

A LATE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHICAL APOLOGIA

by DAVID GEFFEN

ספר בחינת הדת לר' אליה דלמדיגו מקנדיא. יעקב יהושע רוס.

*Sefer Behinat haDat of Elijah del-Medigo*. A critical edition, with introduction, notes and commentary by Jacob Joshua Ross. Tel-Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, Tel-Aviv University, 1984. 153 p.

A brief philosophic text of only thirty pages, this work, composed by Elijah del Medigo in Candia on the isle of Crete at the end of 1490, has enjoyed two previous printed editions and a number of manuscript versions during its five hundred year history. The present edition, the most complete and accurate ever, is based upon all the earlier printed versions, later manuscripts, and the only complete early manuscript of the work, housed in the Ambrosiana Library in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Professor Yaakov Ross of the Philosophy Department at Tel-Aviv University has written a detailed introduction with extensive footnotes, placing the work in its historical and philosophic context. To make this edition more usable, he has also divided the text into chapters and added textual annotations. This version is an excellent example of how a more accurate text of a late medieval classic may be developed by intensive study of the manuscript and printed variants.

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Dr. David Geffen is Director of Information Services of the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel (AACI) and the author of an unpublished doctoral dissertation on del Medigo, *Faith and Reason in Elijah del Medigo's Behinat ha-Dath*, New York: Columbia University, 1970.

1. MS. Ambrosiana – Milano X 130/5 (Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, No. 14587).

Before discussing Professor Ross's new interpretation of this work, we shall review some of the biographical details of del Medigo's life. Born in the city of Candia in 1460, Elijah was a member of the famous del Medigo family, which had lived on the island since the fourteenth century. The first twenty years of his life are virtually unknown; however, there are extant details concerning the intellectual life of Cretan Jewry during this period. As Crete was a crossroads for Jews who were leaving Spain to travel to the Turkish empire, on the one hand, and for itinerant Jewish scholars coming from North Africa and Palestine, on the other, the island was seething with intellectual ferment; there were several individuals among the local population qualified to teach Jewish and secular philosophy, Kabbalah and the sciences. In this atmosphere Elijah del Medigo was educated. Thanks to his inquisitive mind, he acquired a solid background in Jewish philosophy, and an especially strong grounding in Averroistic thought, via the Hebrew versions of the works of this Arab philosopher.

From 1480 to 1490, he lived in Italy, beginning his stay in Venice, where he served as a judge in a philosophical debate. His Venetian sojourns at the beginning and end of the decade were marked by several short works and translations into Latin which he penned for such well-known personalities as Girolamo Donato, Domenico Grimani and Antonio Pizzamano. During this Italian decade, he produced at least three original treatises in Latin on the nature of the universe and four commentaries in Latin on the works of Averroës, and translated eight of Averroës' commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Plato from the Hebrew into Latin. There are also a number of Hebrew manuscripts of his from this period extant in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Between 1481 and 1486, del Medigo maintained an especially close relationship with Pico della Mirandola. An outstanding thinker and Christian Kabbalist, Pico, while seeking philosophic texts of Averroës and other medieval thinkers, befriended Elijah because he felt that this young Jewish scholar could be of assistance to him, having access as he did to unknown Averroistic texts. Pico also wanted del Medigo to teach him various aspects of medieval thought. Del Medigo prepared original treatises and translations for Pico, and the two held extensive discussions on a variety of philosophic topics.<sup>2</sup> While with Pico in Florence in 1485, del Medigo engaged in disputations concerning the validity of Judaism. There, in the home of the Platonist Marsilio Ficino, del Medigo and another Jew – now shown by David

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2. Del Medigo was dependent upon patrons for aid, including Pico. While he was appreciative of this, he was also bothered by what he had to take to subsist. In 1486, he wrote to Pico, "...so that you not consider me a boor, send me a little present, not a great one as you usually do, and I will be as happy with it as I would if the Grand Turk conferred a castle on me" (Paris Latin MS. 6508, fol. 76b).

Ruderman to have been Abraham Farissol<sup>3</sup> – argued against the position of Flavius Mithradites, a convert from Judaism who claimed that the scriptures contained references to Jesus. In addition to his philosophic expertise, Elijah proved an outspoken critic of heretical Jews, whom he was concerned would lead people away from the faith.

After parting ways with Pico in 1486, Elijah spent time in various other Italian cities prior to returning to Venice. By the end of the decade, he had returned to his native city on the island of Crete. There are a number of theories as to why he left Italy. The three most commonly suggested explanations are: 1) that he was excommunicated by Rabbi Judah Minz, chief rabbi of Padua, because of his views on philosophy and Judaism; 2) that his espousal of the Averroistic doctrine of the unity of the intellect caused him to be banished by Bishop Pietro Barozzi of Padua; 3) that he suffered from strained relations with the Italian Jewish community, against the background of his critique of the Kabbalah. In addition, Ross notes that the spread of Pico's syncretistic thinking, which was even accepted by some young Italian Jews, was problematic for del Medigo. Because of all these factors, Ross argues, del Medigo wished to return to Candia, where he could teach and develop his basic understanding of philosophy and Judaism – which Ross identifies with the rational approach of Maimonides – without interference (pp. 23-25).<sup>4</sup> Asked to prepare a work on the relationship of faith and reason by his student, Saul Cohen Ashkenazi, del Medigo wrote what was to be his final work, *Behinath ha-Dath* (“An Examination of Faith”). This was completed on December 31, 1490, and he died less than three years later.

## II

*Behinath ha-Dath* delineates del Medigo's view that one can study philosophy without endangering one's Jewish beliefs. His arguments on this point are based upon Averroës' theory of double truth, found in his *Fasl al Maqal* (“The Harmony of Faith and Reason”). This doctrine states that philosophy and prophecy-revelation are to be regarded as separate and independent sources of truth, both of which are valid. In this, del Medigo is loyal to the Aristotelian-Averroistic tradition and, in a sense, is perhaps even more rigorously rationalistic and “philosophically” consistent than his master, Maimonides, whose work contains a certain harmonistic-allegoristic tendency. (See pp. 48-54) Del Medigo also presents a study of the principles of faith, with a critique of Albo and Duran's positions (albeit without referring to them by name). He also analyzes the topic of *ta'amei ha-mizvot* (the rationales for the commandments) and its important role in Judaism.

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3. David B. Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew; the life and thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati, 1981), pp. 52, 56.

4. See also the present reviewer's “Insights into the Life and Thought of Elijah del Medigo,” *PAAJR* 41-42 (1975), 69-86.

Another significant facet of this work is its critique of Kabbalah – a movement than reascent among Italian Jewry (pp. 39-43).<sup>5</sup> Del Medigo's was the first systematic, written critique of the Kabbalah, and includes a challenge both to the legitimacy and the authenticity of the Kabbalah, and particularly of its key work, *Sefer ha-Zohar*. His arguments are both historical – that the claim of the *Zohar* to hoary antiquity, to authorship by R. Simeon bar Yohai, is incorrect, as evinced by the absence of citations of Kabbalistic positions in either Talmudic or later rabbinic writings – and theological. He sees the doctrine of the *sefirot* as heretical, denying the unity of God, and criticizes the thurgic interpretation of the *mitzvot* as magical, stressing that the spiritual world is not subject to influence by human beings, but that rather the opposite is the case.

*Beḥinath ha-Dath* also offers a stringent criticism of certain aspects of Christianity, which he believes to be anti-rationalistic. These last mentioned sections on Christianity appeared in part in the 1629 Basle edition, but were censored out of the 1833 edition by its editor, Isaac Reggio. These passages have been carefully studied in recent years by Daniel Lasker and by David Ruderman,<sup>6</sup> and now by Professor Ross, who contends that *Beḥinath ha-Dath*, while primarily a defense of the Maimonidean rationalistic approach to Judaism, also deliberately included a polemic against Christianity, in general, and against Pico, in particular, who was trying to proselytize through his syncretistic thought. Del Medigo makes it clear that such doctrines as incarnation, transsubstantiation, the Trinity and original sin are anti-rationalistic. Indeed, this work may have been penned in Crete because of the negative critique it implied of the philosophical and theological approach taken by his former student and patron, Picco della Mirandola, and by other Christians whom he knew in Italy.

Another significant insight in the Ross edition concerns del Medigo's use of the term *mitpalsefim* (literally, "philosophizers"). These people in fact did justice neither to philosophy nor religion. The term may have referred to "pseudo-Maimonideans," who utilized certain allegorical tendencies in Maimonides' interpretation of the *mitzvot* to justify their own wholesale rejection of their yoke. Del Medigo, by contrast, continued to stress the necessity of the observance of the *mizvot* (commandments) as part of Judaism's logical structure. More specifically, Ross (following Ruderman<sup>7</sup>) identifies this group with the circle of Pico and Ficino, who developed a syncretistic approach combining Christianity, elements of Judaism (especially Kabbalah) and Hermeticist magic (pp. 35-37). Thus, the various polemical themes contained in the book – against Christianity, Kabbalah, and *mitpalsefim* – ultimately lead towards the controversy with this circle, with which

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5. Isaiah Tishby sees this as a most important aspect of this work; see his *Mishnat ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1971) I, 45-46.

6. Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977); Ruderman, *op. cit.*

7. Ruderman, pp. 55-56.

he was involved during his years in Italy. Del Medigo made these individuals a particular target of criticism because of their negative effect upon Judaism and his fear that their influence might spread.

Professor Ross' interpretive essay, based upon his reading of this critical version of the text of *Behinath ha-Dath*, now provides an important new approach to this work. What is even more telling is that the thought of Elijah del Medigo, who is not generally considered as being in the first rank of Jewish philosophers, could be such a fascinating source of study. This work by Ross adds a new dimension to the study of the history of ideas in Jewish thought. Hopefully, now that a standard Hebrew text exists, an English translation will be prepared so that students of philosophy in general will be able to make use of this treatise.

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