; educación; España a finales de la Edad Media.

Jewish religious oeuvres written in the Iberian Peninsula were characterized by elitist writing until the end of the thirteenth century. Scholars of different religious orientations addressed their works to the elite class of sages and scholars. Those of a Talmudic orientation dealt primarily with Talmudic and Halakhic writing, in a learned style, in depth and detail, intended to reach students in the study halls. Scholars of a philosophical or kabbalistic orientation dealt with esoteric materials aimed at the exclusive few, worthy to receive them. Only a few works were intended for the general public and not the educated elite. Sometimes in these writings one may sense disparagement towards the ignorant masses, who did not share in the intellectual achievements – Talmudic, philosophical, or kabbalistic – that are necessary to achieve man's purpose.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the Middle Ages, starting from the early fourteenth century there was a clear turning point in Jewish literary activity in Spain that was expressed in non-elitist writing of two notable groups: writing for

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<sup>1</sup> It is generally believed that scholars with a Talmudic orientation saw the fulfillment of man's purpose in performing commandments, primarily the study of Torah. However, some of these scholars regarded the purpose as the intellectual achievement of knowledge of Torah. To a degree these scholars were closer to the philosophical strain that saw the purpose of man as intellectual achievement, than to those in the Talmudic trend who saw the path in the technical fulfillment of commandments and maximizing those acts; see Yoel MARCIANO, *Sages of Spain in the Eye of the Storm: Jewish Scholars of Late Medieval Spain* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2019 [in Hebrew]) pp. 148-161.

the general public that had limited knowledge, but was capable of using Torah literature presented to it and made accessible in Hebrew<sup>2</sup> and writing that was intended for beginning students.

This article addresses the literary phenomenon of non-elitist writing, and it focuses on a genre that started to develop at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a part of both ethical literature and homiletics.<sup>3</sup> The central figure dealt with in this article is R. Isaac Aboab (the First), author of *Menorat ha-Maor*. This scholar was among the first to engage in such writing and he is unique in that all of his writings were devoted to this genre. In the introductions to his works he explains the ideological background that brought him to systematic writing of this kind. From his writing emerges the image of a sage well-versed in the rabbinic sources, sensitive to the needs of his generation, and who should be regarded as the harbinger of writing for the masses among the sages of late-medieval Spain.

## 1. TRENDS OF NON-ELITIST LITERATURE IN SPAIN

The need for change in the areas of Torah study was expressed in the ethical literature. This is not accidental, since ethical literature is characterized by internal and critical examination of society and its ills, without giving overdue respect to social and intellectual elites. This literature puts a mirror before the readers and calls for reform in religious and ethical life, both of the individual and of society. This attitude frequently enables it to sense the very fiber of society, to predict processes before they occur and sometimes to accelerate them. More than once,

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<sup>2</sup> See Carmi HOROWITZ, *The Jewish Sermon in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Spain: The Derashot of R. Joshua Ibn Shue'ib* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 11-14, and Judah GALINSKY, *The Four Turim and the Halakhic Literature of Spain in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Spain – Historical, Literary and Halakhic Aspects* (Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 1999 [in Hebrew]) pp. 85-134.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding ethical and homiletic literature, see, e.g., Isaiah TISHBI and Joseph DAN, *Hebrew Ethical Literature Selected Texts* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: M. Newman Publishing, 1971 [in Hebrew]), and Marc SAPERSTEIN, 'Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn' – *Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati: Hebrew University College Press, 1996).

subversive undercurrents against the social elites or against ingrained conventions in society may be found in them.<sup>4</sup>

One of the best-known critiques of the way Torah scholars serve God is in the book *Hovot ha-Levavot* (“Duties of the Heart”), by R. Bahya b. Joseph Ibn Paquda (written in 1080). Bahya objected to the tendency of scholars to concern themselves with details of Talmudic discourse while ignoring spiritual matters and moral improvement, which are the most important:

Those who make efforts to understand the words of the Talmudic sages and to resolve doubts and explain obtuse passages in order to make a name for themselves and gain fame, but ignore the duty of the heart and do not awaken to their dearth of acts, they use up their days in the knowledge of matters known from the history of laws that are too obscure in books of halakhic ruling for the average person [...] and remembered disagreement of Talmudists with novelties that extend from the laws and they fail to examine that which they had no right to ignore – matters of their soul, which they were obliged to examine.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., in Ashkenaz an outstanding example is *Sefer Hasidim*. Cf. Yitshak BAER, “The Socio-Religious Tendency of *Sefer Hasidim*” [in Hebrew], *Zion* 3 (1938) pp. 1-50; for criticism of the elite in late medieval and early modern Eastern Europe, cf. Haim Hillel BEN-SASSON, *Hagut vehanhaga – The Social Views of Polish Jewry at the End of the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1959 [in Hebrew]); Mendel PIEKARZ, *The Beginning of Hasidism* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1975 [in Hebrew]), and Yishai SHAHAR, *Criticism of the Society and Leadership in the Musar and Drush Literature in Eighteenth-Century Poland* (Jerusalem, 1992 [in Hebrew]).

<sup>5</sup> See R. BAHYA B. JOSEPH IBN PAQUDA, *Hovot ha-Levavot [The Duties of the Heart]* (Jerusalem: A Levin Epstein Press, 1959) Worship of God, chapter 4, pp. 99-107. This idea is stressed in several places in the course of the work, and it seems that there were additional scholars in his time, who also held this opinion. Thus, in his preface he praised one scholar who was asked a marginal question about the laws of divorce and answered as follows: “You are the man who asks about something that will do us no harm if we do not know it, do you know everything that you should know of the commandments that you are not free to ignore and you should not violate, so that you are free to think about strange questions, that will grant you no benefit in your learning and your faith, nor will it repair anything awry in the virtues of your soul?” (*Ibid.*, pp. 16-17). Besides the critique of taking too much interest in halakha, Rabbenu Bahya was also of the opinion that combined religious piety and abstinence together with philosophical examination. His religious approach aroused much criticism in later generations, for example, in the book *Derekh Hayyim* by R. Menahem de Lonzano. Cf. Joseph R. HACKER, “Agitation against Philosophy in Istanbul in the Sixteenth Century: Studies in Menahem

Rabbenu Bahya's view was influenced by Muslim and particularly Sufi thought, which stressed the love of God, moral life, and intention in action, more than the law itself. Thus it seems that the root of his critique of Torah students, who devote all of their time to clarifying the details of Halakha, is derived primarily from a theological view of the way to achieve the purpose of the *individual* – unification with God.<sup>6</sup>

R. Isaac Aboab (the First), who was active in the first half of the fourteenth century, also expressed a similar critique, but differently. In the preface to the trilogy of works that he wrote, which are devoted to the needs of the community in various areas, he criticizes scholars, who spend their days studying Halakha, and particularly those laws that are not in use or only rarely relevant, rather than the issues that society needs. This concept expresses a conceptual change of approach towards the role of the scholar and the purpose of his actions. Attention to the success of the public and not that of the individual scholar constitutes a significant difference between these two critiques and presents a different understanding regarding the ideal function of the scholar and the purpose of his activities. According to Aboab, scholars should not confine themselves to the narrow world of casuistry, argumentation, and the “four cubits of Halakha,” but should deal more with the spiritual needs of the community in the philosophical, ethical, and educational areas steeped in the teachings of the Sages.

And I have observed that the Talmud, which is the basis and the pillar, remains, thanks to our sins, solitary [...] only a few learn it. They occupy themselves with it for days or years, interpreting the laws, learning the statutes and judgments, many or few, adhering to minute details

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de Lonzano's *Derekh Hayyim*” [in Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature – Isaiah Tishbi Jubilee Volume*, eds. Joseph DAN and Joseph R. HACKER (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986) pp. 507-536: 514-517. Regarding the dissemination, the attitudes, and the influence of *Duties of the Heart*, cf. Israel M. TA-SHMA, “An Abridged Version of Duties of the Heart by R. Asher b. Shlomo of Lunel” [in Hebrew], *Alei Sefer* 10 (1982) pp. 13-24; Amos GOLDREICH, “Possible Arabic Sources of the Distinction between ‘Duties of the heart’ and ‘Duties of the Limbs’” [in Hebrew], *Te'uda* 6 (1988) pp. 179-208: 204-205.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding his religious teaching, cf. Diana LOBEL, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue – Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

but ignoring the true principles,<sup>7</sup> hopping between two opinions, learning two or three folios, they are slothful, slothful. And they spend their days on *Tosafot*<sup>8</sup> and novella, asking questions and giving novel solutions, and on the nature of divorce writs and marriage, releasing vows and oaths, and in the laws of the other sections, sometimes new every morning. There are ten rulers in the city, dealing with the *halakhot* of “allowing a field to be grazed bare by one’s livestock” and the chapter of “the tooth” and “the outbreak of fire.”<sup>9</sup> They abandon precious stones and pearls and spend their days on problems in *Eduyot* and *Horayot*<sup>10</sup> and do not issue a ruling. They take a bride without a blessing.<sup>11</sup> Their illness has no cure. They work hard and fight like an army over the words of Rabbi Akiva and the expressions of Abaye and Rava. That is fitting for students who fear the word of the Lord at first in order to exercise their minds, but not to do so all their lives. And even though the intention

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the requirement to deal with principles and not details, see below.

<sup>8</sup> In Spain, the study of *Tosafot* was not the common practice mainly, because it was regarded as a collective work, unsystematic and incoherent, and not focused on halakhic decision-making. For example, R. Samuel Ibn Abbas (thirteenth century) wrote: “And he should not try to investigate the novellae (*hidushim*) and addenda (*Tosafot*) and their like which were written by many people, of differing numbers, because they all waste a person’s time with vanity and folly, and anything is allowed; it contributes nothing to the intended purpose of the Talmud” (Simcha ASSAF, *A Source-Book for the History of Jewish Education from the Beginning of the Middle Ages to the Period of the Haskalah*, ed. Shmuel GLICK [New York–Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2001 [in Hebrew]] vol. II, p. 66). This approach is expressed by the fact that the Spanish works are characterized as individualistic and directed towards Halakha. From R. Abraham Zacuto and additional sources it appears that they minimized the study of *Tosafot* until the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula. Zacuto wrote: “And since Nahmanides in Aragon and Castile they would read the Talmud in the yeshivas until the Expulsion with Rashi and the novellae of Nahmanides, and only a very small part of sages were reading what is called *Tosafot* and they were not held in high regard (R. Abraham ZACUTO, *Sefer ha-Yuhasin*, ed. Zevi H. FILIPOWSKI [Frankfurt am Main: Wahrmann, 1925] p. 221). The Toledo region was influenced by Rabbenu Asher, who moved there in the early fourteenth century. R. I. Aboab was active there, where some people studied *Tosafot*, but usually that study concentrated on the *Tosafot* of R. Peretz and of Rabbenu Asher.

<sup>9</sup> Laws of Damages (*Nezikin*); see Ex. 22:4-5 and *Baba Qama* 1:1.

<sup>10</sup> The tractate *Horayot* concerns cases in which the court erred in giving judgment. These *halakhot* are not applicable to the general public.

<sup>11</sup> According to Tractate *Kallah* 1:1. He meant by this that their study is of no use, just as “a bride without a blessing [‘Seven Benedictions’ or a wedding canopy] is forbidden to her husband like a menstruating woman.”

of some of them is good – to obtain the World to Come this way – better yet is a dry crust, which enables Torah and wisdom and tranquility [...] and to spend all their days and use all of their time to know the main rulings, to teach them in the streets and the markets, to every one of those ignoramuses who toss over their backs the legends, documents and secrets, parables and puzzles, more precious than gold, sublime and clear wisdom. The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings. Better you should hold on to one and not let go of the other, lest the word of the Lord be scorned.<sup>12</sup>

R. Isaac Aboab and his contemporaries, who were active towards the end of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries, were part of a growing phenomenon of sages who devoted themselves to non-elitist religious writing. This phenomenon continued to characterize the creativity of the Jews of Spain until their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula and even later in the Spanish diaspora. Non-elitist writing influenced the evaluation of the rabbinic literature of the Late Middle Ages and its perception as mediocre. However, the realization that this was an intended change derived from the needs of the generation may reduce that criticism. To a great degree it is possible to appreciate the new genres that characterized rabbinic literature in Spain in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as those that gave strength to the Jewish communities in times of distress and were valued highly in their day.

Under the rubric of “non-elitist” works different and varied compositions were written, which may be divided into two central groups:

- (1) Works that were intended for the public lacking in broad knowledge, but able to make use of rabbinic literature in Hebrew that was made accessible to it.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Isaac ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. Yehuda PREIS-HOREB and Moshe Hayim KATZENELLENBOGEN (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1961) p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> This group includes works that were written for certain sectors of the public, such as the book *Šeda la-Derekh*, written by R. Menaḥem ben Aharon ibn Zerah, who stated in his preface that he wrote it on behalf of the courtiers, who needed a book that contained a variety of information when they journeyed from place to place: “And when I saw that those who go to the court of our lord the king, may he be exalted, are a shield and a protection for parts of the community, each in accordance with his status and position, and indeed due to the abundance of turmoil and the appetite for luxuries [...], they go lacking in fulfillment of the commandments, particularly those who are on the



(2) Works written for beginning students, who need aids to help them learn, as well as works for learned individuals on different levels. This literature includes mainly clarifications of biblical commentaries, and methodological literature for study of the Talmud.

Below I shall present some examples of this kind of writing.

In the area of Halakha, we find treatises that were addressed to the general public in that period. It is expressed in the style of halakhic writing; arrangement of halakhic literature in a way that makes it easy to find a particular law; creation of specialized and accessible literature for certain parts of the public; and focusing on relevant laws primarily in the sphere of *Orah hayyim*, which concerns day-to-day and yearly cycle laws. Judah Galinsky has written at length regarding this phenomenon in the varieties of halakhic literature in the fourteenth century, surveying all the relevant writings from that century, outlining the image of the intended audience and perceiving in the most important halakhic work of the century – *Arba'ah Turim* by R. Ya'aqov ben Asher – a part of this trend.<sup>14</sup>

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roads and in the service of the king, and they are: prayer and blessings, observing the forbidden and the permitted in food, the observance of the Sabbath and festivals, and the laws regarding women.” R. Menahem ben Aharon IBN ZERAH, *Sefer Tsedah la-Derekh*, ed. Rami YUNAEV (Tel Aviv: n.s., 2014) pp. 58-59.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GALINSKY, *The Four Turim*, and Judah D. GALINSKY, “On Popular Halakhic Literature and the Jewish Reading Audience in Fourteenth-Century Spain,” *JQR* 98 (2008) pp. 305-327. Halakhic writing that summarizes the *halakhot* and makes them accessible without the halakhic discussion also developed in Ashkenaz and France in the thirteenth century. Israel M. Ta-Shma saw in this development a response to the critique of the Ashkenazi pietists of the elitism of the scholars and their way of learning; see Israel M. TA-SHMA, “The Commandments of Study of Torah as a Religious and Social Problem in *Sefer hasidim*” [in Hebrew], in *Ritual, Custom and Reality in Franco-Germany, 1000-1350*, ed. Israel M. TA-SHMA (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996) pp. 119-122, and *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature, vol. 1. Germany* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2004) pp. 317-344). Regarding Galinsky’s opinion that the center of this halakhic literary development was in France, see Judah D. GALINSKY, “Between Ashkenaz (Germany) and Tsarfat (France): Two Approaches Toward Popularizing Jewish Law,” in *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France*, eds. Elisheva BAUMGARTEN and Judah D. GALINSKY (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 77-92: 85-86, and “Rabbinic, Readers, and the Paris Book Trade: Understanding French Halakhic Literature in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Cultures*, eds. Elisheva BAUMGARTEN and Judah D. GALINSKY (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) pp. 73-92.



Writing super-commentaries on the Bible was widespread in the Late Middle Ages, mainly with regard to Rashi's commentary. The first super-commentaries we have on Rashi were written in the second half of the fourteenth century<sup>15</sup> and they have been discussed by scholars in the last generations, especially at length by Eric Lawee.<sup>16</sup> In addition, even

<sup>15</sup> The first super-commentaries we have were written in the second half of the fourteenth century, e.g. the commentary by R. Samuel Almosnino (regarding his time and location, cf. Moshe PHILIP, [ed.], *Perush la-Perush Rashi me-harav ha-gadol Rabbi Shmuel Almosnino* [Petah Tiqwa: n.s., 1998] pp. 5-7); the super-commentary by R. Samuel Ibn Shoshan on Rashi (Ms. Oxford-Bodl., Neubauer 201 [Institute for Micro-filmed Hebrew Manuscripts: 16337]) which cites (fol. 18r) things he heard from R. Menahem b. Zerah, who was active in Castile in the fourteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Among scholars of the Rabbinic-Talmudic orientation, Rashi's commentary was the preferred of all the Medieval Bible commentaries. An expression of this is the ruling of Halakha that reading Rashi's commentary along with the Torah portion itself fulfills the obligation of "twice Scripture and once a translation" (see Beit Yosef, O.H., 285). Recently Moshe Philip published critical editions of super-commentaries on Rashi. For example, the afore-mentioned commentary by R. Samuel Almosnino (PHILIP [ed.], *Perush la-Perush Rashi me-harav ha-gadol Rabbi Shmuel Almosnino*); the commentary of R. Moses b. Shem Tov ibn Gabbai ha-Sefardi (Petah Tiqwa: n.s., 2006); the commentary by R. Jacob Kenizal (Petah Tiqwa: n.s., 1998); the commentary by R. Abraham ibn Bokhrat (Petah Tiqwa: n.s., 1985); the commentary by R. Judah Khalatz, *Mesiah 'Ilmim* (Petah Tiqwa: n.s., 2001). Evidently there were many more commentaries, but they were lost. Regarding the canonization of Rashi's commentary on the Bible, cf. Abraham GROSS, "Rashi and the Tradition of Study of the Written Law in Spain" [in Hebrew], in *Rashi – Studies in his Work*, ed. Zvi A. STEINFELD (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1993) pp. 27-55; Jordan S. PENKOWER, "The Process of Canonization of Rashi's Commentary on the Torah" [in Hebrew], in *Limud va-da'at be-mahshava yehudit*, ed. Howard (Haim) KREISEL (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2006) pp. 123-146; Eric LAWEE, "From Sepharad to Ashkenaz: A Case Study in the Rashi Supercommentary Tradition," *AJS Review* 30:2 (2006) pp. 393-425, "The reception of Rashi's 'Commentary on the Torah' in Spain: the case of Adam's mating with the animals," *JQR* 97 (2007) pp. 33-66, and "The Omnisignificant Imperative in Rashi Supercommentary in Late Medieval Spain," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 10 (2014) pp. 169-192, and Yoel MARCIANO, *The Jewish Sages in Fifteenth-Century Spain: Their Education, Social Status, Religious and Intellectual Profile* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010) appendix no. 1.

Regarding the use of Rashi on the Bible as a means for training beginning students as a methodological technique enabling them to progress to more advanced study of the Talmud, cf. MARCIANO, *Sages of Spain*, pp. 36-44.

Some scholars wrote independent commentaries (not super-commentaries on the extant commentary) for the students, e.g. R. Joseph Hayoun who wrote a philosophical

earlier, extensive commentaries were written on the commentaries of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra<sup>17</sup> and of Ramban (Nahmanides).<sup>18</sup> Unlike the

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interpretation commentary on the Scroll of *Song of Songs* (philosophical commentaries on Song of Songs generally view the allegory of love for the beloved as referring to the desire of man to adhere to the Active Intellect) for students with a philosophical orientation. In apologetic language he explains why he went to the trouble —and his explanation is astonishing: “Since many among our nation [who] ‘destroy the vineyards’ [Song of Songs 2:15] will rejoice greatly if verses are given a philosophical, allegorical interpretation, I shall also offer such an interpretation, a broad commentary for everyone, without saying very deep and foreign things, that are difficult to understand for beginners.” Abraham GROSS, *R. Yosef b. Avraham Hayoun: Leader of the Lisbon Jewish Community and his Literary Work* (Ramat Gan, Bar Ilan University Press, 1993 [in Hebrew]) p. 186; Yossi MARCIANO, *The Philosophical interpretation of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages: Rabbi Joseph Al-Fawwāl and other commentators* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 2005 [in Hebrew]) vol. I, pp. 127-128 and 197-198.

<sup>17</sup> Some rationalistic scholars criticized Rashi and preferred to regard Ibn Ezra’s commentary as canonical. These commentaries are characterized by a high level of intellectual discourse and should not be regarded as non-elitist. Regarding the division between critics of Rashi and his supporters, based on an inclination towards rationalism, in the Middle Ages and Modern Times, see Judah ROSENTHAL, “Rashi and Rambam as Appreciated by Generations” [in Hebrew], in *Mehkarim u-meqorot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1967) pp. 117-125. The awakening of philosophically-oriented scholars, particularly in the fourteenth century, is referred to in research as the “Renaissance of Ibn Ezra,” an expression used by A. Altmann, and following him by other researchers, when they dealt with the many super-commentaries written on Ibn Ezra’s Torah commentary. See Alexander ALTMANN, “Moses Narboni’s ‘Epistle on Shi’ur Qoma’,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander ALTMANN (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1967) pp. 225-288: 241-242; GROSS, “Rashi and the Tradition of Study of the Written Law in Spain,” pp. 35-37; Dov SCHWARTZ, *The Philosophy of a Fourteenth Century Jewish Neo-Platonic Circle* (Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute and The Bialik Institute Press, 1996 [in Hebrew]) pp. 13-15. According to SCHWARTZ (*The Philosophy of a Fourteenth Century Jewish Neo-Platonic Circle*, pp. 33-45) the awakening of writing super-commentaries on Ibn Ezra’s commentary was a reaction to the rising interest in Kabbalah and astrology. See also Judah L. FLEISCHER, “Commentaries on the Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Scripture” [in Hebrew], in *Oṣar ha-ḥayyim* 11, 12 and 14 (in installments); Naftali BEN MENAḤEM, “Commentators on Ibn Ezra on Scripture” [in Hebrew], *Areshet* 3 (1961) pp. 71-92; Uriel SIMON, “Interpreting the Interpreter: Super-commentaries on Ibn Ezra’s Commentaries between 1275 and 1400” [in Hebrew] in *The Bible in the Light of its Interpreters – Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sarah

See note 18 on next page.

super-commentaries on Ibn Ezra which were intended for intellectuals, the super-commentaries on Rashi and Ramban were intended for different audiences of students of varying levels among them some beginners. An example of such maybe found in the introduction R. Judah Khalatz wrote at the beginning of his super-commentary on Rashi: “And my students asked me to write a super-commentary on Rashi, but I did not agree because it is not a glorious endeavor. And not only that, but after the first year I refused to read commentaries with them but only the long Talmud and Alfasi with the commentary of Rabbenu Nissim.”<sup>19</sup> Even after he agreed to write a super-commentary on Rashi, he did not have much regard for the work: “I did not do so for credit, since what credit is there in it?”<sup>20</sup>

In the area of Talmudic writing, the main books that are worthy of mention are the two most comprehensive and important ones: *Sefer Keritut* by R. Samson of Chinon, evidently written in the early fourteenth century<sup>21</sup> and *Sefer Halikhot ‘Olam* by R. Yeshua ha-Levi, evidently

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YEFET (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994) pp. 367-411; Eleazar GUTWIRTH, “Fourteenth Century Super-commentaries on Abraham Ibn Ezra,” in *Abraham Ibn Ezra y su tiempo*, ed. Fernando DÍAZ ESTEBAN (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1990) pp. 147-154. Regarding Ibn Ezra’s exegetical method, and its different character and outlook from Rashi’s method and viewpoint, cf., e.g., Uriel SIMON, “The Spanish School of Biblical Interpretation” [in Hebrew], in *Moreshet Sepharad – The Sephardi Legacy*, ed. Haim BEINART (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press – The Hebrew University, 1992) pp. 115-136. Some of the commentaries were published; see, e.g., JOSEF BONFILS (TOBH ELEM), *Sophnath Pan’eah*, ed. David HERZOG (vol. 1: Krakau: Joseph Fisher Press, 1912; vol. 2: Berlin: Itzikovsky Press, 1930), and Howard (Haim) KREISEL, (ed.), *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra. The Earliest Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra’s Torah Commentary* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> E.g., R. Isaac ABOAB, *Super-commentary on the Commentary of Ramban*, in *Otsar Mefarshei ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: n.s., 1973).

<sup>19</sup> R. Judah KHALATZ, *Mesiah ‘Ilmim*, ed. Moshe PHILIP (Petaḥ Tiqwa: n.s., 2001) p. 31. By “long Talmud” (“*Talmud arokh*”) he refers to the Babylonian Talmud as distinguished from Alfasi, which is usually called “The little Talmud” (“*Talmud Qatan*”).

<sup>20</sup> KHALATZ, *Mesiah ‘Ilmim*, ed. M. PHILIP, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> The date of R. Samson of Chinon’s death is unclear and is presumed to be between 1310 and 1330, and his work is presumed to be composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century; see R. SAMSON OF CHINON, *Sefer Keritut*, ed. Yoel Z. ROTH (Brooklyn: Hosa’at Sameah, 1961) pp. 8-10, and Ephraim URBACH, *Ba’alei Hatosafot* (vol. II: Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1980) p. 721.

from the mid-fifteenth century – both of which are books of “*kelalim*” (“general principles”) that present the five areas of knowledge essential for successful study: the order of generations of the sages in the Mishna and Talmud, principles for determining Halakha, principles of Talmudic hermeneutics, the language of the Talmud, and principles of the Talmud. Similarly R. Immanuel wrote to his student:

Before studying you should know the principles of the Talmud, so that you can answer every question and achieve a thorough and full understanding. And one should be accustomed to five, and they are the gate to understanding, and one should be diligent in them: The first way is to know the order of the tradition from one person to the next in the memory of the sages and how they are called, and to know who was a master and who was a disciple, in order to question the words from one place to another. The second way is to know the words and languages that are unusual and need to be investigated. The third way is that you should know the rules that are stated in the “thirteen ways of the Talmudic hermeneutics” in which the Torah is interpreted [of Rabbi Ishmael] and the thirty-two ways of Rabbi Yose Haglili. The fourth way is that you should know who is the *Tanna* that the Halakha follows [...] and likewise in the case of *Amoraim*. The fifth way is to know the method of the Talmud and how it operates, its issues, and its arguments, in general and in particular, and its precision, and its argumentations and the way of discussing an issue [...] <sup>22</sup>

Even though the literature of principles benefited first class scholars, its primary intention was to help students. The areas of knowledge assembled in these books (particularly in *Sefer Keritut* and *Sefer Halikhot 'Olam*) were essential for preparing the students, particularly in the system of Hispano-Jewish speculation, which became popular in the Iberian Peninsula in the Late Middle Ages.<sup>23</sup> By using the technique of

<sup>22</sup> Yoel SHILO, *The Principles of the Talmud to R. Immanuel ha-Sefaradi* (Masters Thesis. Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1991 [in Hebrew]) section II, ch. 4, pp. 109-112. This chapter is essential to comprehend the Iberian talmudic speculation and it seems that the author intended to open his composition with it, as Shilo noted.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding this system, see, e.g., Hayyim Zalman DIMITROVSKY, “Rabbi Ya’aqov Berab’s Academy” [in Hebrew], *Sefunot* 7 (1963) pp. 43-102, and “By Way of *Pilpul*” [in Hebrew], in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul LIEBERMAN (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1975) pp. 110-181; Hayim BENTOV, “Method of Study of Talmud in the Yeshivot of Salonica and Turkey After the Expulsion from

principles, which was widespread at that time,<sup>24</sup> the students could encompass much knowledge, identify exceptions that required investigation, and understand the characteristics of Talmudic language and the principles of Halakha.<sup>25</sup> These works should not be included in the category of elitist writings, but as works intended mainly for students and learned people at the beginning of their studies.

The appeal to the public is also expressed in the expanded interest in homiletics. The sermon was one of the central functions of a communal rabbi.<sup>26</sup> In the letter of appointment of R. Joseph Yeshu'a as Rabbi of Saragossa two types of sermons which he is expected to give to the congregation are mentioned. The first is the routine sermon for Sabbaths, joyous occasions, eulogies and the like. The second is twelve sermons that would be delivered during the year when he was expected to provide the community with a first-class sermon.<sup>27</sup> In the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries the phenomenon of writing books of sermons and aids, like *Kad ha-Qemah* by R. Bahya b. Asher b. Halawa, and *Menorat ha-Maor* by R. Isaac Aboab (which we shall discuss below) as well as *'Ein ha-Qore* by R. Joseph Ibn Shem Tov, which is a guide for preparing

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Spain" [in Hebrew], *Sefunot* 13 (1971-1978) pp. 5-102; Aviram RAVITSKY, *Aristotelian Logic and Talmudic Methodology* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2010 [in Hebrew]) pp. 244-283; MARCIANO, *Sages of Spain*, pp. 140-216. Regarding the origins of the technique and its echoes in the fourteenth century, cf. Yoel MARCIANO, "From Aragon to Castile – The Origins of Sephardi Talmudic Speculation in Fifteenth-Century Spain" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (2008) pp. 573-599.

<sup>24</sup> See below a quote from R. Nissim, at note 74.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding the importance of the literature of principles, cf. MARCIANO, *Sages of Spain*, pp. 162-189.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding sermons, see mainly Marc SAPERSTEIN, *Jewish Preaching, 1200-1800: An Anthology* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1989). Regarding disseminating ideas by means of sermons, see SAPERSTEIN, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, chapter 7.

<sup>27</sup> R. Joseph Yeshua committed himself to delivering twelve sermons per annum, i.e. on the average one a month. Regarding the letter of appointment of R. Joseph Yeshu'a, cf. Asunción BLASCO MARTÍNEZ, "La contratación de rabí Jucé ben Josuá como 'Rav' o Marbiztorá de la aljama de Zaragoza (1454)," *Sefarad* 67 (2007) pp. 71-109; Yoel MARCIANO, "Appointment to the Rabbinate in Ashkenaz and Sefarad at the End of the Middle Ages" [in Hebrew], in *Joseph R. Hacker Jubilee Volume*, eds. Yaron BEN NAEH et al. (Jerusalem, 2014) pp. 244-252.

sermons.<sup>28</sup> The increase in homiletic literature evidently reflects the increase in its status in Iberian society and the importance which contemporary scholars attributed to it.

Various sources indicate that the sermon was a public event in great demand in which the public took part, whether the people were able to follow the sophisticated structure of the sermon or not, thus entering under the same religious umbrella with the class of scholars. The multiplicity of books of sermons in the Late Middle Ages<sup>29</sup> testifies to the intensive activity directed towards the general public, activity that blurred the distinction between it and the class of scholars. This trend also led to the writing of guide books for preachers as we shall see below in our discussion of *Menorat ha-Maor*.

An additional literary area that reflects how the scholars addressed the masses is the exceptional extent of commentaries on *Pirquei Avot*, written by Iberian Jews in the Late Middle Ages and by their descendants. It was the custom of Iberian Jewry to read the Chapters of *Pirquei Avot* on the Sabbaths between Passover and Pentecost. Scholars of the Iberian Peninsula wrote numerous commentaries on the tractate and used them extensively in sermons before the public.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See Carmi HOROWITZ, "Preachers, Sermons, and Homiletic Literature" [in Hebrew], in *Moreshet Sepharad – The Sephardi Legacy*, ed. Haim BEINART (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992) pp. 311-320.

<sup>29</sup> Not a few collections of sermons remain from that period. Some of them were printed in the sixteenth century and other recently in critical editions, e.g., the sermons of R. Joshua Ibn Shu'ib, R. Joel Ibn Shu'ib, R. Joseph Ibn Shem Tov, R. Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (II), R. Isaac Karo, R. Isaac Aboab (II – *Nahar Pishon*); cf. SAPERSTEIN, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn*, pp. 75-105 and 163-365. A considerable part of Biblical commentaries, and particularly Torah commentaries, were derived from public sermons delivered in the synagogue and in public.

<sup>30</sup> Among the Jews of Spain the prevalent practice was to read one chapter of *Mishna Avot* on each of the six Sabbaths between Passover and Pentecost. Since there are only five chapters in *Tractate Avot* it was customary to add the chapter "*Kinyan Torah*" (*Tractate Kallah Rabbati*, ch. 8). This chapter concerns the study of Torah and it is an important basis for educational ideas. Several Iberian sages wrote commentaries on *Avot* in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries. In fact, their commentaries are almost all the known commentaries on this tractate from that period. See for example commentaries by: R. Isaac son of Solomon from Toledo, *A Commentary on Tractate Avot* (Jerusalem: Torah Shlema institute, 1965); R. Joseph BEN SHUSHAN, *A Commentary on*

An awareness of the general public is also expressed by the writing of translations of Scripture and prayers. We find such in the preface of R. David b. R. Joseph Abudarham to his book *Hibbur perush ha-berakhhot ve-ha-tefillot* (“A composition of commentary on blessings and prayers”) better known as *Sefer Abudarham*. This book, written in the middle of the fourteenth century, is much more than a prayer book with a commentary, and it includes a great deal of useful material, such as laws, customs and explanations on various subjects. The background to its writing is related in the author’s preface:

And because of the length of the exile and the great troubles, the customs of prayers have changed in all the countries and most of the masses raise their voices and pray to the God of the universe, stumbling like the blind in the dark, and they do not understand the words of the prayer. Nor do they know the order of the customs and their reasons, in order to perform them correctly. Only, one says this way and another says that way, and all are lost in the forest of customs. “The desert” of prayer “has closed in upon them” [Ex. 14:3] and its gates; no one can leave or enter its innermost rooms.

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*Tractate Avot* (Jerusalem: Torah Shlema institute, 1968); R. Shelomo ben Tsemach DURAN, *Magen Avot*, ed. Eliyahu R. ZINI, (Jerusalem: Erez Press, 2000); R. Mattitya HAYISHARI, *A Commentary on Tractate Avot*, ed. Yaakov Sh. SPIEGEL (Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute, 2006); R. Isaac ben Shelomo ALHADIB, *Rashi Avot – A Commentary on Tractate Avot* (Jerusalem: Beit Aharon ve-Israel institute, 2002); Yaakov Sh. SPIEGEL, (ed.), *Three Commentaries on Tractate Avot* (R. Shem-Tov son of Joseph, ibn Shem-Tov, Shem-Tov ibn Shem-Tov, anonymous) (Petaḥ-Tiqwa: n.s., 2011); R. Joseph Hayoun, *Milei d’Avot* (Istanbul 1579); R. Isaac Abravanel, *Nahalat Avot* (Istanbul 1506); R. Joseph Alashkar, *Merkevet ha-Mishne*, eds. Moshe AMAR and Yaakov Sh. SPIEGEL (Lod: Orot Yahadut ha-Magreb, 1993). Many more are cited by R. Samuel de Uzeda in his anthology on the tractate – *Midrash Shemuel*, Venice 1579. Regarding the special status of Tractate Avot, particularly among the Jews of Spain, cf. bibliography in Aharon AHREND, “Mishnah Study and Study Groups in Modern Times” [in Hebrew], *JSIJ* 3 (2004) pp. 19-53: 19, nt. 1; Yaakov Sh. SPIEGEL, (ed.), R. Joseph Alashkar. *Tractate Avot with the Commentary Mirkevet Ha-Mishne* (Lod: Orot Yahadut ha-Magreb, 1993) pp. 48-52; and Nahem ILAN, “Between an Oral Sermon and a Written Commentary: A Consideration of Rabbi Joseph Ben Shoshan’s Polemic in His Avot Commentary,” *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42 (2012) pp. 183-199, and “Rabbi Joseph ben Shoshan and his Commentary on Tractate Avot as an Outstanding Example of an ‘Egodocument’,” *Iberia Judaica* IX (2017) pp. 83-112.



And when I saw that the gates of prayer and worship were locked, and those who knew how to say it were reduced in number, it occurred to me to write this book.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that this book was among the select works printed in an incunabulum edition in the Iberian Peninsula (Lisbon 1489) testifies to the benefit that his generation found in it.<sup>32</sup>

The motivation for this phenomenon in Iberian Jewish society can be attributed primarily to the weakening of the status of the Jews in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the desire of scholars to help to strengthen religious life and respond to the needs of the public, even if these works were not regarded as first-class.<sup>33</sup> Against this background one should understand the activity of R. Isaac Aboab, and in particular his book *Menorat ha-Maor*.

## 2. RABBI ISAAC ABOAB'S OUTLOOK

The *Menorat ha-Maor* ("The Candelabrum of Light", Constantinople 1513) of R. Isaac Aboab b. Abraham (the first), is a comprehensive work on ethics and appropriate religious behavior, in which he integrated nearly all of the rabbinic sources he found on the subject.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> R. David b. Joseph ABUDERHAM, *Abuderham – Hibbur Perush ha-Berakhot veta-Tefillot*, ed. Eliyahu GRUENZWEIG (vol. 1: Jerusalem: Keren Reem, 2016) p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> The book was printed five more times in the course of the sixteenth century: Constantinople 1513, Fez 1516, Venice 1546 and 1566, Salonika 1568.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding the weakening of the Jewish community in this period, see Yitzhak BAER, *The History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (vol. 2: Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966) pp. 306-378. Writing religious literature for the general public was also widespread in Christian Western Europe in the Late Middle Ages (such as "Books of Hours" that included prayers and chapters of Psalms). Regarding the connection between the phenomenon in Jewish society and that in Christian society, cf. GALINSKY, "On Popular Halakhic Literature," pp. 313-314, and the bibliography cited there.

<sup>34</sup> Aboab admits that there were legends that he did not include in his collection, and he cites seven reasons: lack of books available to him; sources that he forgot to include; sources "that were not required by the author's intent;" sources about which he felt that their inclusion was more harmful than their omission; "esoteric and exalted" things comprehensible only by select individuals; sources that by tasting them the reader "would be exiled to the place of bitter waters and his sin will be due to me;" sources

The book is essentially the first part of a trilogy including two additional works, *Aron ha-'Edut* and *Shulhan ha-Panim*. The description of these additional works and the background to their composition has been preserved in Aboab's introduction to the trilogy and was printed as part of the introduction to *Menorat ha-Maor*, without distinguishing between the introduction to the trilogy and the introduction to *Menorat ha-Maor* itself.<sup>35</sup> The other works are described as follows:

And since the *halakhot* teach us the edicts and rulings, which have several facets, I shall write the opinion of the Geonim and the interpretations of the commentators, those I have seen and those I shall be able to see, in the past and in the future: the words of the Talmud in the center and the clarifications surrounding them, written on both sides. And I called it *Aron ha-'Edut*, so that it would be a testament for me, a memory between my eyes, so that I could hold it before my face at all times, those things that we need in our time, now that because of our sins our Temple was destroyed, until our savior will come speedily in our days. And some of it I separated, calling it *Shulhan ha-Panim*, and I divided it into twelve parts drawing it from the sea of the Talmud, arranging the order of blessings, short and long, and the prayers that are required as stipulated in the Talmud, in the order of *halakhot* – to thank our Maker with them, and to glorify our Creator with them and to praise our King with them and to ask all our needs and give thanks for all our pleasures.<sup>36</sup>

The description of the two compositions conforms to the general character of *Menorat ha-Maor*. All three works have in common the desire to create works that will be useful to the general public, and not specifically for the elite well-versed in Torah. *Shulhan ha-Panim* contains blessings and prayers and their laws and *halakhot*. This work has

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that might help the heretics to claim that the sages erred or expressed contempt for their religion, or wrote against the gentile nations; cf. ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 769.

<sup>35</sup> For example in *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, which is the most widespread, one lengthy introduction appears, presumably comprising four prefaces (pp. 9-10, 11-12, 13-19 and 20). These prefaces appear also in the early manuscripts of the work (regarding the manuscripts, see below, note 44), which reveals that combining them into one place occurred at an early stage. It is possible that R. Isaac Aboab himself combined the general preface and the specific ones into one introduction.

<sup>36</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 12.

survived.<sup>37</sup> *Aron ha-'Edut* dealt with the day-to-day *halakhot* that the public needs to know. That work was lost. From the introduction it is evident that he presented the *halakhot* in clear language, with no content that impedes understanding or orientation in the book (similarly to what he did in the extant *Shulḥan ha-Panim*). All three works – dealing with ethics, *halakha*, and prayer – comprised in the author's estimation, a perfect solution for the needs of his time. Below we shall focus on *Menorat ha-Maor*, and from an analysis of that work and other sources we shall try to explain the motivation for the development of this literary work in its early stages, and to provide a general outline of its characteristics.

*Menorat ha-Maor*, which belongs to the category of ethical literature, encourages the reader to improve his moral character and behavior and to observe the commandments, stressing those that strengthen spirituality and family life. This combination of ethics and religion is very widespread in Jewish ethical literature, and it is derived from the concept of faith that identifies the commandments of the religion and of ethics as one coherent unit.<sup>38</sup>

The book *Menorat ha-Maor* was evidently the first of its kind written in Castile, but it was preceded by anthologies of *midrashim* and *aggadot* of the Sages written about ethical topics. Nevertheless, it is also unique primarily because it is the result of a systematic view that constitutes part of a trilogy meant to provide a coherent and comprehensive response to the needs of the public. As result of the structure of the work

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<sup>37</sup> Private collection (the manuscript was sold from the Schocken Collection, where its signature was 12473 [Microfilm Institute no. 72244]). To a degree, this composition is reminiscent of *Sefer Abudarham* by R. David b. Joseph Abudarham, which concerns the interpretation of the blessings and prayers for the general public, who are not familiar with the laws of prayer and their meanings. R. David Abudarham also operated in Toledo in the first half of the fourteenth century.

<sup>38</sup> *Menorat ha-Maor* discusses notably ethical subjects like the command to refrain from jealousy, lust, honor, transgressions related to speech, and the requirement to adhere to good qualities such as modesty, humility, and to behave peacefully and with love for one's fellowman. Along with ethical matters, the commandments mentioned center around religious life, for example, circumcision, how to raise children, prayer, observing the festivals, respect for parents, to take a wife and maintain a life of holiness, commandments of charity and kindness, truth in judgment, and assigning regular times for Torah study.

and its contents, its wide scope and methodical characteristics were planned conscientiously (as discussed below).

These works that were meant to mediate between religious literature and the public enjoyed great popularity. Evidence of that may be found in the adaptations and commentaries that were written about them. The work *Kad ha-Qemah*, for example, was adapted in *Meni'a ha-Kad* by Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut at the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>39</sup> *Menorat ha-Maor* was interpreted in a commentary by R. Joseph Ibn Halt, as R. Abraham Zacuto recorded: "As R. Joseph Haluta – who wrote a commentary on *Menorat ha-Maor* – explained, all of his commentary is copied from Rashi."<sup>40</sup> This commentary was written evidently in the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>41</sup> In modern times many commentaries were written on the work, the most famous of them *Nefesh Yehuda* (Amsterdam 1701) by R. Moses Frankfurt.<sup>42</sup> Evidence for the enthusiasm with which the work was received over generations is the fact that it was published in more than eighty editions since its first printing (Lisbon 1489) until 1960, among them abbreviations and adaptations.<sup>43</sup> The geographical distribution of the book is also impressive. It was translated into several languages (Ger-

<sup>39</sup> *Meni'a ha-Kad* is an abridged version and summary with additions and emendations. Dov Schwartz published extensive parts of the book. Regarding R. Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut, see the bibliography collected in DOV SCHWARTZ, *Interpretation, Preaching and Rationalism: Writings of Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut* (Tel Aviv: Idra Press, 2017 [in Hebrew]) pp. 149-151.

<sup>40</sup> R. Abraham ZACUTO, *Liber Juchassin*, ed. Herscheil FILIPOWSKI (London 1857) p. 174.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. TA-SHMA, *Hidat Sefer Menorat ha-Maor u-Pitrona*, p. 206; Adam BIN NUN, (ed.), *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor 'im ha-Perushim Nefesh Yehuda ve-Hoq Ya'aqov* (Bnei Brak: Shetilie Zetim Institute, 2012) p. 106. The commentary by R. Joseph Ibn Halut – The National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8.°6391; Cambridge University Library, Add. 1747.

<sup>42</sup> About the commentaries, particularly by Yemeni scholars and the place of the work in Yemeni Jewry, see BIN NUN, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, pp. 106-118.

<sup>43</sup> See the list of printed editions up to 1953 (including translations and abridged editions) in the survey by N. Ben Menahem in the beginning of R. Isaac ABOAB, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, ed. N. BEN MENAHEM (Jerusalem: Eshkol Press, 1953) and compare it with the entries in the Hebrew Bibliography Project, which includes editions printed in several languages in Hebrew letters up to 1960.

man, Yiddish, and Ladino) and it was particularly popular in Yemen, where the rabbis used to read a chapter to the congregation every Sabbath day. Thus it is not surprising that many of the complete or partial manuscripts of the work stem from Yemen. In addition to the many printed editions, the work has come down in a great number of manuscripts, some complete and others partial.<sup>44</sup>

Similar in many ways to Aboab's work is the book by R. Israel Al-Nakawa, also entitled *Menorat ha-Maor* (Cracow 1593).<sup>45</sup> These two works share two basic characteristics: They both focus on ethical matters while including words of encouragement and faith and both of them make extensive and systematic use of *aggadot* (legends) and *midrashim* (homilies) in their exposition. Besides the identical name of both works and their similarity, it seems that some copying was done from one work to the other and it is difficult to determine which one preceded the other. However, as Ta-Shma proved, R. Isaac Aboab was active in the Iberian Peninsula in the first half of the fourteenth century (after 1325), while R. Israel Al-Nakawa lived in the following generation and was martyred at an advanced age in the persecutions of 1391.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it should

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<sup>44</sup> Many of the early manuscripts are undated and they usually preserve only short parts of the work. Nevertheless, the number of items reveals that not a few copies of the work were made. From the period prior to the Expulsion, a notable manuscript is Biblioteca Universitaria Valladolid Ms. 321 (microfilm 71968) that was copied on "Tuesday [...] the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Tishrei [5]244? [=1483?]." (The last digit of the year is hard to read. Only in 1480, 1483, and 1487 did 29 Tishrei fall on a Tuesday). This beautiful manuscript provides the entire text, dated, and was copied by a professional scribe. Another manuscript that provides an important witness, even though it is lacking towards the end of the work, is Oxford - Bodleian Library MS Hunt. Don. 19, pp. 159a-240b. Many of the manuscripts, particularly from the last centuries are from Yemen. Regarding them, see BIN NUN, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, Preface.

<sup>45</sup> Printed in Cracow under the title *Menorat Zahav Kula* ("The Totally Golden Candelabrum"). Parts of this work were already printed in *Reshit Hokhma* ("The Beginning of Wisdom") by R. Elijah DE VIDAS, Venice 1579. Cf. the critical edition: R. Israel b. Joseph b. AL-NAKAWA, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, ed. Hilel. G. ENELAU (New York: Bloch Publishing Company [Jerusalem, 1972 – facsimile edition]) vols. 1-6.

<sup>46</sup> See Israel. M. TA-SHMA, "The Problem of the Book 'Menorat ha-Ma'or' and its Solution" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 64:4 (1995) pp. 395-400. Ta-Shma confirmed Zunz's assumption regarding the time when Aboab's book was written – between 1300-1320, cf. Leopold ZUNZ, *Die Ritus des synagogalen Gottesdienstes* (Berlin: Louis Lamm, 1919) pp. 204-210. However, since R. I. Aboab mentioned the *Tur* in his book, and

be noted that despite the similarity between the two works, they are also significantly different in structure, writing style, and manner of exposition. A deeper look into the books sheds light on a difference of rabbinic orientation of the two authors. As Schwartz has shown, Aboab's book refers in several places to matters of thought, using philosophical terminology and philosophically-oriented sources – revealing the author to be a moderately rationalistic Talmudic-rabbinic scholar.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand Al-Nakawa's book makes no reference to philosophical literature, but does make extensive use of Kabbalistic literature, which is almost entirely absent in Aboab's work.<sup>48</sup>

Another work that should be mentioned in this context is that of R. Bahya b. Asher Ibn Halawa (a student of Rashba),<sup>49</sup> *Kad ha-Qemah* ("The Jug of Flour"). R. Bahya was a contemporary of R. Isaac Aboab and active in Saragossa in Aragon about a generation before him. As mentioned his book is similar in some ways to that of Aboab, which was written evidently in Toledo, Castile. Both books concern ethics and faith, relying on *midrashim* and legends of the Sages and were influenced by the same works of later literature.<sup>50</sup> In addition, both books were written in order to make it easier for the reader, especially preachers, to find rabbinic sources on different subjects. *Kad ha-Qemah* is divided into subjects arranged technically in alphabetical order and *Menorat ha-Maor* is arranged thematically carefully planned around a metaphor of the Menorah, in which each of its seven branches lights another subject, and

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refers to R. Judah ben Asher as "my teacher," the date of composition of the book should be regarded as after 1325 (my thanks to a reader who called my attention to this detail).

<sup>47</sup> See DOV SCHWARTZ, "A Pattern of Moderation: Rabbi Isaac Aboab's *Menorat ha-Maor*" [in Hebrew], *'Alei Sefer* 20 (2009) pp. 7-16: 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> See TA-SHMA, "The Problem of the Book '*Menorat ha-Ma'or*' and its Solution," p. 397.

<sup>49</sup> The dates of Bahya's birth and death are not known. In 1291 he was engaged in writing his commentary on the Torah. Since the commentary is mentioned in his *Kad ha-Qemah*, the latter was clearly written later.

<sup>50</sup> Regarding sources they used, see R. BAHYA, *Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya*, ed. Haim. D. CHAVEL (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1970) pp. 12-13, and ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 6-8.

all of them together bring the individual to religious-ethical improvement.<sup>51</sup>

The structure of the parts of the book is explained in the third part of the preface. Aboab bases the process that the book proposes on three stages taken from the verse “Shun evil and do good, seek amity...” (Ps. 34:15).<sup>52</sup> “Shun evil” – is divided into two parts: the first light, to stay away from bad qualities (jealousy, lust, and pursuit of honor), to which people are naturally inclined. The second light, refraining from sins of speech (mocking the scholars, lying, flattery, slander, insults, foolish talking, “not to fill one’s mouth with laughter,” “not to mention the name of God in vain,” not to say things that are blasphemous). After shunning evil, R. I. Aboab goes over to “doing good” – which is divided into three parts: the third light: observing the commandments that correct physical attributes (circumcision, education, prayer, the festivals, honoring parents, taking a wife, charity and acts of kindness, truth in judgment, pursuing the commandments). The fourth light (the central one in the Menorah): study of Torah in order to achieve intellectual virtues (to maintain times for study of Torah, to learn dialectics, and to respect students of Torah). The fifth light: paths of repentance (stages of repentance, days of repentance, ways of atonement). After completing “doing good,” one is expected to continue to the next and final stage, “seeking amity” – divided into two parts. The sixth light: paths of peace and love (respectful behavior and pursuing peace). The seventh light: humbleness, which is the key to living in peace with one’s fellow men (humility and bashfulness).

In addition to the process by which a person develops from one stage to the next, the Menorah also has an aspect of symmetry. The branches of the Menorah, three on the right and three on the left, are arranged in a kind of mirror image: The first branch concerns distancing the indi-

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<sup>51</sup> The purpose of *Kad ha-Qemah* is made clear by the opening poem of the book: BAHYA, *Kitvei Rabbeinu Bahya*, ed. CHAVEL, pp. 17-18. The thrust of the introductory poem is that the author regarded the book as something needed by the public for whom studying the Talmud was difficult, but *midrashim* and *aggadot* were invigorating, thus he arranged his book alphabetically in order to enable laymen and preachers to find what they were looking for.

<sup>52</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 18-19.



vidual from bad traits, such as jealousy, lust and pursuit of honor; opposite it, the seventh and last branch concerns modesty, humility, and shame. The second branch deals with the prohibition of speaking against one's fellow, and opposite it the sixth branch concerns seeking peace and brotherly love. The third branch pertains to observance of the central commandments of Jewish life, and opposite it the fifth branch discusses repentance for those who have not been meticulous in their observance and acceptance of the suffering that grants atonement. At the center of the Menorah is the branch devoted to the study of Torah. This branch is in the middle of the Menorah because the study of Torah is the foundation for all the aspects of religion and ethics discussed in the other parts of the book.

A study of the structure of the book and its contents reveals two central things:

The structure of the book and the choice of subjects demonstrate the author's priorities. He concentrates on the values that he regards as the basis of religious and ethical behavior, and, in a similar vein, he chooses the central commandments of the "life cycle" that are essential in order to maintain a religious and ethical identity. He does all of this without going into the details of *halakhot* that are irrelevant to the masses.

The book is not just a collection of sources arranged by subject (like *Kad ha-Qemah*), but an effort to create a complete and coherent structure of religious and ethical principles. It does so by means of prescribing the precise recipe for the religious and spiritual health of the believer and the stages for achieving it.

The general background behind the writing of Aboab's book is apparent in the preface, in which he criticizes the understanding of Torah by contemporary scholars and saw his book as a way of correcting it. Aboab criticized in very harsh terms the class of scholars of his generation. He called on them not to confine themselves to the narrow world of *pilpul* (casuistry), halakhic speculation and the exclusive sphere of Halakha. In his opinion what they are doing is appropriate only for the preparatory period of the sage, who needs to sharpen his mind. However, a person who has already studied should devote himself to other dimensions of the religion, which are found in "legends, documents and secrets, parables and puzzles." In these sources there are philosophical,

intellectual, and ethical aspects that someone who restricts himself to the confines of Halakha misses. He advises to learn from the Sages, who dealt with a variety of areas, as reflected by the Talmudic text that includes along with Halakha matters of thought, ethics and human behavior in *Midrash* and *Aggada*.<sup>53</sup> He calls on them to devote more energy to the spiritual needs of the public in intellectual, moral, and educational areas, that are entrenched in the teachings of the Sages.

We should not attribute to Aboab a lack of interest in the halakhic aspects of the Talmud.<sup>54</sup> However, he does stress that studying Halakha alone does not provide an answer to the issues of faith and ethics that his generation so desperately needed, in particular the lower classes. He does not spare criticism of the occupation with Talmudic casuistry that serves no purpose, particularly for the masses, and criticizes the rabbis who give rulings to be observed by the public, but neglect their duty to provide spiritual leadership. Towards the end of the preface to his book, Aboab repeats his approach towards study of the Torah more emphatically:

And if I discuss at length general principles, I shall be brief regarding details [...] since they have already been mentioned in all the rulings and compositions, and in other books. Since we do not need to deal at length with the laws of '*arakhim* [assessments].<sup>55</sup> **And if people will be**

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<sup>53</sup> This is how Aboab describes the ideal situation in the time of the Sages: "This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their righteousness. The beginning of wisdom is initially fear of the Lord. Evening, morning and noon their prayer is an enigma of the words of God. Their love is wisdom and understanding. All their desire is to know reason so that they gain wisdom in the end. They deal with Scripture and Mishna every day and in every season. And they merited both worlds [this world and the world to come, Y.M.]. That is why they wrote in the Gemara every severe *halakha* [=subject] and every fine legend and every hidden puzzle and every noble wisdom and every selected counsel and every clear discussion and every crowned trait." ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 10. It should be noted that Aboab's criticism of the behavior of the scholars of his day is not confined to the subject of *Midrash* and *Aggada*, but to the entire curriculum.

<sup>54</sup> Regarding this scholar's orientation as an example of a moderate scholar who does not tend to extremes, see SCHWARTZ, "A Pattern of Moderation." In this article Schwartz presents a number of issues about which Aboab's moderation is apparent.

<sup>55</sup> This is evidently a reference to the laws of '*Arakhin* in the Mishna, most of which were applicable only when the Temple existed or to the reality in Eretz Israel, but were not relevant in the Diaspora.

righteous,<sup>56</sup> they will not occupy themselves discussing debts and damages. And if they observe the Sabbath, [refraining] from work, and they do not struggle to know the Halakha, and to make homilies on the degree of “going out”,<sup>57</sup> to examine all the problems. And we do not have the obligation of a sin offering and its related matters, nor the law of “exempt but forbidden” and its ramifications.<sup>58</sup> And we have neither sacrifices nor twenty-four gifts [to the priests].<sup>59</sup> But regarding everything, study and receive a reward.<sup>60</sup> And you shall have no foreign god,<sup>61</sup> and remember your Creator in the days of your youth.<sup>62</sup> And for this you require intelligence and understanding, and ethics and confidence and exultation in order to enter under the wings of the Divine presence.<sup>63</sup>

His criticism of the way the Talmud and Halakha are studied is harsh and direct. He objects to the common curriculum, proposing new goals based on study of *Midrash* and *Aggada* as cited in his book. Aboab expresses his hope that “people” will also know how to focus appropriately on the important subjects for developing their spiritual and ethical world, and that their study of *halakhot* will be correctly regulated in terms of “study and receive a reward.” In his opinion the need for *Aggada* and *Midrash* in his generation is greater than the need for Halakha. He continues as follows:

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<sup>56</sup> Such is the reading in early manuscripts; cf. ABOAB, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, ed. BEN MENAHEM: “And if my children were righteous.”

<sup>57</sup> The prohibition of moving items from one domain to another on the Sabbath; see *Shabbat* 1:1.

<sup>58</sup> “Exempt but forbidden.” Acts that the Sages forbade even though the Torah exempted those who committed them from punishment. The author adds them to the list of subjects the clarification of which is meaningless because they are forbidden, and the discussion is only about the degree of severity of the transgression.

<sup>59</sup> The 24 gifts given to the priests in the time of the Temple, which, like the sacrifices are not applicable.

<sup>60</sup> “Study and receive a reward.” A Talmudic expression that refers to the study of *halakhot* that are not applicable, but their study is regarded meritorious; see *Sanhedrin* 51b.

<sup>61</sup> See Psalms 81:10.

<sup>62</sup> Eccl. 12:1.

<sup>63</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 20.

And much as a person for his sustenance required some times in a day bread and many times water to maintain his body in health, here too in order to sustain the spirit he needs matters of commandments at certain times, and matters of *Aggada* all day.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, *halakhot* are like daily bread but *aggadot* like water, which a human being needs even more, and therefore one should study them more. He maintains that the *aggadot* include “ethics, virtues, appropriate human behavior, and how to improve both body and soul;”<sup>65</sup> they are particularly beneficial for “the masses and draw their hearts to the straight path.”<sup>66</sup> Even though the use of *Midrash* and *Aggada* for ethical education existed before him, and was surely known to him,<sup>67</sup> and even though writers usually regarded their compositions as new and worth writing, which the public should copy or buy, it is noteworthy that Aboab presents collecting *aggadot* as a novel idea, since in his own words, until the writing of his book, these texts were dispersed within books of Halakha:<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 17-18.

<sup>65</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 17-18.

<sup>66</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 17-18.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. *Sha'arei Teshuva* (“Gates of Repentance”) by R. Jonah Gerundi.

<sup>68</sup> In the parallel work to this book, *Menorat ha-Maor* by R. Israel Al-Nakawa, the author describes the problem of how dispersed the sources are and what he took upon himself to collect and arrange: “Dispersed and separated, and they became each one on his own, like cattle wandering in the wilderness, like a flock without a shepherd, every herd on its own, and they found no helpmate, wandering on their way and no one gathering them. Except for a few sages such as Rav Sa’adya and Rav Amram, the Gaonim, who composed books of prayers to Him who wraps Himself in greatness [i.e. God], and R. Jacob son of R. Asher of blessed memory, who composed *Orah Hayyim* [the first part of the *Arba’a Turim*], and his other books[...] And a few other writers, who composed from this matter a few things, like two or three grains” (AL-NAKAWA, *Sefer Menorat ha-Maor*, ed. ENELAU, vol. 1, p. 12). And later he writes: “And I have stamped the basis on the basis of these books, and I have laid a corner stone on the ruling of the writers, and from the early works that were before. And from Scripture and the *Mishna* and the *aggadot*, from the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, and from the *Tosefta* and from *Pirkei R. Eliezer*, and from *Pesikta* and from *Mekhila*, and from *Sifra* and *Sifre*, and from *Halakhot Gedolot*, and from *Sefer Hekhalot*, and from *Midrash Hazita*, and *Midrash Hashkem*, and from *Midrash Tanhuma* [...] and from *Yelamdenu Rabbenu* [evidently *Midrash Tanhuma Yashan*, Y.M.] and from the Responsa of our Gaonim and from the *Midrash of R. Nehunia b. Hakane* [...] and from *Hupat Eliyahu*

I, the youth [...], found the instructions and the laws, arranged in different ways and in different vessels. There is nothing wrong in the composition and nothing should be appended or omitted. The first and the last, both these and those are the words of the living God. But they left the pearls, sweet for all mouths, built magnificently, dispersed into corners. Therefore I had the idea [...] to bring together words of silent wisdom, which I found in *midrashim* [...]. And I have put down hidden things which are exalted and severe [...] and have held on to sweet things, desirable, great and strong, statutes and righteous judgments.<sup>69</sup>

Aboab expands on the great advantage of collecting *aggadot* and *midrashim* for the general public. He stresses this by detailing the different kinds of people who comprise the public and might reap benefit from the book:

To fill the ignorant with knowledge and to give cunning to fools and completion to those who are full [of knowledge], to revive the heart of the oppressed. It is built of principles, to be an aid to the great, attract the heart of fools, good promises for those who are beginners, and an introduction for those who cannot [learn]. To lead their heart quickly, in the war of Torah and the depth of Halakha, which is longer than the land and broader than the sea, to fill all their desires. Giving advice to children, to youth, to the old, to those who are knowledgeable, and those who are ignorant, camping in all four corners. Admonition to men and women, hearing for the deaf, and light for the blind who feel their way. This is the book of discovery, which contains open admonition, the Candelabrum of pure gold [...].<sup>70</sup>

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*Zuta* and *Rabba*, and from *Bereshit Rabba*, and many others of this kind. And from Responsa of the sages, and from *Marganita of R. Meir* –published in Idan DESHE HA-LEVI, (ed.), *Yalqut Midrashim* (Safed: Or Olam, 2003) part II, pp. 351-361– and its chapters [...] and the books of Maimonides [...] and Nahmanides [...] and the books of all people of understanding, and from *Orah Hayyim* and *Hoshen Mishpat* and *Even Ha'ezer* and *Yore De'a*;" pp. 18-19.

The extent of books he mentioned is very astonishing, and indicates that where he resided, evidently Toledo, he had access to a very large library for that time. At any rate, it is clear that this catalogue demonstrates the purpose of the book in which he wanted to insert material from all the facets of Torah – a broad variety of sources for the topics discussed.

<sup>69</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 11.

The main way in which the masses could benefit from the book was through its use by preachers, who read the book and use its sources in their sermons, easily finding texts thanks to its organization by subject.<sup>71</sup> He goes on to say that the great effort to find the sources led him to write the composition for himself, for his own study and for preparing public sermons:

Since the *aggadot* are dispersed in the Talmud [...], and people struggle to find them throughout it [...] and they also include fine things necessary for man's improvement, that are written in other *midrashim*, it is even better because of forgetfulness to arrange them by topic and present them as necessary. Therefore my heart filled me to devote some of that time [...] to think about this, which would be my sacrifice [...] may He know that my intention in writing this composition was not to make a reputation for myself [...] but for it to be a memory between my eyes, to meditate and investigate it more than I could with my limited knowledge [...] and also to examine it quickly and without effort when I need to preach in public.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the purpose of the book is double. R. I. Aboab wanted to create a systematic book on the subjects of faith and ethics that contribute to man's improvement. In addition, he brought together the sources he found in books according to topics, in order to make them accessible to anyone, and in particular to a scholar who wants to preach in public.

It is important to note an additional level in the complex structure of the book, which creates a kind of hierarchy of the elements that contribute to the religious-ethical improvement of the reader. Aboab mentions several times in his preface the concept of using "principles" (*klalim*) to encompass material, an idea that is well known from the literature of

<sup>71</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 18. And in the colophon concluding the book he wrote about the composition of the *Menorah*: "To enlighten my heart in the words of *aggadot*, to be a memory between my eyes and to find matters of ethics and advice and everything in its place, ready and formulated, as they appear in the *midrashot*, in an order that will be more suited to my mind [...] and so that I need not go to trouble every time that I want to look for a matter that is dispersed in the *midrashot*, but that will be ready for my needs and the needs of anyone who is looking for this matter." Cf. ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, p. 769.

principles that flourished among the exiles from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modern Times. The main purpose of this literature was to provide the student a structured selection of material that it is necessary to know in the form of principles that comprise a great deal of knowledge. In this way the student can encompass the material, remember it and apply it to new cases. The following quote, attributed to R. Nissim Gerundi (1315-1376), who lived close to the time of Aboab, describes the importance of using principles in every area:

I heard from R. Nissim [may his soul be blessed] **a great rule for succeeding in learning knowledge** to know the principles and not to forget them quickly. Is the rule you should apply **in every kind of knowledge that you learn, both internal knowledge and external knowledge in different fields:** After reviewing one issue of the matters of that area of knowledge many times, until you understand it well, strengthen your mind, **and think it over in order to internalize the principle of that matter** and to know how to apply it and its ramifications and how to derive benefit from it, and to know the essence of the writer's intention in that matter, and after understanding the message of the writer in order to know and understand the intention of what you have read, read the principle many times over and learn it by heart **and retain it in your mind. And as long as you keep the principles of all areas of knowledge, you will be knowledgeable in all of them. And in consequence you will remember them always, and understand their concealed things and the allusions of their secrets that are dispersed in books, some here, and some there. Do not try to know everything that is written by heart, without omitting one letter or word, because time will run out and your efforts will not suffice, and you will only obtain the clay on the pearl.** And if you take my advice, you will hold the precious stones of wisdom without the clay.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, the purpose of the principles is to incorporate in them the vast knowledge that is difficult to encompass, but which needs to be applied in every area one seeks to learn. The disciple of R. Nissim, R. Hasdai Crescas, in his critique of Maimonides' *Mishne Torah*, stressed

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<sup>73</sup> Anonymous composition in a collection of fifteenth-century writings, cf. Ms. Moscow-Ginsburg 926/9 (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Institute for Micro-filmed Hebrew Manuscripts, no. 48272) fol. 175r.



the importance of principles that may provide answers to halakhic questions that will arise in the future:

And here in the composition on the commandments [...] <sup>74</sup> he [Maimonides] did not note the sources of the items [...] and therefore I have in mind to do so [...] so that one perusing this book [that it was Crescas's intention to write] should first know the Talmud and how to study the Talmud, and then it will be easy for him to understand the matters of commandments and their principles and their reasons in detail, **until by remembering the definitions and principles alone, when understanding them, he can encompass all the commandments of the Torah**, for which it will be a clarifying reason for memory and observance. <sup>75</sup>

Similarly Profeyt Duran wrote about the need to study using the system of principles in order to encompass the Talmud: "And indeed the Talmud, which cannot be encompassed except by a few survivors whom God calls, who barely exist at this time, it is enough to observe some rules, and learn the way of negotiation in questions and solutions."<sup>76</sup> This literature reaches its peak in the fifteenth century, with the intensive writing of literature of principles, such as the work of R. Isaiah Halevy, *Halikhot 'Olam*<sup>77</sup> and the works of the school of R. Isaac Kanpanton.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, the idea of principles, which Aboab raised in his preface, asserts that if a person knows well the structure of *Menorat ha-Maor*, then he will know the essence and thus encompass completely matters of ethics and virtues in the literature he collected there. This idea

<sup>74</sup> The reference is to Maimonides' *Mishne Torah*.

<sup>75</sup> R. Hasdai CRESCAS, *Or ha-Shem*, ed. Shelomo FISHER (Jerusalem: Ramot Library, 1990) pp 6-7.

<sup>76</sup> Isaac b. Moses HALEVY the Ephodi (Profet DURAN), *Ma'aseh Ephod*, eds. Yom-Tov FRIEDLÄNDER and Yaakov HA-COHEN (Vienna: Yozef Holtsvorte Press, 1865) p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> See R. Isaiah HALEVY, *Halikhot 'Olam*, ed. Shemaryahu PORTNOY (Jerusalem, n.s., 1998). This work and others were influenced by *Sefer Kritchut*; cf. R. SAMSON OF CHINON, *Sefer Kritchut*, ed. Simcha SOFER and Yoseph SOFER (Jerusalem: Devri Sofrim, 1965).

<sup>78</sup> Regarding the literature of principles among the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula in the late Middle Ages, see MARCIANO, *Sages of Spain*, pp. 162-189.

led to the complex structure of the book and to the great importance the writer attributed to the structure in his preface.<sup>79</sup>

In light of Aboab's teaching, why did he regard it important to cite sources from the Sages both for the reader and for the preachers?

As Joseph Dan has shown in his studies, ethical and homiletic literature that is based on homilies of the Sages was a novelty introduced only in the thirteenth century. This literature was not only meant to attract the general public, but was also an important element in the struggle against philosophy.<sup>80</sup> The first writers in the Iberian Peninsula to do so were Kabbalists from Girona, who wanted to present an intellectual and ethical alternative to philosophy, derived from the ancient tradition originating in Divine revelation, which was, of course, preferable to the power of reason and of sources outside Judaism.<sup>81</sup> This literature developed also outside the Iberian Peninsula and scholars with a Talmudic orientation, not identified as Kabbalists, also engaged in it. The entirety of these works, and particularly those that can be defined as anthologies of Midrash and Aggadah, contributed to creating a broad intellectual discourse that provided a response for the intelligentsia in Jewish society that needed internal Jewish sources to use in philosophical and cultural discourse.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> See detailed table of contents in ABOAB, *Menorat ha-Maor*, eds. PREIS-HOREB and KATZENELLENBOGEN, pp. 3-7.

<sup>80</sup> JOSEPH DAN, "The Cultural and Social Background of The Emergence of Traditional Ethical Literature," in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume On the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*. Part A, eds. Moshe IDEL, Warren Z. HARVEY, Eliezer SCHWEID (Jerusalem: n.s., 1988) pp. 239-364: 239-251, and *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature* (Jerusalem: n.s., 1975 [in Hebrew]) pp. 146-147 and 154-157.

<sup>81</sup> From the end of the Geonic period until the beginning of the thirteenth century, ethical literature belonged to the realm of philosophical thought. It was written in Arabic by thinkers in whose opinion no systematic ethics had crystallized in the Jewish world, and they were creating it anew in relation to non-Jewish sources. On the contrary, the first four ethical compositions written on the basis of Jewish sources in the thirteenth century were composed in Girona, which was a center of Kabbalah. Dan presumes that the need for esoteric writing in Kabbalah encouraged the Kabbalists to express their views basing them on an anthology of expressions of the Sages, which could be used. See DAN, *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature*, pp. 147-157, and "The Cultural and Social Background," pp. 240-251.

<sup>82</sup> See DAN, "The Cultural and Social Background," pp. 260-264.

The words of R. Samuel Archevolti, who brought to print the Venice 1595-1602 edition of R. Isaac Aboab's *Menorat ha-Maor*, demonstrate this value. He identified in the book a spiritual and cultural answer to a great need in Jewish society in his generation. According to him, many people are attracted to the surrounding society. The ideas inherent in the *midrashim* and *aggadot* that Aboab collected in the book can demonstrate to the masses that "The People of Israel have sources of their own", and the Jew does not need to seek intellectual and moral edification in the surrounding society. As he wrote:

Today there are many ignorant people who say let us allow ourselves to follow the path and prove every theoretical investigation [non Jewish scholars] and from the writing of the children of gentiles, Gebalites and Ammonites and Amalekites, Greeks and Arabs and the like, from peoples upon whom the sun of true tradition<sup>83</sup> from the mouth of the Highest did not shine. Only from their heart have they extracted words in the three known areas of behavior.<sup>84</sup> And they did not know that these are but fleeting clouds in nothingness that will be lost. But this [the Torah] will never lie or deceive. Therefore on the scales and in the balance of human justice they deleted or overfilled by a measure. And whoever has this has been impregnated with struggle and anger [...] Unlike these is the perfect scholar Rabbi Isaac Aboab of blessed memory. For he "put wisdom in the hidden parts" (Job 38:36) and founded his sayings on the words of the Sages, who received the truth one from another back to Moses our master, may he rest in peace, who received them from the Holy One Blessed Be He. And he [Aboab] has enlightened us in the book *Menorat ha-Maor* with the eternal light to maintain the path of the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good, from the fruit and good of which the lowly may eat and be satiated.<sup>85</sup>

In other words R. Samuel Archevolti saw in the sources collected in the book a platform for Jewish intellectual thought and dialogue. This argument, not mentioned in Aboab's preface to his work, certainly suits the reality of Jewish society in the Iberian Peninsula in the late Middle Ages. We often find expressions of despair from the rabbis, unable to

<sup>83</sup> The transmission of the Oral Law from generation to generation.

<sup>84</sup> Ethics, economics and politics.

<sup>85</sup> Preface of the proof-reader, R. Samuel Archevolti, to the Venice edition of *Menorat ha-Maor*, 1595, fol. 1b.

thwart the use of philosophical thought among the Jews. The scholars of the rabbinic stream complain that the preachers of the time use the words of philosophers and base their talks on them, as if the Jewish sources are inadequate. Thus for example one of the sages of fifteenth century Castile, R. Hayyim b. Judah Ibn Musa (*ca.* 1380-post 1456), complained bitterly in the letter he wrote to his son:<sup>86</sup>

And new preachers have come recently, going up to the pulpit before the reading of the Torah to preach, and most of their sermon is logical syllogisms and philosophical matters. They mention Aristotle, Alexander [of Aphrodisias], Themistius, Plato, Averroes and Ptolemy, while Abaye and Rava are hidden in their mouths, and the Torah waits on the pulpit of the ark in sadness like a wife waiting for her husband until he comes out of the house of his mistress, giving her a glance, and ignoring her. And on all of that they recite *Kaddish*.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Regarding this individual, his letter and his work *Magen ve-Romah*, cf. David KAUFMANN, "Letter" [in Hebrew], *Beit Talmud* 2 (1882) pp. 110-125; R. Hayyim IBN MUSA, *Sefer Magen ve-Romah ve-Iggeret livno* (Jerusalem: n.s., 1970) and the Preface by Joseph HACKER there.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. KAUFMANN, "Letter," p. 118. Kaufmann provides several references to the increased use of gentile sources on the one hand, and a "distorted" use (according to the rabbis) of the sources of the Sages on the other. Ibn Musa relates at the beginning of the letter an event that occurred around the time of the persecutions of 1391: "I heard in my youth a preacher who preached about the unity [of God] according to the methods of investigation of the philosophers and repeated many times: 'And if He were not one, it would mean so on and so forth,' until one member of the community, who was zealous about the word of the Lord, stood up and said: They destroyed everything that I had in the persecutions of Seville and they beat me and injured me until the mob left me for dead, and all of this I suffered for the belief in 'Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One,' and now you apply the investigation of a philosopher to the tradition of our fathers and dare to say 'and if He were not one, it would mean so on and so forth?' And he said I have more faith in the tradition of our fathers and I do not want to hear this sermon and he went out of the synagogue and most of the congregation with him;" KAUFMANN, "Letter," p. 117. Similarly, in the preface to *Minhat Kenaot*: "For many and honored are those who are with me / who were very zealous when they heard the voice of uproar from the preachers / who hold the books of the Greeks / making their letters into signs / in order to deny the miracles and signs" (R. ABBA MARI BEN MOSES, *Minchath Kenaot*, ed. Mordechai L. BISLICHES [Pressburg: Verlag von Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1838] p. 3); and in par. 23 he wrote: "And also King David of Israel, the pleasant singer / needed [to compose] many lengthy and brief prayers / in order for them to be recited in the synagogue. And now, without prayer or petition Aristotle and Plato have earned

For rabbinical scholars, who shrank from the use of that literature, books like Bahya's *Kad ha-Qemah*, Aboab's *Menorat ha-Maor*, and Al-Nakawa's homonymous book served as alternative storehouses of acceptable sources that included words of faith and ethics for preparing sermons.

This issue also seems to be the background behind collecting *aggadot*, interpreting them and printing them in the generation of the Expulsion, as for example in the anonymous collection of *aggadot*, *Haggadot ha-Talmud* (Constantinople 1511).<sup>88</sup> This book includes, among other things, an index to the verses cited in *aggadot*, which turns out to have been prepared for the convenience of preachers.<sup>89</sup> Another anthology of *aggadot* of the Sages is, of course, the famous work by R. Jacob Ibn Habib, *'Ein Ya 'aqov*. The many printings of this work over generations and its wide dissemination in the public testify to the religious-social need it served.

It is important to point out that the process of collecting *aggadot* started in Christian society before it began among the Jews. These *aggadot* provided material for Christian preachers, particularly Dominicans, in their efforts to capture the hearts of their listeners.<sup>90</sup> In other words, even if the idea of collecting *aggadot* and *midrashim* started at the turn of the thirteenth-fourteenth century, it had a precedent in the

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the privilege / to fill with their books every [place...]" (ABBA MARI BEN MOSES, *Minhat Kenaot*, p. 31).

<sup>88</sup> *Haggadot ha-Talmud* was printed in Constantinople in 1511, but its author and the time of its composition are unknown.

<sup>89</sup> The index is at the beginning of the book, fols. 2r-12r. The collector of the *aggadot* is not known, but nevertheless the names of those who dealt with the printing, mentioned in the colophon, were exiles from the Iberian Peninsula. Regarding this work, cf. Raphael Nathan Neta RABINOVICZ, *An Article on the Printing of the Talmud*, ed. Abraham M. HABERMANN (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1952 [in Hebrew]) pp. 256-258. Making the material accessible to the reader is important in the design of the book, for example it says: "Since not every person is aware of the order of the tractates one after the other and it would be difficult to find the place of each and every expression, even if he knows in what tractate it appeared, we saw [...] fit to make it easy for anyone since that was the intention of the author of this book [...] He did not want to mention his name since he had nothing in this but technical work alone". *Haggadot ha-Talmud*, Constantinople, last page of the introductory material (not paginated, p. 24 by my counting).

<sup>90</sup> Much has been written about the exempla stories. Regarding the attitude of the Jews towards this form of Christian literature, see Ram BEN-SHALOM, *Facing Christian Culture* (Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi institute, 2007 [in Hebrew]) pp. 213ff.

Christian milieu, and what he did was to create a parallel collection to the existing one in the surrounding gentile society.<sup>91</sup>

R. Isaac Aboab, who wrote his work, *Menorat ha-Maor*, in Castile in the first half of the fourteenth century, was neither the first nor the only one to collect *aggadot* and *midrashim* in the framework of ethical literature. However, as we have seen, his literary enterprise went far beyond collecting and he should be noted for two main reasons. First of all, his clear and organized teaching, presented in the preface to *Menorat ha-Maor*, in which he expressed his socio-religious view, critical of the writings of his predecessors and demanding that the scholars address their works to the public and its needs. The second reason is that his work was devoted entirely to the fulfillment of his socio-religious teaching. This work included three books that encompass the life of the Jew, engaged in a struggle for his Jewish identity in a time of crisis: Ethics (*Menorat ha-Maor*), Halakha (*Aron ha-'Edut*), and Prayer and Blessings (*Shulhan ha-Panim*). The uniqueness of *Menorat ha-Maor* is not only its extent and presumption to collect *midrashim* and *aggadot* from all of rabbinic literature, but to create a well-planned, intricate, and sophisticated literary work that claims to confront the challenges he presents. Aboab stressed the multi-purpose character of the material he collected: for women and men, children and adults, the educated and the uneducated, and the like. He sees the potential intrinsic in *aggadot* first of all as material that spoke to the heart of the Jewish masses in order to inculcate popular and naïve faith, and also as an alternative to external literature from Jewish sources – addressed to the intellectual stratum of Jewish society. Aboab's call, together with other scholars who were active in Catalonia and Aragon, was a harbinger of the first expansion of “non-elitist” writing. The great bulk of literature written from a desire to make material accessible to the different strata of society, in a variety of ways, was to a great degree the fulfillment of the vision he presented in the preface to *Menorat ha-Maor*.

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<sup>91</sup> Generally speaking, the style of the sermon and its structure were influenced by the rhetoric and culture of Iberian society.