LEHRHAUS

OVER SHABBOS VAYECHI 5778

Articles:

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The Hasidism of Rav Kook

Bezalel Naor

Editors' Note: On January 7, 2018, Lincoln Square Synagogue will host a book launch for the new Koren Rav Kook siddur, with commentary by Rabbi Bezalel Naor. In that forum, Rabbi Naor and Prof. Marc B. Shapiro will discuss the legacy of Rav Kook. More details may be found here.

We usually associate the term "Neo-Hasidism" with thinkers such as Martin Buber, Hillel Zeitlin and Abraham Joshua Heschel. It may come to many of us as a surprise that Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook also proposed a new Hasidism, but it should not.[1] During Rav Kook's lifetime, there were those who perceived him as the founder of a new Hasidic movement. Both admirers and detractors understood that this charismatic teacher embodied a renewed spirituality.

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap, eminent disciple of Rav Kook, wrote a letter to the Gerrer Rebbe in which he portrayed his mentor as a modern-day Hasidic master reaching out to alienated Jews in an attempt to bring them back to the fold.[2] A cynical writer of the Agudah camp, critiquing Rav Kook's seminal work *Orot* (1920), segued to the secular *"tzaddik"* Martin Buber and expressed fear lest there develop around Rav Kook yet another mystery religion.[3]

What are the facts? How did Rav Kook himself envision the new Hasidism? Was it to be a reincarnation of the East European variety attributed to Rabbi Israel Baʿal Shem Tov?

Untrained observers have the answer ready. One need merely point to the *spodik*, the tall fur hat perched on his head, to determine that Rav Kook viewed himself as a Hasidic rebbe. However there is an historical context to the headwear. Rav Kook's predecessors in the Ashkenazic Jerusalem rabbinate—his father-in-law Rabbi Elijah David Rabinowitz-Te'omim (Aderet) and Rabbi Samuel Salant, staunch Lithuanian *Mitnagdim*—wore the identical fur hat. Excuse the cultural confusion and move on to Rav Kook's own words.

In his much calumniated *Orot*, Rav Kook threw down the gauntlet, calling for a "great Hasidism," "very superior Hasidim," and "great Hasidim, unique in greatness of knowledge."[4] He even pushed the term to its extreme limits, signing off: "Give strength to the higher knowledge; to the exalted, *radical*, godly Hasidism (*Hasidut ha-elohit ha-radikalit ha-romemah*)!"[5] And with that, the reader is left wondering where exactly Rav Kook's *poignard* is pointing.

This year, yet another heretofore unknown journal of Rav Kook was released in Jerusalem.[6] An entry in the journal fleshes out Rav Kook's vision of a new Hasidism.

We should pay careful attention to this recently released passage. It should disabuse us of many well-intentioned but ill-conceived attempts to reduce Rav Kook to the status of one more Hasidic rebbe with a fur hat on his head. The entry, which is easily an essay in its own right, contains several subtle nuances which might be missed in our contemporary pop culture. Evidently, Rav Kook anticipated our ability to manufacture facile acronyms such as *HaBaKuK* (Habad, Breslov, Kook, Carlebach). In a "preemptive strike," he unleashes his own byword, *KeMaH*, the initials of *Kabbalah, Madda, Hasidut* (Kabbalah, Science, Hasidism).

Kemah: *Kabbalah, Madda,* and *Hasidut*

Early on in the piece, Rav Kook holds up as a lodestar the book *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* by Abraham Cohen Herrera (a.k.a Alonso Nunez de Herrera).

Herrera (d. 1635) studied in Ragusa (today Dubrovnik, Croatia) under Rabbi Israel Sarug, a peripatetic teacher who transmitted a form of Lurianic Kabbalah to several distinguished students in Italy, the greatest being Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano.[7]

Herrera's Spanish work of Kabbalah, *Puerta del Cielo* (*Gate of Heaven*), remained until recently an unpublished manuscript. Luckily, Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca (1605-1693), eventual *Hakham* of the Portuguese community of Amsterdam, translated the work (which is to say, portions thereof) into Hebrew at Herrera's behest. The book was printed in Amsterdam in 1655 under the title *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*.

What strikes the reader of *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* is the ease with which Herrera juxtaposes arcane Lurianic Kabbalah and Neo-Platonic philosophy, prompting Alexander Altmann to title his 1982 study of *Puerta del Cielo*, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key." Herrera shuttles between Israel Sarug and Marsilio Ficino without batting an eyelash.

The reader may find curious the fact that Rav Kook, rather than viewing this Spanish work of Kabbalah chock-full of Western philosophy as an aberration or serious departure from tradition, regards it as mainstream. Furthermore, Rav Kook holds it up as a role model for the direction in which he wishes to lead us. As he writes regarding *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, "So did the great throughout the ages."

Rav Kook's perception of *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* may have been influenced by the publisher's introduction to the Warsaw 1865 edition. Israel Jaffe of Kalisz wrote: "All that was investigated by the great godly geniuses—Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto; the Vilna Gaon; his disciple Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin; Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi; his son Rabbi Dov; and his disciple Rabbi Aaron, all of blessed memory—all their systems are gathered together in this book." Jaffe certainly engaged in hyperbole, but his point was well taken. Herrera's book did in fact set the tone for an entire approach to Lurianic Kabbalah that came to be known as *"hasbarah"* or

conceptualization. In Padua, Vilna, Volozhin, Liadi, Lubavitch, and Starosselye, Kabbalah was demythologized and translated to the language of reason and discourse.

But that is not exactly what Rav Kook is saying. Rav Kook asserts that in *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* we have a rapprochement between Kabbalah and the science of the day. In this, Rav Kook may be barking up the wrong tree. In the seventeenth century, in Holland as well as in Italy, there was a demarcation (however blurred) between philosophy and science. Rather than choosing Herrera as his role model, Rav Kook might have done better opting for Herrera's contemporary, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (or as he is known in Hebrew, *"YaShaR mi-Candia"*) as an exemplary amalgam of Kabbalah and science. (By the way, Delmedigo's Kabbalah too is of Sarugian lineage.)

Be that as it may, Rav Kook advocates the marriage of Kabbalah and science. Where does Hasidism enter into the discussion?

Midway through the essay, Rav Kook rather abruptly quotes the rabbinic maxim, "The greater the man, the greater his inclination (*yetzer*)" (*Sukkah* 52a). *Yetzer* is usually understood as *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. In truth, *yetzer* derives from the root *yatzar*, "create." Rav Kook seems to be saying that the new creativity unleashed by the fresh synthesis of Kabbalah and *madda* (science) demands a new ethic.[8]

Rather than the mediocre *Mussar* of the masses, Rav Kook writes, a new Hasidism is called for. Here, both the terms *Mussar* and Hasidism beg definition. What *Mussar*? What Hasidism?

By *"Mussar,"* Rav Kook undoubtedly refers to the *Mussar* movement founded in Lithuania by Rabbi Israel Salanter. Rav Kook was a product of the Volozhin Yeshiva, whose heads (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin and Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik) rejected the Mussar movement. Rav Kook finds Mussar enervating. The new Hasidism he proposes is empowering. "It takes them out from fear and darkness to confidence and light; from servitude and weakness to sovereignty and strength of spirit."[9]

To put his new Hasidism into clearer perspective, Rav Kook juxtaposes it to the previous Hasidism. "Such a Hasidism will certainly not be lacking all the (spiritual) wealth of the latter-day Hasidism." "The latter-day Hasidism" (*ha-hasidut ha-me'uharah*) is code for the Hasidism that originated with the Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht). In *Orot*, Rav Kook refers to Beshtian Hasidism as "the latest Hasidism" (*ha-hasidut ha-aharonah*).[10] This is done to distinguish between East European Hasidism and earlier pietist movements, such as *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, the medieval Pietists of the Rhineland.

So what would Rav Kook's Hasidism look like? Perhaps the Hasidism advocated in Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto's classic, *Mesillat Yesharim* (*Path of the Just*) could serve as an analog. In its original form, *Mesillat Yesharim* consisted of a dialog between a *Hakham*, a wise man, and a *Hasid*,

a pious man.[11] Luzzatto, a Renaissance man in the tradition of Italian Jewry, combined Kabbalah and the science of his day. In Padua, a university town renowned for its medical school, Luzzatto's immediate circle included physicians Moshe David Valle and Yekutiel Gordon. In *Mesillat Yesharim*, Luzzatto included an entire section on *Hasidut* (chaps. 18-21). So enamored was Rav Kook of Luzzatto's work that he penned a digest, *Kitzur Mesillat Yesharim.*[12]

Many years ago, a famous Rosh Yeshivah by the name of Rabbi Abba Berman (quoting his father who led a *metivta* in Lodz, Poland before World War Two), told me in private conversation: "The only Hasidism is that of the *Mesillat Yesharim*."

Speaking of his new Hasidism, Rav Kook writes: "It must be expansive. It must reach to the depth of its source in the nation and the individual, and it must reach to the heights of God's loving-kindness (*hesed*)."

This is Rav Kook's way of reminding us subtly (or not so subtly)—as did Luzzatto in *Mesillat Yesharim*—that the word *"hasidut"* (piety) derives from *"hesed"* (loving-kindness).[13]

In his *modus vivendi*, Rav Kook certainly internalized the words of the "*Hasid* Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto"[14]: "It is worthy for every *hasid* to intend with his actions for the good of his entire generation, to acquit them and protect them…for the Holy One, blessed be He, loves only the one who loves Israel; and the more a person loves Israel, the more the Holy One, blessed be He, loves that person."[15]

Translation of Text of *Pinkesei Ha-Ra'ayah*[16]

> Kabbalah must bond with all the sciences; to live with them and through them. So did the great [sages] throughout the ages; and more than they achieved—it is obligatory upon us to achieve. The spiritual world that bestows its spirit upon the thinking man, was enhanced by constant appearances of the light of intellect. This enhancement dulls the oppositions between one science and another, and once the barriers have come down—the different sciences actually come to one another's aid.
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> Science in all of its breadth, in all of its various aspects—spiritual and practical, societal and global—must find its place alongside the supernal wisdom [i.e. Kabbalah].
>
> A shining example of this would be the book *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* by Rabbi Abraham Cohen Herrera, who was the second in a line extending from Rabbi Isaac Luria through Rabbi Israel Sarug, disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria. Herrera was inspired to write his book in Spanish, in full view of the cultured world of the day. With a breadth of intellect and feelings of respect and affection, the author toured all the philosophical studies that represented the finest literature of his time. Rabbi Isaac Aboab [da Fonseca] who

admired Herrera—translating the work into Hebrew for the benefit of Hebrews—followed in his spirit, which is the spirit of true culture worthy of Torah scholars who are truly "men of holiness."

It is understood that according to the changes of the *Zeitgeist*, so must the synthesis (between the supernal, divine wisdom and all the human thoughts that proceed from the sciences) shift, but the principle remains the same. The preparedness of the thinker—pure of knowledge and holy of thought—to absorb into his midst the best thoughts of the finest writers, the thinkers, the sages of every people and language, of every subject of science; and to shine upon them, from them and through them, the divine light—this is the unchanging way of the world, upon which we are obligated to travel.

Only "if you have heard the old, will you hear the new" (*b. Berakhot* 40a) The old must be studied and researched, and it will bring the new, good, and fundamental.

[This synthesis of] science and the supernal illumination that expands the soul, produces a strong character in our entire organic unity, spiritual and material.

Through the supernal splendor and the fullness of life that beats in its midst, the natural inclinations of the soul and the body, and all its senses and faculties, are invigorated, strengthened, and expanded. "The greater the man, the greater his inclination (*yetzer*)" (*Sukkah* 52a). In order to purify great powers; to refine powerful, luminous, lofty ambitions, much preparation is required. So the synthesis of Kabbalah and science immediately beckons us to—Hasidism (Pietism).

We need now a rich, broad, luminous Hasidism to illumine us!

Such a Hasidism will certainly not be lacking all the [spiritual] wealth of the latter-day Hasidism [i.e. of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov], but it must be expansive. It must reach to the depth of its source in the nation and the individual, and it must reach to the heights of God's loving-kindness (*hesed*).

[We need] a Hasidism that negates no good; no science, peace, Torah, or talent, but rather crystallizes and purifies all. When understood as such, people with heart will not oppose it.

This Hasidism is needed by men of powerful spirit, just as the average *Mussar* (Ethics) is necessary for the masses. This Hasidism contains all the ways of *Mussar*, but it surpasses them; it takes them out from fear and darkness to confidence and light; from servitude and weakness to sovereignty and strength of spirit. This Hasidism must be combined

with Kabbalah and science, so that greatness of spirit not grow inimical to routine ethics (which the average acquire through revulsion brought on by fear).

When we will have this order in hand—first in theory, and later in action—we will have the basis for all the light of Torah; for the theory of *Halakhah* and for all the parameters of action, education and true *hiddush* (creation). A *hiddush* that is at once sharp and esthetic; straight and clever.

And the more enhanced the knowledge and understanding of Torah—real Torah, permeated with the everlasting Holy Covenant—the more the ideal soul will expand, as it fills with the splendor of Kabbalah, the sciences, and Hasidism.

In this regard I invoke the adage: "If there be no *KeMaH* (Flour), there be no Torah; if there be no Torah, there be no *KeMaH* (Flour)" (*m. Avot* 3:17). [*KeMaH* being an acronym for *Kabbalah, Madda, Hasidut* or Kabbalah, Science, Hasidism.]

This is the straight way of the Lord that the new life and the feelings of freedom ringing throughout the sacred soil at this time require us to embark upon.

And a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness...the redeemed shall walk there (Isaiah 35:8-9).

Bezalel Naor is the author of several works of Jewish thought with concentration upon Kabbalah, Sabbateanism, and Hasidism. Recently, his annotated English translation of Rav Kook's seminal work Orot was published by Maggid Books (2015). Naor is presently at work on a kabbalistic novel and collection of poems.

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[1] Incidentally, both Buber and Zeitlin met with Rav Kook in Jerusalem and were favorably impressed.

[2] See my introduction to *Orot* (New Milford: Maggid, 2015), 33.

[3] Ibid., 53.

[4] *Orot ha-Tehiyah*, ch. 4.

[5] Ibid.

[6] *Pinkesei ha-Ra'ayah* 4, ed. Tsevi Mikhel Levin and Benzion Kahana-Shapira (Jerusalem: Makhon 'al-shem RZYH Kook, 2017).

[7] Gershom Scholem lavished much scholarly attention on both Herrera and his teacher Sarug. In the first case, Scholem published a small biography, *Abraham Cohen Herrera: Leben, Werk und Wirkung* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978). As for Sarug, in an early essay, caustically entitled "Israel Sarug: Student of the Ari?" (1940), Scholem attempted to expose this sketchy figure as a fraud. Scholem presumed that Sarug was an impostor who passed himself off to unsuspecting Europeans as an erstwhile disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria in either Egypt or Eretz Israel. Lately, researchers such as Ronit Meroz and Yosef Avivi have made some headway in rehabilitating Sarug's image as a genuine conduit of Lurianic teaching.

[8] Rav Kook revisits this theme in a later journal: "One who feels in his soul that he needs much divine illumination, many ethical studies, and much contemplation, let him not delude himself by saying that he can throw off this burden and be like everyone else and like the masses of *"b'nei Torah"* (Torah students); that he can engage totally or for the most part in practical affairs, and that will suffice for him. *"The greater the man, the greater his inclination."* In direct proportion to the potential that one has for spiritual ascent, are the deficiencies, the strange desires and the pull to gross corporeality—that have no comparison among the average. The only way that one can be spared them (and even profit from them, inasmuch as their mighty power can be harnessed to pull one to a supernal loftiness) is if one fortifies one's character, raising thereby one's essence to its proper place: to "stroll in the Garden of Eden" of lofty matters, and the splendor (*Zohar*) of the joy of the Lord shall be his strength. But if one should wish to be like the masses of *"b'nei Torah,"* one will actually end up much lower than them, descending to the depth of bad traits. He shall find himself extremely corrupted—until he reassumes the spiritual quality that is unique to him." See *Pinkesei ha-Ra'ayah* 4 (Jerusalem, 2017), *Pinkas ha-Dapim* 2:14 (p. 232).

[9] Rav Kook's critique of Rabbi Israel Salanter's *Mussar* movement deserves a separate study. I hope one day to treat that subject at length. For now, one would do well to consult Rabbi Moshe Zuriel's collection, *Otzrot ha-Ra'ayah* (Rishon le-Zion, 2002), vol. II, 311-312, 314, 329-330.

[10] *Orot ha-Tehiyah*, ch. 35.

[11] See Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim* (Dialogue Version from Ms. Guenzburg 1206, Russian State Library, Moscow; and Thematic Version from first edition, Amsterdam, 1740), ed. Avraham Shoshana (Jerusalem: Ofeq, 1994).

[12] First published as an appendix to Rabbi Zevi Yehudah Kook's *Li-Sheloshah be-Elul*, vol. 2 (1947), 23-31, *Kitzur Mesillat Yesharim* has since been reprinted in *Ma'amrei ha-Ra'ayah*, vol. II (Jerusalem, 1984), 273-276; and in Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, *Otzrot ha-Ra'ayah*, vol. II, 297-300.

[13] Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, ed. Avraham Shoshana (Jerusalem, 1994), chap. 19 (p. 282).

[14] Thus did Rav Kook refer to the author of *Mesillat Yesharim*. See Rav Kook's eulogy for Rabbi Israel Salanter in *Ma'amrei ha-Ra'ayah*, vol. I (Jerusalem, 1980), 121; and Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, *Otzrot ha-Ra'ayah*, vol. II, 311.

[15] Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, end chap. 19 (p. 296).

[16] *Pinkesei ha-Ra'ayah*, vol. IV, ed. Z.M. Levin and B.Z. Kahana-Shapira (Jerusalem, 2017), *Pinkas ha-Dapim* 1:34, 88-92.

An Old Jew and His Grandchildren

Eliezer Berkovits

Editors' Note: Dr. Eliezer Berkovits authored this essay shortly after he moved to Chicago to lead the Philosophy Department of the Hebrew Theological College. The moving article appeared as a "guest feature" in the November 1958 issue of the Yeshiva Women bulletin. We thank the Hebrew Theological College for permission to publish this relatively unknown article.

One late summer afternoon as I was walking through a Jewish neighborhood, my attention was caught by an interesting scene.

A number of people were sitting in two groups on the porch of a middle-class home.

One group was formed by a patriarchal figure of an old Jew. He was a man rich in years, obviously approaching the close of his earthly pilgrimage. His head was covered with the traditional "yarmulka" and his face, adorned with a long greying beard. He was sitting in an armchair deeply engrossed in what was undoubtedly a "sefer" from the traditional literature of Judaism.

At some little distance from the old man was sitting the other group. They were younger people, apparently of the same family—possibly children of the old Jew or, perhaps, his grandchildren. They were silent also but absorbed in the reading of newspapers that were scattered around and about them in almost numberless sheets.

The old man did not look like a complete group all by himself. Here were two *worlds* on that porch: the one of "Zaide" and the other of Zaide's children; two worlds alike and side by side, but one could sense the gulf—unbridgeable—that separated the one from the other. There were a father and his children, so close to each other in space and yet so far removed from each other in communication.

There was a silence on the porch and somehow one realized that it meant: we have nothing to say to each other. However, there was something else too about that silence.

Silence could easily be made into a most rewarding subject of study. There are almost as many different kinds of silences as there are noises. There is, for example, the silence of an empty apartment. It "sounds" differently from the silence of an apartment that is a *home*, in which people live and which is silent because, after a day's work and play, parents and children have retired and the house is at rest.

Two people may be silent because they have nothing to say to each other; but there may also be silence of an entirely different quality between two people who love each other—who do not speak because they understand each other without words.

There is a silence of anger, the "icy silence" and there is also a kindly and encouraging one that is a balm to the heart.

The two groups on the veranda were separated from each other even by nature of their silences. For the truth was—and it was probably the most striking feature of the scene which I happened to observe—that there were two different silences there: the one surrounding the father reading the "sefer," the other around the children with their newspapers.

The silence about the old man had a dignity of its own; it meant thinking and contemplation, it had a fragrance like that of old wine. It was a most eloquent silence, for if one listened carefully one could hear it say: There is so much to think about, so much one ought to endeavor to understand. And it is good to sit and think and to ponder on what others before us, saints, prophets, and teachers thought and taught … and now and then to put the good book down for a while and to think our own thoughts and dream our own dreams, stimulated by the book.

The old man's silence was saying all this and much more, but his children did not hear it. They were far away roving restlessly over endless sheets of black print. They were barricaded behind their own silence. And what a different silence it was. It revealed to the observer that the children had just finished their evening meal and it was too early yet either for their favorite TV program or for the show they were planning to see that night. What could one do at such a moment between work and entertainment? To converse? To think? Perhaps to read a book? About what? … The children's silence spoke of boredom and mental exhaustion.

The newspapers that the younger group read were thrown away the next morning; the book in the hands of the old man was read and treasured by many generations in the past. The old man will put the book away for tomorrow and the next day and for the day after that. But one day "Zaide" will no longer be sitting on the porch. What will then happen to the book? Will there be only one silence left—the silence of irrelevance, grazing over the very latest nickel-wisdom of a soon-forgotten evening paper?

Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) was a European-born theologian and philosopher. He served as a rabbi in England and Boston before assuming the chairmanship of the Philosophy Department of the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, IL. He authored more than 20 books and many scholarly articles.

Azariah de Rossi's Fascination with the Septuagint

Elli Fischer

The Letter of Aristeas, composed by Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jews in the second century BCE, remained unknown to rabbinic Judaism until it was translated and published by Italian Jewish Renaissance figure Azariah de Rossi in the 1570s. The question is not what took so long; the rabbis had good reasons to ignore the work. The question is, rather, what drew Azariah to engage with it.

Aristeas tells the story of how King Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt commissioned 72 Jewish sages from Jerusalem to translate the Torah into Greek for the famed library of Alexandria. After bringing these sages to Egypt and posing philosophical questions to them, the king sends them to an island, where they complete the task in 72 days. Upon its completion, it was read in the presence of the Jewish population:

> After the books had been read, the priests and the elders of the translators and the Jewish community and the leaders of the people stood up and said, that since so excellent and sacred and accurate a translation had been made, it was only right that it should remain as it was and no alteration should be made in it.… When the matter was reported to the king, he rejoiced greatly, for he felt that the design which he had formed had been safely carried out.

It is from this work that the Greek translation of the Torah—the Septuagint, or *Targum Shiv'im*—draws its name. Josephus (*Antiquities* 12:2) cites entire passages of *Aristeas*, and Philo (*Life of Moses* 2:7) embellishes it, giving the translators prophetic properties and reporting that the island became a pilgrimage site, where "not only the Jews but a great number of persons of other nations" visit each year to observe a festival, "reverencing the place in which the first light of interpretation shone forth, and thanking God for that ancient piece of beneficence which was always young and fresh."

Although the earliest accounts of this translation project were overwhelmingly positive, the rabbinic tradition takes an entirely different view. The *Talmudim* merely note that the translators made changes out of political necessity, but several traditions from the tail end of the Talmudic era view the translation of the Torah into Greek as an unmitigated catastrophe:

> "Seventy elders wrote the entire Torah for King Ptolemy in Greek, and that day was as difficult for Israel as the day it made the [Golden] Calf, for the Torah could not be properly translated" (*Masekhet Soferim* 1:7).

> "Rabbi Yehuda La-Levi ben Rabbi Shalom said: Moshe wanted the *Mishnah* to be written as well, but the Holy One foresaw that the nations of the world would translate the Torah, read it in Greek, and say 'We, too, are Israel'" (*Tanḥuma Vayera* 6).

A list of fast days from the Geonic era provides a specific date for the completion of the Septuagint: "On 8 Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and the world was dark for three days" (codified in *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 580:2).

Few people, if anyone, still fasts on eighth of Tevet—though I and several other translators are beginning to observe it as a solemn day to reflect on our role—but several *piyyutim* for the tenth of Tevet make reference to the catastrophic translation of the Torah into Greek. The *Letter of Aristeas*, like the works of Josephus and Philo, were preserved and even held sacred by Christians. The celebratory attitude toward the Septuagint was completely forgotten to the Jewish people for over a thousand years.[1]

The fate of *Aristeas* among rabbinic Jews began to change in November of 1570, when the Italian Jewish scholar Azariah de Rossi was forced out of his home by a series of earthquakes that devastated the city of Ferrara. During his wanderings, he was approached by a Christian scholar for clarification on several difficult points in the Latin translation of *The Letter of Aristeas*. The scholar was surprised to learn that there was no Hebrew version of a work that is so complimentary of the Jewish Bible. Over the following three weeks, Azariah produced a Hebrew translation of *Aristeas*, which he called *Hadrat Zekenim*. Though he was nearing 60 years of age and was extraordinarily erudite, this was the first work that Azariah wrote for publication.

It was not his last, though. The floodgates had been opened. Over the next few years, he wrote a chronicle of the Ferrara earthquake (*Kol Elokim*) and a controversial treatise in which he took a critical approach to aggadic historiography (*Imrei Binah*), publishing these three treatises as a single work, *Me'or Einayim*, in 1573.

What was it about *The Letter of Aristeas* that Azariah found so compelling? What inspired him to take a work that cut against the grain of rabbinic views of the Septuagint, a work that had been all but forgotten by the Jews and preserved only by the Christians, and make it accessible to his Hebrew-reading fellow Jews?

Robert Bonfil offers several reasons why Azariah was drawn to *Aristeas*. For one, it constituted an admission by classical Greek culture (represented by Ptolemy) and Christianity (which preserved the work and considered it sacred) that the Jews held the original, authentic Bible and had access to its true meaning and wisdom. For a persecuted people—it had been barely a year since the expulsion of Jews from Bologna, and the Talmud had been burned publicly in several

major Italian cities in the 1550s and 1560s, not to mention that Jews expelled from Spain constituted a significant part of Italian Jewry—such a work had great apologetic value.

Moreover, Hebrew language played an important role in the two great movements that were transforming Europe at the time: the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Renaissance, as its name indicates, was perceived as a recovery and renewal of lost grandeur, a rebirth after a long, dark age. There was a return to Greek and Latin classical culture, but also to Hebrew.[2]

In Italy and the Netherlands, Renaissance scholars studied Hebrew with Jewish or apostate tutors, attempting to gain access to Jewish texts—far more than just the Torah—without the mediation of translations or interpretations. The Reformation, already in its earliest years, rejected any supreme authority on Christian faith and practice other than Scripture itself: *Sola Scriptura*. Here, too, the ability to access Hebrew Scripture—the Scripture read and interpreted by Jesus himself—became a valuable skill. Of course, Catholic scholars would themselves return to Hebrew Scripture to defend their doctrines, cannons, and interpretations.

This emergent phenomenon, which came to be known as Christian Hebraism, required Jewish manpower, and indeed, fifteenth and sixteenth century Jewish scholars like Elijah del Medigo, Elijah Levita, Barukh of Benevento, and Jacob Mantino found employment teaching Hebrew to Christians and translating Hebrew works into Latin and other European languages. That is, they were playing a role similar to that of Ptolemy's seventy sages. Azariah too, we have seen, was approached by a Christian scholar seeking to clarify the meaning of *Aristeas* by consulting the (non-existent) Hebrew version.

Like the Septuagint, these new works were being assimilated into vast repositories of knowledge, old and new. A New World was being discovered, mapped, and colonized. A generation earlier, Paracelsus and Copernicus revolutionized the way that human anatomy and the solar system, respectively, were observed and studied. And, of course, knowledge was more accessible than ever thanks to the rise of print.

But Azariah was not just the analogue of Ptolemy's sages; he was also their mirror image. They translated Hebrew into Greek; he translated their story from Latin into Hebrew. They brought the Torah to the famed Library of Alexandria; he brought books and knowledge from the vast repositories accessible to him and embedded them in a rabbinic work. And indeed, he cites from a dizzying range of sources, classical to contemporary, from outside the Jewish tradition.

Knowledge, during the Renaissance, was becoming mobile. Works that had been the exclusive preserve of a particular group were becoming part of the cultural assets of all humanity, while those collective cultural assets were being imported to particular groups as their scholars reconsidered the meaning of the old books in their light. Azariah was an agent of that mobility and mutual permeability, bringing Jewish texts "out" to the world, and bringing outside texts

"in" to Judaism. It is possible that nothing represents this interpermeability better than *Hadrat Zekenim*—the Hebrew translation of a Latin translation of a Greek work about the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek.

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[1] For a fuller treatment of early Jewish responses to the Septuagint, see Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "The Tasks of the Translators: The Rabbis, The Septuagint, and the Cultural Politics of Translation," *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 1-39.

[2] See: Azaria de Rossi, *Selected Chapters from Sefer Me'or Einayim and Matsref la-Kessef*, edited with Introduction and Notes by Robert Bonfil (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1991), 91-96.