

TRANSLATION

THE ANATOMY OF ANTISEMITISM: ON SOLOMON IBN VERGA'S *SHEBET YEHUDA*

by DAVID FLUSSER *

The Passover Eve Seder reminds us of our Egyptian servitude and of the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt in the house of bondage before leaving slavery for freedom. This night also reminds us of the blood libel since on this night especially, the danger was great that the Jews would be accused of this terrible deed.

Calamities and anti-Jewish legislation have yet to leave the world – they wear one form and then another throughout the history of our people. This process was not halted by Zionism, and the establishment of the Jewish state as Zionism had hoped. Therefore we may learn something now from the words of Jewish sages in the past. A necessary condition to our readiness to learn is that we recognize that there is continuity in the history of our people both in what concerns its honor and its terrible sufferings. If we will recognize this fact, we could learn a lesson from our past. Then we will be happy to find that the words of wise and learned Jewish sages, and their explanations for the calamities and antisemitism in the past are applicable, at least in part, to what is happening to us today, if we adapt their explanations to the new circumstances. In my opinion, the words of these men as they relate to Jewish history can help us today as well.

One of these very compositions is without doubt the fine work *Shebet Yehuda* by R. Solomon Ibn Verga, from the first half of the 16th century, who was a Spanish

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exile. This book was published some time ago in a scientific (Hebrew) edition by the Bialik Foundation (Jerusalem, 1947) and prefaced by the renowned scholar Yitzhak Baer, who had already devoted an important study to this book (in German) and an instructive article. Baer showed that *Shebet Yehuda* isn't only what we see at first glance: tales of decrees which attended the Jews in the past, which are not given chronologically, as well as tales of disputations with Christians. Such stories of the sufferings of Israel serve the author as window dressing; the book is actually an anatomy of antisemitism and its concrete manifestations. We will briefly discuss *Shebet Yehuda*, and bring forth some of our reflections gained from reading it anew.

If you will read *Shebet Yehuda* with understanding, a strong impression will stay in your heart: you will become a partner to the hard Jewish fate in the past, and to a great extent you will be able to understand your place in the history of your people. This is due to the fact that the book is not simply a collection of edicts and disputations, but rather this subject was used by the author to express a historiography – a phenomenology of antisemitism, its expressions and circumstances. Rabbi Solomon achieves his goal by making use many times of a free adaptation of historical material, and includes within it ideas, inventing deeds or conversations and disputations between Jews and Christians – or among Christians themselves concerning the Jewish problem. With regard to antisemitism, he is indeed familiar with the hatred of Israel in the Islamic world. In one conversation King Alfonso of Spain says to Thomas, the Christian sage: “What is this great hatred of the Christians for the Jews? And though they killed our Saviour the Arabs hate the Jews even more, but did not kill their Prophets . . .”, and Thomas replied: “In my opinion, is it not so that they who are not part of any people and its sufferings will be those elected to carry on their religion.” (p. 154). Therefore, *Shebet Yehuda* actually deals with Christian antisemitism.

We are obliged to say here that *Shebet Yehuda* is different from modern studies which discuss antisemitism as one of many important concerns. In my opinion, the difference is in *Shebet Yehuda*'s favor. Contemporary studies deal with antisemitism from a psychological, sociological, meta-historical, theological and even almost cosmic perspective. In a premeditated manner, they do not discuss the Jewish cause of antisemitism, and turn a blind eye to it. There are of course many reasons for this particular attitude, one of which appears already in the past century: the undeclared fear that in case the special situation of the Jews (and their characteristics as one of the causes for the hatred of Israel) would be discussed, it would be necessary to deal with the subject from a stance that would not always be praiseworthy and would therefore serve as an excuse for antisemites. In addition, after the terrible suffering with which we have been attended, the monstrous side of antisemitism is so prominent that it attracts our complete attention. Therefore today, when almost every hour, there are outbreaks of antisemitism in all corners of the world it would be desirable to better understand the special situation of the Jewish people among the nations and of the State of Israel in the world community. A comprehensive analysis of the Jewish factor would undoubtedly help us to

find a better way for Jews and their leaders to comfort themselves in order to make our lives easier. It should be understood that the minute that antisemitism is seen only as a supernatural clash between darkness and Judaism – at a time when many Israelis do not see themselves as Jews or think that before the establishment of the State of Israel and outside of Eretz Israel, the edicts were “meta-history”, and the sufferings of the state have an historical explanation – they do not see the simple truth, that our difficult situation among the nations is historically and fundamentally connected to those same edicts described in *Shebet Yehuda*.

From what has been said, it is clear that the anatomy of antisemitism in *Shebet Yehuda* is a honorable attempt to see all the angles to antisemitism. It is clear that R. Solomon Ibn Verga does not avoid the Jewish factor in antisemitism. To the outside world, the Jewish vanity for luxurious living awakened Gentile hatred for the Jew. Therefore the author is not only a sharp critic of Jewish behaviour – he also sees that the special situation of the Jews causes antisemitism.

It is however correct that part of R. Solomon Ibn Verga’s conclusion is no longer relevant for our times. It is also true that the author did not intend to provide a cure-all that would absolutely wipe antisemitism from off the face of the earth – and perhaps this is just as well. Furthermore, it is true that our main interest is not in historiosophy which deals in matters above and beyond actual history. Yet today perhaps, when Jewish thinkers are often floating into metaphysics and they lack a sense of reality, it is good to read a book that deals with the concrete circumstances of Jewish fate and does not forget that the special condition of the Jews, and sometimes even their shortcomings can aid antisemitism. Regarding the various reactions of Gentile strata towards the Jews, R. Solomon Ibn Verga states that the main factors of antisemitism and cruel edicts are the inflamed mobs and Christian clergymen. In relation to the mobs he rightly points to the general factor of hatred. Regarding the clergy he correctly points to their religious fanaticism. With regard to monarchs, he loves to talk about “benevolent kings” – and in this matter he exaggerates. Though as is seen, in general he is a realist and one may learn from him practical wisdom even today.

Shebet Yehuda includes interesting variations of Christian antisemitism of that period. In addition, as stated, the author examines the causes of antisemitism and does not avoid the Jewish factor. He even mentions the negative characteristics of the Jews. Therefore, what is special about the book is that the analysis of Jewish characteristics is heard many times from Christians. Here the reader must be careful lest he think that the arguments of erudite Christians in the text are in their full meaning, those of the author. After all, even the righteous kings and Christian sages in *Shebet Yehuda* are not lovers of Israel, but rather they represent clearcut Christian positions. With the presentation of a varied gallery of Christian figures from antisemites to somewhat dubiously righteous men, the author exhibits at the same time, the creative imagination of a gifted thinker and writer. From the standpoint of the clash of many kinds of Gentile opinion regarding the Jews and Judaism, there is in *Shebet Yehuda* a unique genius. We hear from the lips of various strange

Gentiles about the Jewish problem. This becomes a characterization of images held by these Christians and many times serves as an echo of the author's viewpoints as well.

It is because of and from the author's sensible and realistic approach as well as his special personality that the spark of genius came. This genius brought him to create a book which is to a large extent a series of experiments whose purpose is to examine the circumstances of the hatred of Israel. Today, if I am not mistaken, it would be said that he is building models for himself. What is extraordinary is that he is often ready to clarify a problem within an updated stance from the outlook of antisemites or on the other hand of righteous Gentiles whose righteousness is certainly not perfect. In such a case, we must not think that the views of these Christians in *Shebet Yehuda* precisely represent the author's views.

The gallery of Christians, their views on Judaism, the negotiations and disputations with them on the part of Jewish luminaries which we read about in *Shebet Yehuda* are very illustrative to this day. It is very desirable that everyone who works in information and foreign policy should read this book. Of course, if one frees himself from the established prejudices of contemporary auto-apologetics, he will gain great benefit from the book, in negotiating with the nations of the world and their leaders, for himself and the people of Israel who are again in danger. We read the arguments of the righteous Christian kings and those of these sharp-witted Christian sages in the book; in addition we hear the opinions of our friends in the world, and we see that much has not changed since R. Solomon Ibn Verga succeeded in building his models.

May God have mercy upon us and lead us speedily from slavery unto freedom in our own day.