

### R. GEDALYA IBN YAHYA'S SHALSHELET HAKABBALAH ("CHAIN OF TRADITION");

#### A CHAPTER IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

by ABRAHAM DAVID

#### INTRODUCTION

At the close of the Middle Ages, from the Spanish Expulsion until the late sixteenth century, Jewish historiographical compositions of great length and quality appeared. Among them were *Sefer Yuhasin* ("Book of Genealogy") written by the well known Spanish astronomer R. Abraham Zacuto and *Sefer HaKabbalah* ("Book of Tradition") by Abraham b. Solomon of Tortutiel — which according to its author was meant to complete and provide continuity for Abraham Ibn Daud's *Sefer HaKabbalah*. During the course of the sixteenth century, additional works appeared, such as *Shebet Yehuda* ("The Scepter of Judah") by Solomon ibn Verga (who belonged to a respected and genteel family in Spain at the time of the Expulsion), the work in Portuguese by the New Christian R. Samuel Usque called *Consolaçam as Tribulaçoens*

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(אברהם דוד, "מפעלו ההיסטוריוגרפי של גדליה אבן יחייא בעל שלשלת הקבלה"; נכתב בהדרכתו של פרופ' חיים ביינארט באוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים. ירושלים: תשל"ו, 420 ע').  
A critical edition of *Shalsholet HaKabbalah* is being prepared for publication by Dr. David. The textual quotations in the body of this article are taken from the first edition of Ibn Yahya's work (Venice, 1587).

*de Israel* ("Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel") or the two compositions by Joseph ha-Kohen of Genoa: *Divrei ha-Yamim le-Malkhei Zarefat U-beit 'Othman* ("History of the Kings of France and Turkey"), and *Sefer Emek ha-Bakha* ("Vale of Tears"). Similarly, we find in that century, the very special historiographical treatise *Me'or Einayim* ("Enlightenment to the Eyes") by R. Azariah de' Rossi, and at the century's end, R. David Gans' *Zemah David* ("Offspring of David").

Concerning the blossoming of Jewish historiography in the sixteenth century, my teacher and mentor the late Professor Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson raised several representative guidelines in late medieval Jewish historiography. In the sixteenth century it was characteristic for Jewish historiography to feel the effects of crises on the one hand, and of intellectual openness on the other. In the historiographical creativity of this period there is a natural aspiration to find a fitting explanation for the question of Jewish existence in the Diaspora — in light of the Jewish people's distress throughout the ages. This question is warranted by the terrible catastrophe which struck Iberian Jewry at the turn of the fifteenth century.

The extent to which we observe the past is reinforced in no small measure by political, social, and cultural considerations which were current in European Christian society in the latter half of the fifteenth century, bringing it into severe crises — what with the prevailing power of Christianity's foes (the conquest of Constantinople in 1453), and the internal disintegration which in the end gave birth to the Reformation movement. In addition, there was a strong historiographical awakening among Renaissance humanists circles whose influence among the Jews was great. It was not by accident that Italy served as an historical observation point, since this country saw the absorption and transfer of Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal, being the main sphere of influence for Renaissance culture. Similarly, it is not accidental that the majority of sixteenth century Jewish chroniclers were from among the Spanish and Portuguese emigrants or their descendants.

#### A. GEDALYA'S BIOGRAPHY

In the roster of late medieval Jewish chroniclers from the period of Hebrew historiography's blossoming, we should include the name of an Italian Jew, Gedalya b. Joseph Ibn Yahya, scion of a distinguished Portuguese Jewish family — the ibn Yahya family, many of whose sons served in the courts of the kings and rulers of Spain and Portugal for generations. Gedalya's grandfather, R. David b. Joseph ibn Yahya, arrived in Italy with his family about the time of the 1497 forced mass conversion of Jews in Portugal. Gedalya was born at Imola in northern Italy in 1526, where he passed his childhood. Most of his life was spent wandering about the various towns of

northern Italy. It appears that he was the pupil of important rabbis in that country — among them R. Obadiah Sforno of Bologna, and R. Meir b. Isaac Katzenelbogen of Padua. He was granted his rabbinical ordination (*semikha*) by three rabbis: R. Jacob Israel Finzi Recanati of Pesaro, and the brothers R. Abraham and R. Israel of Rovigo who were *yeshiva* (rabbinical academy) heads in Ferrara. It appears that among his teachers was the eminent rabbinical *posek* (arbiter) R. Azriel Trabot of Pesaro as well. Gedalya worked as a moneychanger, losing considerable capital when he was forced to leave the Papal States close to the expulsion of 1569. His last years were spent in the city of Alessandria in the Piedmont region, serving there in the rabbinate until his death in the year 1587. In his variegated literary work, of which only a very small portion is still extant, his spiritual personage stands out — integrating as it does fundamental Jewish tradition, and Italo-Jewish humanism. Gedalya composed more than twenty works — three of which have come to us, and one which is extant in manuscript but inaccessible. The subject of most of his works is in the field of homiletics and morality. It appears that in this field, he showed substantial ability. The other fields with which he dealt are historiography, biblical and liturgical commentary, philosophy, *belles lettres*, superstition, and sorcery. It should be mentioned that in this period, the last mentioned occupation was widespread among Jewish and non-Jewish humanists.

## B. *SHALSHELET HAKABBALAH* (THE CHAIN OF TRADITION)

### 1. *GENERAL DESCRIPTION*

Our discussions, therefore, will concentrate on Gedalya's historiographical treatise, the "Chain of Tradition" which Ibn Yahya himself called "Sefer Yahya" (Yahya's Book). This work, the writing of which continued for decades, was begun in Ibn Yahya's youth while staying in the city of Ravenna (1549) and was concluded close to his death in 1587 — being dedicated to his eldest son Joseph. More than fifteen printed editions are known of this book — most of which were published in Eastern Europe. The first printed edition was published at Venice in that year; while it was still in press Gedalya passed away.

A brief glance at the book will show us something of the tremendous variety of knowledge from different fields joining together into an interesting description of the Jewish people's historical continuity from its beginning. The author divides his book into three parts as per his statement in the preface:

בבחרתי לחלוק כל החיבור הזה בג' חלוקות, הראשון יהיה סדר קבלת התורה מאדם עד היום, והשני יהיה בהודיעך קצת כללים על ההגלגלים ועולם שמימי ועל יצירת הוולד

במעני אמו, ומה יהיה אחריתו, ועל מעשה כשופים, וכל זה בקוצר רב . . . ועל מטבעות ומזות שבשתא סדרו, והשלישי יהיה שלשלת חכמי האומו' וגזירות שהיו נגד ישראל וחודשים יפים שנולדו בכל דור ודור.

("I choose to divide all this work into three parts; the first part being the order of Jewish tradition from Adam until today; the second being to inform you of some of the principles concerning celestial bodies and the heavenly world, on the creation of the new-born in the material womb, and what will be in the end, and on magic — and all this with great brevity . . . and on coins and measures in the Mishna; and the third being the chain of Gentile sages, and the persecutions of Israel, and the fine innovations that came in every generation.")

We will center our discussion on the first and third parts which are similar in their external forms. The division into generations from the beginning of humanity is common to both parts. In the first part which comprises more than half of his work, the discourses primarily concentrate on the historical continuity of the Jewish people as it materialized in the spiritual tradition from generation to generation. In this way, the author underlines important historical episodes from the Second Temple period and afterwards, relying to a considerable degree on R. Azariah de' Rossi's *Me'or Einayim* ("Enlightenment to the Eyes"). The latter, an analytical historian, brought Jewish and Christian sources concerning the Second Temple period under his careful scrutiny. But the discussion in this section primarily deals with the generational evolution of Jewish sages, while paying attention to the medieval period. Important biographical and bibliographical traditions of this period have been preserved from numerous and varied sources — especially from rabbinical literature, a considerable number of them being acknowledged only in recent times. Ibn Yaḥya also included in this section tales of feats that were attributed to illustrious people — primarily central figures who lived in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, for instance: R. Solomon Yitzḥaki (Rashi), R. Jacob Tam, Maimonides, Nachmanides, R. Yehuda HaLevi, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, and R. Yehiel of Paris.

## 2. INTEREST IN THE GENTILES' HISTORY

The small third section of the work is split into the two sub-divisions. In the first part, we find a very general description of humanity's development from its inception. Actually, Gedalya presents knowledge and traditions which are connected to the outlook and actions of the Gentile sages and rulers — while determining when eminent Jewish personalities lived. He primarily emphasizes the role of Greek sages, the rulers of Rome and Byzantium as well as the major figures of the Christian world (the Church fathers, Popes, and theologians). Indeed, in Hebrew historiography, one finds that there is great interest in the history of the Gentiles in general, and of the nations of antiquity in particular.

Several of the Jewish historiographers did not suffice in describing the annals of their people, giving their views on Gentile history as well — whether briefly or extensively. Interest in Gentile history was limited to those peoples who during the course of time had been connected with the Hebrew nation — Greece, Rome, Byzantium, France, Italy, Turkey, etc. This trend found forceful expression during the Renaissance, though it appears that its precedents can be found a century before. We find a list of Roman and Byzantine emperors written in Hebrew in the year 967 C.E. by a Byzantine Jew. The author of *Sefer Josippon* describes the great power of the Roman empire, and is well acquainted with the culture and rule of the Byzantine empire. Abraham Ibn Daud from the twelfth century also provides details on the Roman emperors and a few of the Byzantine emperors, in a short work entitled *Zikhron Divrei Romi* (“History of Rome”).

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we find several Jewish historians who devote complete works or chapters to Gentile history. Joseph b. Zadik who lived in Spain in the fifteenth century, and the Spanish exile Abraham b. Solomon of Torrutiel provide important information on the Spanish kings. Abraham Zacuto dedicates the sixth essay in *Sefer Yuhasin* (“Book of Genealogy”) to chapters on Gentile history. Don Isaac Abravanel’s commentaries on the Bible contain considerable historical data concerning the Gentiles. Eliyahu Capsali wrote about the history of the Turkish sultans in his work *Seder Olam Zuta*, and the rule of Venice in another. Joseph ha-Kohen devoted an historiographical treatise especially to the kings of France and Turkey, entitled: *Divrei ha-Yamim le-Malkhei Zarefat U-Beit ‘Othman HaTugar* (“History of the kings of France and the Turkish Ottoman Dynasty”).

Gedalya showed great interest in the annals of several Gentile nations; special interest was shown for the history of Greek civilization, the emperors of Rome and Byzantium, and the Christian world — incidental to connecting them in terms of the period to Jewish history. He also provides some details concerning other Gentile peoples.

Gedalya’s interest in the history of ancient peoples is not unusual since one of the most outstanding characteristics of the Italian Renaissance was the return to the past, the aspiration to perceive, appreciate and emphasize the good and beautiful existence, sometimes even embracing it. This aspiration found its strongest expression among Italian humanists. These patterns of thought made their imprint in Italo-Jewish society as well, which showed great interest in ancient civilizations. In various sixteenth century Jewish works we find growing interest in ancient history, and in learning the hidden secrets of antiquity. The main proponent of this trend is the fine historio-

grapher Azariah de' Rossi who in 1570 wrote *Me'or Einayim* on Second Temple Jewish history. This work is based on daring critical investigation, and the best of ancient classical and Christian literature. There is also the famous book *Shilte ha-Giborim* ("Shields of the Mighty") by R. Abraham Portaleone which contains a systematic presentation of the Temple, and its worship, being based on extensive research into Hebrew literature, and non-Jewish sources. In a dialogue on love, *Dialoghi d'Amore* ("The Philosophy of Love") by Judah Abravanel (Leone Ebreo), there is an explanation of ancient Greek legends. In this context, we clearly understand why Gedalya studied ancient coins and measures, and compared them with Italian coinage. He devoted a detailed separate discussion to this matter, in this book (fols. 88r-90v).

Our study now divides into two principle topics, each of which is an essay by itself — knowing the ancient world and its culture on the one hand, and interest in Christianity on the other. These are two subjects that attracted Gedalya because they are connected to his surroundings — to his land of birth, Italy. Rome served as the capital of the Roman kingdom, republic, and empire for hundreds of years, and as the site of the Holy See. In such a place it was not difficult for him to collect and collate information from various sources.

Regarding the first subject, recognition of the ancient world and its civilization, one can only sense the essential difference in its two parts. In the first part, devoted to Greece, Gedalya emphasizes the cultural side; he quotes legends and tales from Greek mythology, and enumerates Greek writers, thinkers and historians while noting others. In the second section which concerns Rome, Gedalya places greater emphasis on political measures, the character of the Roman administration and its leaders (emperors and military commanders). In both sections, Gedalya made use of material which is clearly historical, and sometimes legendary, primarily concerning the most central figures. Even if the material is not meant for teaching historical *realia*, it can still point to living traditions which relate to these personages.

The second subject concerning the world of Christianity, was not at all foreign to Gedalya. He often goes beyond his realm, providing information on Christianity. Apparently, he was intimately familiar with the patristic literature, having before him various writings of Popes, clergymen, and theologians — such as canons and papal bulls (of which he made important use). From the same Christian literature, Gedalya learned something of the history of Rome and its emperors, on which he comments extensively elsewhere. Gedalya also knew the Apocryphal literature, and referred especially to Judith and Tobit, as well as to the works of Philo, Ben Sira, and others whom he knew of from standard Christian versions.

It should be remembered that the Italian Renaissance is known as a period when barriers between Jews and Christians were removed, an attempt being made to come closer and understand one another. Jews went to study at Christian academies. In this period, we find numerous Jewish humanists at universities such as the famous one of Padua, where Gedalya's brother Judah was a student. Furthermore, there were Jews who taught at Christian schools — among them the philosopher Elijah Delmedigo, R. Judah Minz, and the grammarian Abraham de Balmes. Gedalya directly developed bonds with Christian circles. He attests in one place to his conversations with Christian erudites who were proficient in the imperial history of Rome:

”יש אומרים שיש בתורות הקסרים של רומא פסק א' נקרא על שם אבטליון כשהיה ערל ברומא, ואני השתדלתי עם חכמי גדולים שבהם למצוא הפסק ההוא ויגעתי ולא מצאתי” (כה, ב.).

(“There are those that say that in the Roman imperial laws, one ruling is named after Abtalyon when he was a Gentile in Rome; and I tried with the help of great Gentile sages to find this ruling; I toiled but did not find it.” — p. 25v)

A substantial portion of Gedalya's book is devoted to a description of the sufferings and persecutions of the Jewish people due to Christian fanaticism from the first centuries C.E. (as we will show hereafter). He himself fell victim to this religious fanaticism, becoming a wanderer after being expelled from the Papal States in 1567. In spite of this, Gedalya saw nothing wrong in giving information to his reader on this same religion and its exponents, though in matters that were not connected to his people and culture. It is worth noting that in Jewish historiography there is very little treatment of Christian matters that are unrelated to Judaism. Besides Gedalya, we find some treatment in Don Isaac Abravanel's biblical commentaries — particularly his commentary of Daniel which is entitled: *Ma'aynei ha-Yeshu'ah* (“Wells of Salvation”) as well as in the sixth section of Abraham Zacuto's *Sefer Yuhasin* which scatters here and there glimpses of Christianity. There is also some treatment of Christianity in Joseph ha-Kohen's chronicle which is devoted to the history of the kings of France (and Germany), and Turkey. Though Azariah de' Rossi makes very important use of Christian material, his purpose is to discuss Jewish matters.

### 3. PERSECUTIONS AND DISTURBANCES THROUGHOUT THE AGES

This special discussion is the second in this portion of the work, showing through brief, continual description, the oppression, persecution, edicts, and disturbances that were a way of life for diaspora Jewish communities in medieval Europe. In this context, Gedalya attempted to contend with the question of Jewish existence in the countries of dispersion. As is known, this

question was given special significance as well in the writings of other historians who were of the first and second generations after the destruction of the Jewish community in the Iberian peninsula — such as Abraham Zacuto, Solomon ibn Verga, Samuel Usque and Joseph ha-Kohen. Just as it is impossible to ignore these events, so too regarding the general phenomenon of bodily injury affecting the Jewish masses throughout the ages. There were those among these writers who by adding the tales of persecution to their chronicles wished to express their growing anger; others in anguished expressions showed their hatred for Christianity in whose name wanton acts were committed, or desired in this manner to educate in the spirit of those martyred in all times. Most of Gedalya's knowledge of Christianity was derived from the above mentioned four historians. Yet as he was accustomed to do, Gedalya brought such details to his readers in a brief, compact form — sometimes with exaggerated brevity which spoiled the strict sense of the matter under discussion. Sometimes, what he says has no relationship to the secure used, and is completely incomprehensible because Gedalya did not understand the course of events described or because he overly abridged or omitted sources. Here and there, he tended to attach to the description of a certain event information from a few sources as a sort of interpolation. These sources sometimes compliment one another, but more often they contradict, perplexing the reader. This in turn blurs the structure of the historical story; at times Gedalya puts additional informational content in a narrative framework from one source or another which he has gleaned from unknown Christian and Jewish sources. These latter sources have been proven historically — and it is here that Gedalya's contribution has been considerable.

A fair amount of Gedalya's information on the disturbances is taken from other sources of which only a small portion were known and clarified. Concerning a few events which occurred in Spain and Portugal, Gedalya preserved family traditions as some members of his family (forefathers) were involved one way or another, since they held high position at the royal court. Most of the descriptions of events in Italy are not from Hebrew sources but rather from general — particularly Church — sources. Much of the information can be corroborated from bits of evidence which have only recently been discovered.

#### 4. *APOCALYPTICS*

In the first section of the work, Gedalya pays special attention as well to messianism and apocalypics. In a relatively detailed manner, he discusses reckoning the End of Days; this occupation was very widespread in sixteenth century Italy. He surveys sources where it is possible to find material



on this, dramatically describing how he himself had arrived at a reckoning of the End of Days: the year משיח (ת"ש"ג = 1598) in which redemption would come.

To a limited extent, Gedalya gave his views concerning widely held beliefs in the Middle Ages on the existence of the Ten Lost Tribes, whose discovery was always connected with redemption. He takes a first step in providing knowledge of false messiahs and bearers of redemption among the Jews throughout the ages — from the Second Temple period, ending in the efforts of David Reuveni and Solomon Molcho to bring the Redemption sooner. In this context, it should be noted that the messianic hopes, the longings and yearnings for redemption nevertheless are given expression in various modes in all ages but achieved their greatest dimensions in sixteenth century Italy. At the end of the fifteenth century, in an atmosphere full of messianic tension, an extensive apocalyptic literature began to develop in Italy. One by one, various reckoners of the End of Days and bearers of redemption began to flourish. At the same time, there were numerous stories and rumours regarding the history of the Ten Lost Tribes who were to be redeemed in the future.

#### 5. GEDALYA'S SERMONS IN THE "CHAIN OF TRADITION"

With this, we have briefly surveyed the two sections of the book which are pertinent to our discussion. It is worthwhile mentioning that the middle section of his book includes sermons of a universal character which were, to a great extent, harmonized to the personal views of contemporary Italian humanists. This middle section consists of innovations in contemporary knowledge of the celestial bodies, the creation of the new-born, the soul, sorcery, evil spirits, human law, coins, and measures..

#### 6. HIS TRENDS

From here on, we will discuss the question of trends in Gedalya's writings. In the preface to *Shalsholet HaKabbalah*, Gedalya specifies his trends which number twelve, and are referred to as "תורניות", which impelled him to write his book or to stress specific directions of thought to different chapters in it. Similarly, these same trends are to be found in three primary tendencies which Gedalya had in front of him during the writing of this work:

- a) Consideration of the evolution of the Jewish tradition.
- b) Religious consciousness in light of the stories concerning edicts and persecutions against the Jews — from the beginning of the Middle Ages until Gedalya's times.
- c) Crystallization of the concept of the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its Law.

Now we will discuss in some detail these same fundamental goals which he set for himself in writing this composition.

a. *The Evolution of the Jewish Tradition*

Gedalya sees this trend as the crowning glory of his book, as he clearly states:

“היא גדולה מכלם, והיא השתלשלות קבלת תורה שבע”פ מאדון הנביאים ... מדור אל דור ... עד דורנו ... איש מפי איש ...” (תועלת יא).  
 (“And it is the greatest of all, being the evolution of the receiving of the Oral Law from the Master of the Prophets Moses ... from generation to generation ... until our day ... from the mouth of one to the other ...” — trend no. 11)

It is from here that we get Gedalya’s appellation for *Shalsholet HaKabbalah*. He widens the discourse in order to describe the history of those who transferred the tradition throughout the ages — from the formation of the Jewish people — while emphasizing the spiritual heritage which has been to the coming generations, and paying special attention to the medieval sages. In Gedalya’s opinion such a discussion can train his readers in modes of thought, practices, and ways of morality that came from the sayings and writings of illustrious persons. This trend also is a foundation for other chronicles in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

b. *Religious Consciousness in Light of the Stories Concerning Edicts and Persecutions*

As stated above, Gedalya devoted a substantial portion of his work to a description of the Jewish people’s affliction throughout the ages — from the fifth century C.E. until Gedalya’s times. Gedalya also desired to add an independent note of criticism regarding the Jews: the miseries have come in order to admonish Jewry for its sins. This is what he says:

“כי מתוך ספורי המאורעות והגליות שהיו בעמנו נשכיל ונדע כמה ארך אפים הוא יתברך, וזה כי עם היות שעוונותינו חייבו אתנו כליה הגה הוא יתברך משגיח בפרטינו, ועל כל פשעים מכסה אהבה” (תועלת ט).

(“From the stories of riots and banishments that our people underwent we will be enlightened and know how merciful God is, and this being so because our sins caused our destruction; Divine Providence oversees us, covering all transgressions with love” — trend no. 9).<sup>4</sup>

In another paragraph, describing the riots of 1391, Gedalya brings Abraham Zacuto’s statement which hangs the responsibility for the troubles on the wickedness of the age:

“ואומר ספר יוחסין שבשנת קנ”א היה גזירה גדול בקטלונאית וקסטיליא זארגון, והמירו יותר ממאתים אלף נפשות, ונתנו סיבה על ערוב אנשי ישראל עם נוצריות, כי הבני הרגו אבותיהם” (קיד, א).

("And *Sefer Yuhasin* says that in the year 1391 there was a great persecution in Catalonia, and Castile and Aragon; more than two hundred thousand souls converted, giving as reason, the missing of Jews and Christian women; the sons killed their fathers" — p. 114r).

Nevertheless, Gedalya attempts to encourage and console his readers with his belief that the Lord will not abandon His people. If they are left desolate by one king, another ruler will spread his wings over them:

"וגם כי מלך א' דוחה אותנו ממלכותו, הקב"ה נותן אותנו לרחמים לפני מלך אחר, ופורש כנפיו עלינו עם היותנו מתי מספר . . . ובכן יתחזק בטחוננו בו יתברך, ונדעה ונרדפה לדבקה בו, ובעבודתו כל הימים" (תועלת ט).

( 'And also if one king banishes us from his kingdom, the Holy One, blessed be He gives us in mercy to another king who spreads his wings' over us being few in number. . . therefore our certainty in God was strengthened; so was devotion and worship of Him for all times" — trend no. 9).

Here Gedalya is referring to the condition of the Jews who were cruelly banished by the Spanish and Portuguese kings, but were rewarded with a life of tranquility in the Ottoman empire. Perhaps he intended a reference to local Italian expulsions, when the Jews would be expelled from one duchy, finding sanctuary in another.

Gedalya also finds cause on educational grounds for emphasizing martyrological events that were so widespread in the web of persecutions from the Middle Ages until contemporary times. He feels that by elevating the martyr's image there would be a strengthening of belief in the God of Israel:

"להלהיב תשוקת הקורא לקדש שם שמים בכל לבבו ובכל נפשו ובכל מאוודו, כאשר עשו שלמי' וכן רבים שיסופר ענינם איך מסרו עצמם על קדושת ה' וסבלו יסורים וגלויות, ובכל זאת לא חטאו ולא נתנו תפלה לאלהים" (תועלת ו).

("To arouse the reader's desire to sanctify the Heavenly Name with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might when they became righteous, and also many of whom it would be told, how they delivered themselves in martyrdom, or suffered affliction and exile, and despite all this did not sin or commit heresy against God" — trend no. 6).

### c. *The Uniqueness of the Jewish People and its Law*

Not any less, and perhaps more, important, this trend is stressed when Gedalya wishes to glorify in various ways the Jewish religion and culture in which he sees the basis and root of all wisdom; all quality in the intellectual world comes from the Jewish heritage. In his view, the wisdom of the great Gentile thinkers and philosophers flows from the Jewish religion. We have already observed above that on the basis of Jewish and Christian sources he

points to the influence of the Jewish religion, through those that speak for it, (the prophets and their successors) on great philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and especially Aristotle. Concerning him, Gedalya had a tradition that Aristotle converted to Judaism. He writes *inter alia*:

”כי גם שרבו חכמי' בהם, לא ידעו ולא יבינו להטיל ח"ו דופי בתורתנו הקדושה, ובוהו תוכר אצל כל העולם שהיא תמימה מחכימת פתי, ולא תפול בה ספק מכל צד.“ (תועלת ז). (“When the Gentile sages were many, they did not know or comprehend, hurling insult God forbid, at our Holy Law, and thus the Law will be recognized in all the world as pure . . . and no one will doubt its value” — trend no. 7).

In another citation, Gedalya makes a clear statement on this matter:

”וראוי לדעת כי רבים מחכמי אטיני ויוונים הלכו פלוסופיהם לירושלים לראות חכמי ישראל אשר היה שמעם וחכמתם מפורסמת בכל העולם, וזה בהדות ומשלים ויפלאו יחד הרבה, והיוונים הודו לישראל, ויאמרו כי עם חכם הם.“ (צח, ב). (“And it is worthy to note that many of the Athenian sages, and the Greek philosophers went to Jerusalem to see the Jewish sages whose learning and wisdom were famous all over the world in riddles and parables; they the Greeks and the Jews would debate much between themselves. And the Greeks thanked the Jews, saying that they are a wise people” — p. 98v).

It is not in vain that Gedalya devoted a number of discourses to translations of the Hebrew Bible into several languages. He sees in the distribution of the Bible among the Gentiles overwhelming proof of its veracity and esteem in the eyes of Gentile sages. Without doubt, the masterpiece in this case is the Letter of Aristeeas which is the source of the story of the Septuagint *targum* which Gedalya had taken from *Me'or Einayim*. Gedalya extolls the widely held Renaissance view (held both by Jewish and Christian society) that the ancient language spoken by humanity before the generation of the Tower of Babel, was Hebrew. In this case, he was greatly influenced by *Me'or Einayim*, even adding that he saw in an ancient Christian source that the Greek alphabet is based on ancient Hebrew. It is in this spirit that we understand as well his words, taken as they are from the Church fathers — that our forefather Abraham was a pioneer in the fields of astrology and mathematics.

In another source, Gedalya sees the need to devote a discourse to the great respect which was felt for the Temple by the rulers of the great Gentile nations. Within the same trend, Gedalya takes hold of every tradition which attempts to point to the conversion of this sage or that ruler to Judaism. In certain paragraphs, Gedalya adds an additional element connected to this trend, namely, his observation that Jewish influence is not confined to spiritual culture but appears in material culture as well. He desires to present

Jewry as the pioneer of human progress, one of whose unique qualities is the originality. He notes for instance — on the basis of a non-Jewish source — that agrarian methods that were instilled by Joseph the son of Jacob the Patriarch served as a foundation for the Egyptian kings in the generations that folowed:

“ראיתי בדברי הימים שלהם, כי המלכים הגדולים שהיו בעולם בין האומות הראשונים היו מלכי מצרים, והתמידו על מנהג יוסף הצדיק שכל הארץ היה מהמלך עבור פרעון המעשה באופן שנתעשרו בהפלגה רבה.” (ק, א).

“I saw in Christian chronicle that the great kings of the world, among the Gentile nations, were those of Egypt; they persisted in Joseph’s custom that all the land was from the king, being paid for in labour; and in this manner, they became exceedingly wealthy” — p. 106r).

When he discusses as well the quality of writing materials in the ancient period, he emphasizes that among Jews the use of parchment was known, “being received on Mount Sinai” — as he states:

“יבימי מלכות קרטגיני התחילו לנהוג נייר של קלף עורות, ואין ספק שיש בידינו אופן עשיית קלף מהעורות, היא לנו בקבלה מסיני.” (צב, א).

“In the days of the kingdom of Carthage, they began to use paper from skin parchment, and without doubt it is known how parchment has been made from skins, having been received by us on Mount Sinai” — p. 92r).

This trend, out of apologetic motives, was fairly widespread in various forms within Jewish as well as Hellenistic and medieval literature. In their varied works, Philo and Josephus accentuate this trend. In the Middle Ages, this same trend was more strongly stressed in the *Book of Kuzari*, *Moreh Nevukhim*, and different thinkers whether Jewish or not. We find apologetic arguments like these being expressed bitingly and in a variety of ways among Renaissance Italian Jews in cultural confrontations with their Christian neighbours. Without doubt, Azariah de’ Rossi was the most prominent of those who influenced Gedalya in this case. Similarly, at the base of these three trends, stands a single goal before Gedalya — namely, to reveal to his people the light shining from Judaism, and to strengthen the belief in the God of Israel.

In order to better understand this, we will start off by saying a few words about the spiritual condition of Italian Jewry during the Renaissance. For Italian Jewry, the Renaissance period represent a very important reference point in their thought and culture. This was a period of scholastic and spiritual blossoming in both Jewish and Christian society, being noted for the removal of barriers between them, and the mutual understanding in matters of the spirit. Despite the edicts of the Catholic Reaction, the Jews

of this period found themselves not only wielding influence but particularly, being themselves influenced by the Christians. The period saw quite a few cases of Jews converting to Christianity of their own volition — and of Christians going over to the Jewish fold.

The new cultural current into which Italian Jewry was thrown in this period, also created a new condition in their religious and ethical life. Still, they tried to preserve the Jewish foundation of their lives, with the religious framework serving as a type of barrier from completely sinking into Renaissance culture. Several gaps were revealed in the mode of life of the religious Jew on an individual basis — as well as a weakening in the status of communal and rabbinical institutions. As a result, we find signs of religious doubt among circles of the social elite.

Similarly, we would not be detracting from the truth if we were to assume that Gedalya was trying to halt the tide of assimilation coming from the current of universalistic thought that were influencing the state of mind of the Jewish intellectual. However, Gedalya himself had the same spiritual fusion — general education and Jewish learning. He felt it appropriate to emphasize that the physical weakness of the Jewish community was a result of numerous riots against it. Such attacks were instigated mainly by the trampling of the Catholic Reaction — to which he reacted in great anger. On the other hand, Gedalya attempted to give prominence to the spiritual strength of the Jews, who despite all, succeeded in preserving their uniqueness through a special spiritual heritage which is the foundation of Gentile knowledge and a repository of important elements connected to human progress. On the one hand, Gedalya tries to open the Jewish reader's eyes so that he will be aware of his hostile surroundings. On the other hand, Gedalya wishes to uplift the reader's spirit, and arouse both his religious and ethnic pride. In other words, though we are physically weak and open to constant assault because of our faith, we are strong in spirit. Therefore, he tries to present in detail those same "torches" which illuminated the Jewish religion in the darkness of the Middle Ages. Perhaps in this manner, we can explain his desire to deal with the Second Temple period — beyond collating an onomastic list of sages who lived and worked in this period. It appears that Gedalya wanted his arguments to point out the strength and spirit of the Jewish people standing up against the mightiest of Gentile nations, seeking to preserve its own unique identity.

#### 7. *An Evaluation of Gedalya's Composition*

We will now evaluate the nature of Gedalya's writing, and its quality. Much wrath was vented on *Shalsholet HaKabbala*. There were those who treated the composition with contempt and disbelief, seeing in it no more than a

pack of lies and nonsense that should neither be taken into consideration nor even relied upon. Contemporary readers of Gedalya's work had a negative attitude towards it — so did later readers. A few among those who have investigated sixteenth century Jewish historiography did not bother to mention him, it being self-explanatory that they did not try to understand him. Those who *do* mention him, insufficiently critique his work. The latter usually make do with a very general and non-exhaustive evaluation. As a matter of fact, if we were to carefully consider Gedalya's words, we could at least partly confirm his detractor's arguments. But because of the complexity of Gedalya's work, we nevertheless cannot adopt their conclusions as to the work's quality in its entirety.

In order to better understand the foundation and root of the factual deficiencies in *Shalshet HaKabbalah*, we have to work according to a fundamental assumption without hesitation, namely, that Gedalya did not fabricate anything. This assumption contradicts the determination of various learned sages. All the bits of information which he presents are based on sources; therefore the number of garbled items is not so great as one would think from reading these sages. They should be examined in keeping with our assumption. There are two basic factors involved in his errors:

a) Mistakes in the source. In investigating Gedalya's sources we find that they are the basis for his errors as he relied on them without ascertaining their quality.

b) An ill-considered understanding of the sources upon which he based himself. Gedalya often, when using his sources, did not understand or go to the heart of the matter in question. This is the reason why in a few places his statements are unfounded or even ridiculous at times.

We come to the conclusion that Gedalya usually related to his sources with great naivety, making no effort to get to the bottom of matters. Similarly he showed no ability to distinguish between a reliable and a defective or fabricated source. Unlike Azariah de' Rossi who excelled in this, with a great capacity for discernment and ability in the logical analysis of the sources upon which he relied — Gedalya did not differentiate between a precise and a distorted text. Yet it seems that in this area, Azaria de' Rossi had no equal, since those who concerned themselves with Jewish history were closer to Gedalya, in their simplistic approach to the sources, than to Azariah..

Gedalya himself was conscious of distortions and inaccuracies that occur in his work. In a statement of apology he blames the defects on distortions in

the printings as well as on textual alterations. Elsewhere, in his preface, he apologizes saying that the defects existing in his composition are the result of objective circumstances — but primarily because of the absence of manuals. They were missing due to the harsh edicts of Pope Julius III who instructed that the Talmud be burnt in 1553, as well as the strict control over the printing of Hebrew books which had to be approved by Church censors. Nevertheless, in a few places, we find elements of criticism in Gedalya's work and the desire to inquire into the veracity of information, which is undoubtedly strange in his manner of writing.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it seems that Gedalya cannot be viewed as he was by many, as a simplistic eclectic who was content with commonplace material gathered and selected from a few well known chronicles. We see his attempts to supplement and enrich the facts with new information as well as to add new light from further Hebrew and Christian sources. Apparently the evaluative additions as well as his efforts to factually detail and provide information as he understood and saw it (being based on Jewish and Christian sources), determine his place in sixteenth century Jewish historiography. Furthermore, he provides considerable new information unknown to any Jewish chronicle. Similarly, in those of his sources which have been uncovered, we can point to the great variety and range in his learning. He had a wide general education, and an extensive knowledge of Rabbinic literature. In addition, he knew historiographical and medieval philosophical literature well, all this by the side of great erudition in Talmudic and Midrashic literature. Yet one should not exaggerate the value of Gedalya's learning. It would seem that the cultural world of many of his contemporaries who were Jewish humanists was not essentially different from the spiritual world of Gedalya. The former rivaled him in having extensive Jewish learning as well as fine general education. From the sources he used and other information concerning him, it has been ascertained, that besides fluency in Hebrew and Italian, Gedalya was proficient as well in the Latin, Spanish and Portuguese languages.

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