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Medieval Yemenite Poetics:
A Translation and Commentary of
Rabbi Zecharia al-Dahiri's *Sefer HaMusar*

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Abstract

This capstone researches, translates, and provides a linguistic commentary on selections from *Sefer HaMusal*, the prolific work of 16th century Yemenite rabbi, poet, and world traveler Zecharia al-Dahiri. In rhymed poetry, the work details al-Dahiri's travels during the peak of the Ottoman Empire's expansion in the medieval world, recounting his life's challenges, victories, key relationships, and efforts in Jewish studies.

This text immersion contains three primary chapters: "Introduction," "Psalms in the Rabbinic World: A Deep Dive into Zecharia al-Dahiri's *Sefer HaMusal*," and "Translation: Selections from *Sefer HaMusal*," in addition to multiple appendices including references to Psalms and images of the primary text along with source material inspiring it.

The goal of this text immersion is two-fold. First, I wish to practice and utilize my skills in modern Hebrew translation in an academic context. Second, and more importantly, this capstone aims to share the poetry of a less-known, yet incredibly influential, Jewish scholar to English-speaking American Jews, who generally know not of him or his work. In line with this text immersion's goals, this work aspires to contribute to the contemporary Jewish landscape by teaching al-Dahiri's poetry, and its values, to this audience and all who seek it.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Psalms in the Rabbinic World: A Deep Dive into Zecharia al-Ḍahiri's <i>Sefer HaMusar</i>	19
Translation: Selections from <i>Sefer HaMusar</i>	32
Appendix A: Psalms References	122
Appendix B: Psalms References by Stylistic Element	123
Appendix C: Psalms References by Relating Mechanism	124
Appendix D: Texts	125
Bibliography	128

Introduction

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rabbinic decrees dating back to the Mishnaic period state that Jews need not fulfill various religious obligations in the sacred language of Hebrew, such as reciting blessings or chanting The Scroll of Esther.¹ With forty-four percent of the global Jewish community concentrated in North America, and the plurality of the religiously affiliated Jewish landscape comprising Reform Jews, reading and interpreting traditional Jewish texts in the English language has not only become permissible; it has become commonplace.² It would seem logical that the American Reform Jewish community has grown insurmountably more knowledgeable about Jewish texts and their interpretations largely by virtue of ever-expanding English translations of the Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic literature, commentaries, codes, philosophy, responsa, among other categories of Jewish literature.

Despite the sheer growth in available English translations of Jewish text, there still remains a critical amount of literary works left untranslated in full, particularly those of Islamic lands, especially Yemen. While Solomon Fisch published an English translation of Midrash HaGadol on the book of Numbers, a compilation of 14th century Yemenite *aggadic midrashim*, much of the compendium has yet to be rendered into English.³ Moreover, even

¹ Berakhot 13a; Megillah 2:1

² Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, Pew Research Center, 2016; A Portrait of Jewish Americans, Pew Research Center, 2013

³ Fisch, S. *Midrash Haggadol on the Pentateuch: Numbers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (1940). Print.

though scholars such as Adena Tanenbaum and Ophir Münz-Manor have translated segments of *Sefer HaMusal* by 16th-century poet and rabbinic scholar Zecharia al-Ḍahiri, one of medieval Yemen's most prodigious rabbis, a large quantity of the poems remain untranslated.⁴⁵⁶ The paucity of translated material from the Jewish-Arab world may reflect the focus on Ashkenazic literature among English-speaking American Jews.

Zecharia al-Ḍahiri's *Sefer HaMusal*, written in narrative poetry, relays the author's experiences traveling to lands including, but not limited to, India, Iraq, Syria, Italy, Turkey, and Israel.⁷ Indeed, Zecharia al-Ḍahiri's *Sefer HaMusal* still endures as a critical element of the Jewish tradition that has not yet, in full, had the opportunity to inform English-speaking Jews about the deep values therein. Grasping hold of this tension, this capstone seeks to translate and comment on sections of *Sefer HaMusal*.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

English translations of Jewish texts offer accessibility, legitimacy, and meaning to today's American Reform Jews concerning their study of Torah. As such, this text immersion seeks to render accessible and elevate segments of Zecharia al-Ḍahiri's *Sefer HaMusal*, offering a critical translation and commentary for the largely non-Hebrew-speaking American Reform

⁴ Münz-Manor, O. "Imagined Journeys: Travel Narratives in Judah Alharizi's *Tahkemoni* and Zachariah Aldahiri's *Sefer Hamusal*." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26/1 (2019): 43-58.

⁵ Tanenbaum, A. "Of a Pietist Gone Bad and Des(s)erts Not Had: The Fourteenth Chapter of Zechariah Aldahiri's *Sēfer ha-mūsār*." *Prooftexts* 23/3 (2003): 297-319.

⁶ I have determined that Tanenbaum and Münz-Manor have translated all of chapters 14 and 24, significant sections from chapters 7, 25, 40, and 45, and minor sections from chapters 6 and 13.

⁷ Ratzaby, Y. (ed.) *Sēfer ha-mūsār: Maḥbērōt Rabbi Zekhariah al-Ḍāhirī*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1965.

Jewish community. In translating this work, the compiler will draw upon existing research of *Sefer HaMusar* alongside translation theory of biblical poetry and modern Hebrew.

This project hopes to offer the opportunity for Jews to delve deeply into medieval Yemenite Hebrew poetry and, in turn, gain exposure to non-Ashkenazic global Jewry, often perceived as an “other” in the American Jewish landscape. Additionally, the capstone aims to contribute to academia by translating a work of Jewish literature that has yet to be critically translated in full.

METHODOLOGY

I have produced this capstone as part of a series of multifaceted phases, including research, text immersion, critical translation and commentary, and writing.

I began the first phase by reviewing and studying the appended bibliography to further learn about the primary text’s contents, context, and connections. The work of Adena Tanenbaum and Ophir Münz-Manor offered significant background information about the primary source, and Judah al-Ḥarizi’s *The Book of Tahkemoni* has deepened my understanding of al-Ḍahiri’s stylistic elements.

The second phase included a text immersion of selected chapters from Zecharia al-Ḍahiri’s *Sefer HaMusar* to be studied alongside Dr. Reuven Firestone. For my text immersion, I utilized Yehuda Ratzaby’s 1965 edition of the Hebrew text.⁸ The specific chapters to be

⁸ For examples of both Ratzaby’s edition and various manuscript evidence, please Appendix D

studied were determined as the study proceeded and now include the Introduction, Chapter One, Chapter Two, and Chapter Three, all considered to be previously untranslated material.⁹ Oral assessment took place as the study occurred.

Next, in the third phase, I produced a critical translation and commentary of the selected chapters studied in the text immersion. This work took into account robust translation theory of biblical and modern Hebrew poetry. The translation includes footnotes, citations, and an author's commentary of relevant information.

Regarding writing, the fourth phase, I have completed the allotted writing in the context of a general introduction to the translation and commentary, the commentary itself, and more succinct introductions to the individual chapters.

Pertaining to the overall introduction, I have encapsulated the history of the poet, relevant socio-political context, and a background to al-Dahiri's work itself. Additionally, I have understood the presence and nature of allusions, themes, and echoes of intertextuality in a selection of the work. I have also discussed my translation process and approach using the theories of Roman Jakobson and Anthony Pym. The following sections provide necessary background of the life and times of the poet, brief summaries of the analyzed chapters, and an understanding of this capstone's translation styles.

BACKGROUND

⁹ The terms "Chapter" and "Maqama" are used interchangeably in this capstone

Rabbi Zecharia al-Dahiri lived from 1519 to 1585 and penned his prosimetric work, *Sefer HaMusar*, in Yemen between 1568 and 1580, in the firmament of the horrific Ottoman conquest of Yemen.¹⁰ Tanenbaum describes al-Dahiri's social and historical context, specifically his travels to the Land of Israel in the late 16th century. The paper highlights cultural stereotypes in which the author's protagonists assert stagnated Yemenite Jewish self-perceptions contrasting with the halakhic, kabbalistic, and exegetical creativity held by Jews in the Land of Israel.¹¹ *Sefer HaMusar* relays the author's semi-fictional experiences traveling to lands including but not limited to Egypt, India, Iraq, Syria, Italy, Turkey, and Israel. The work itself contains forty-five chapters, or *maqamas*, that follow the *maqama* genre of medieval rhymed narrative prose. These individual chapters, each their own closed literary units, contain narratives that lack one continuous story line. Rather, told through the lens of the narrator, Mordechai the Tzdionite, al-Dahiri's poetry often features dialogues between the narrator and secondary characters as Mordechai searches for his comrade, the hero, Avner, son of Helek, amidst trials and tribulations, disguises and revelations. Interestingly enough, the literature suggests that Mordechai and Avner represent alter egos of the writer himself.¹² In most *maqamas*, al-Dahiri emphasizes Avner's wit, rhetoric, and expressiveness through a series of interleaved poems, denoted by indentations, elevated register, and rhymed stylistics.

Al-Dahiri drew inspiration from compositions of the same genre, especially from 13th century Italian-Jewish scholar Emmanuel of Rome and Judah Alharizi, a 13th century

¹⁰ Ratzaby, Y. (ed.) *Sēfer ha-mūsār: Maḥbērōt Rabbi Zekhariah al-Dāhirī*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1965: 51-53.

¹¹ Tanenbaum, A. "Of Poetry and Printed Books: Cultural Contacts and Contrasts Between the Jews of Yemen and the Land of Israel in Zechariah Alḏahiri's *Sefer Hamusar*." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12/3 (2005): 264.

¹² Ratzaby, Y. (ed.) *Sēfer ha-mūsār: Maḥbērōt Rabbi Zekhariah al-Dāhirī*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1965: 52, 63.

Hebrew poet from Spain who may have even brought this genre into the Jewish world.¹³

Toledo-born Alharizi authored *The Book of Tahkemoni*, a work that serves as a linkage between the 11th century Arabic poet al-Hariri of Basra, who elevated the *maqama* to a poetic and prolific art form, and al-Ḍahiri himself.¹⁴ Moreover, Alharizi composed this series of poems to document his experiences in medieval Spain, reflecting a shifting Jewish identity in a society undergoing significant cultural and religious transition.¹⁵ In his work, al-Ḍahiri references and draws heavily upon Alharizi for structure and poetics, but pushes further and grounds his poetry in travel narratives. In his piece, “Imagined Journeys: Travel Narratives in Judah Alharizi’s *Tahkemoni* and Zachariah Aldahiri’s *Sefer Hamusar*,” Münz-Manor posits that both Alharizi’s and al-Ḍahiri’s texts overlap in genre, literary style, and factual and fictional travel narratives.¹⁶ However, Münz-Manor notes, “[f]or Aldahiri, [traveling] was a way of life; for Alharizi it was a unique experience [...],” denoting that, at least in part, al-Ḍahiri drew upon his own travel narratives in crafting his poetry.¹⁷

Al-Ḍahiri’s poems render him a genius in literary rabbinics. Not only are his two-stich rhymes poetically brilliant, but he also weaves together citations from *TaNaKh*, *Midrash*, *Mishnah*, and *Talmud* within the same stichs. As Adena Tanenbaum aptly notes, much like earlier *piyyutim*: “[o]nly readers steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures could fully appreciate such

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tanenbaum, A. “Of Poetry and Printed Books: Cultural Contacts and Contrasts Between the Jews of Yemen and the Land of Israel in Zechariah Aldahiri’s *Sefer Hamusar*.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12/3 (2005): 260.

¹⁵ Segal, D. (ed). “Judah Alharizi: The Book of Tahkemoni, Jewish Tales from Medieval Spain.” Oxford: Littman, 2001.

¹⁶ Münz-Manor, O. “Imagined Journeys: Travel Narratives in Judah Alharizi’s *Tahkemoni* and Zachariah Aldahiri’s *Sefer Hamusar*.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26/1 (2019): 43-58.

¹⁷ Ibid, 54.

teasing twists of meaning.”¹⁸ For example, the book’s name, *Sefer HaMusar*, carries dual meaning. In the introduction, al-Ḍahiri’s writes: “without strength, I stood - and wrote with my entire being¹⁹ a piece to be delivered to every bitter soul²⁰ - which I recited in the heaviness of incarceration - The Book of Moral Instruction²¹ - that everyone who reads it - of their own language or expression²² - shall reap ethics from the trials and tribulations that came our way [...]”²³ Here, the term *musar* reflects its Hebraic meaning, pertaining to chastisement, instruction, reproof, and ethics. In its cultural context, however, Tanenbaum notes that *musar* serves as a Hebrew translation for the Arabic term *adab*, which “was not rigidly defined, and over time was applied not only to a set of cultural aspirations, but also to a belletristic genre of creativity.”²⁴ This double meaning, that of instruction and of bookish comedy, encompasses the book’s genre through linguistic, historical, and cultural lenses.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In his Introduction, al-Ḍahiri speaks directly to his audience about his rationale for composing his work. Al-Ḍahiri begins by offering thanks to God on behalf of his Jewish community of Tzan’a, Yemen, and he describes how the Yemenite-dwelling Muslims conquered the Ottoman Empire in his late 16th-century homeland. In their rage, they destroyed, incarcerated, taxed, and starved all who came their way, including the local Jewish

¹⁸ Tanenbaum, A. “Polemics Real and Imagined in Zechariah Aldāhirī’s Sēfer ha-mūsār.” In *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by W. van Bakkum and N. Katsumata. Leiden: Brill, 2011: 256.

¹⁹ Also translated as soul, breath, lifebreath, refresh, etc. See Exodus 23:12. Also for myself.

²⁰ Bitter soul; perhaps about, or to, every sadness of heart that engaged in communication

²¹ *Sefer HaMusar*, in Hebrew

²² Cf. Psalms 21:3

²³ See Translation section below for all translations

²⁴ Tanenbaum, A. “Of a Pietist Gone Bad and Des(s)erts Not Had: The Fourteenth Chapter of Zechariah Aldahiri’s *Sēfer ha-mūsār*.” *Prooftexts* 23/3 (2003): 304.

population. In his depression, al-Ḍahiri pens *Sefer HaMusar* in order that its readers can reap ethical value from the persecutions and global travels that he experienced. The author introduces his work's two protagonists, Mordechai the Tzidonite and Avner, son of Ḥelek, and their pleasant and peculiar friendship. Al-Ḍahiri then links himself in the chain of transmission of Hebrew poetry alongside giants, including al-Hariri and Yehuda Harizi. The author concludes in the same manner as he commences: with gratitude to God.

The First *Maqama* introduces Mordechai as having encountered a storm in his travels from Alexandria to Damascus. While composing a poem to God in his dwelling place, lonely Mordechai hears a man calling out, cold, soaked, and hungry, and it turns out to be his friend, Avner. Avner shares a lengthy tale about his encounter with an old man who carries a cryptic document and an embittered attitude. In his wanderings, the old man visits various houses of study in attempts to understand the document's secrets. Avner barter with the old man, offering text study skills in exchange for sustenance, and the old man agrees. Avner identifies the document as a riddle outlining a certain family's complex idea of Levirate marriage and proceeds to scarf down his lot. The old man exiles Avner from his home, sending Avner back into the storm. Mordechai, impressed, relays to Avner words of honor, and together the two men recite poetry until the night is through. The next morning, they offer thanks, embrace and kiss one another, weep, and part ways.

The Second *Maqama* details Mordechai's journey from Egypt to Yemen. Missing his comrade, Avner, Mordechai migrates for months by land, riverbanks, sea, and stormwinds in hopes to find him in Yemen. When he arrives, he bumps into a group of men, young and old,

who share about Avner's imprisonment in the form of an interleaved poem. Avner's son invites Mordechai into his home, briefs him about Avner's trials, and sends him on his way. When Mordechai learns that Avner is currently a servant to the king, he seeks him out, finds him, and reveals himself as his loving friend. Avner expresses his grief through a series of three poetic lamentations, describing Imam Al-Mutahhar's afflictions upon his community's bodies and souls, during quotidian and holy times alike, allusions to the Israelite exodus narrative and Jewish festival days, and prayers of redemption, hope, and gratitude to God. Mordechai praises Avner for his linguistic expertise, and Avner offers a final poem, expressing that he shall remain in Damascus. Mordechai acknowledges that he, alone, cannot save his comrade. The two embrace, pray that they will meet in Jerusalem in the future, and part ways.

Lastly, in the Third *Maqama*, al-Dahiri introduces Mordechai in northeastern Babylonia, as he links himself in a chain of exiled Jews. After nine days of travel, Mordechai arrives in the town of Arbel and rents for himself a home. In the marketplace, he encounters a group of intelligent Torah scholars who share with him the secrets of Jewish mysticism. One man arises and offers the group a bargain: in exchange for a celebratory feast, he requests that one group member write a poem based on the ten Mystical Spheres of Kabbalah. Mordechai assumes the responsibility, delivers a poem based on *Sha'are Orah*, the work of 13th-century Spanish Kabbalist Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, and receives a home-cooked feast in accordance with the man's arrangement. At the feast, the group casts lots, and the lots fall upon the host to compose a poem about the Zohar. The host recites an alphabetical acrostic poem about the Zohar only to receive astonishing praise from the group. The host confirms Mordechai by

name, and Mordechai immediately recognizes the host as his comrade, Avner, due to his appearance and poetic wit. The two of them embrace and kiss. Out of fear and trauma, an additional party guest emerges and conveys that one of his former friends has terribly insulted him. He urges the entire group, if they meet his former friend, to translate his newly-found Arabic phrase to Hebrew, a curse of retribution, for recompense. Using poetry, Mordechai pleads for the man to hold back his evil words and succeeds. The group then calls upon Avner to design and utter a poem that reads both vertically and horizontally. He delivers not one, but three poems, with stylistic profundity and humility, in honor of the Kabbalistic sages, Saadia Gaon, and God. For days, the group rejoices in Avner's poetry. In Avner's new home, the reader learns that, due to persecution, Avner left his family and sought a new one. Mordechai and Avner embrace and kiss, and Mordechai departs.

TRANSLATION STYLES

Laura S. Lieber documents in her work, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut*, a translation, annotation, and analysis of the poetry of Yannai, also including a useful methodology for analyzing poetic devices, aesthetics, and intertextuality. Lieber helps to frame this analysis in context of my own relationship to this capstone, as Lieber puts it, “[p]oetry is best translated by poets--a profession to which the present writer has no pretense.”²⁵ I am no poet, and so I know that I do not possess this capacity for adequately translating al-Dāhiri's work. Rather, I understand my work as a “bridge into the world” of medieval Jewish poetry for those with limited scope in the subject.²⁶ Therefore, this capstone

²⁵ Lieber, L. *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut*. New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010: 21.

²⁶ Ibid.

requires research in, and adoption of, translation theory in order to produce a worthy translation of the material.

Many scholars have attempted to grapple with the unique challenges of translation.

Language, in a sense, has a set of rules that function based on the grammatical foundations in its current linguistic context. In another sense, “language is minimally dependent on the grammatical pattern because the definition of our experience stands in complementary relation to metalinguistic operations--the cognitive level of language not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e., translation.”²⁷ 20th century linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson describes the above tension in translation theory: on the one hand, the key to learning and decoding the human experience necessitates grammar. On the other hand, grammar exists as a volatile, unstable, and emergent phenomenon that no individual controls or prescribes. If one wants to communicate outside their grammatical structure, one must constantly interpret, and reinterpret, through translation.

Contemporary scholar Anthony Pym describes the above phenomenon in an alternative way. In his work *Exploring Translation Theories*, Pym explores the importance of having a theory of translation for a myriad of reasons.²⁸ First, translators must clarify their methods in order to address specific, technical issues in a consistent manner. Second, a theory of translation helps translators address more complex issues, such as when ideas in a source text do not culturally parallel those in a target text. Third, and perhaps most relevant, Pym understands

²⁷ Jakobson, R. “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, edited by R. Schulte and J. Biguenet, 144-151. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992: 149.

²⁸ Pym, A. *Exploring Translation Theories*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2014: Chapter 1.

the value of leveraging multiple theories of translation, all pertaining to equivalence. The following paragraph defines equivalence and offers examples.

In the theory of natural equivalence, Pym posits that a translator can always articulate equivalent values, utterances, and cultural motifs from one source text to another culture.²⁹ For some words, like “Tuesday” in English and *martes* in Spanish, translation may function simply and irrespective of directionality. However, Pym also argues that one can translate using the theory of directional equivalence, wherein one can translate from one language to another, but one must not assume the capability of translating back to that original language.³⁰ For example, one might translate *na lashevet* in Hebrew to “please be seated” in English, but “please be seated” in English might look like “*sh’vu, b’vakasha*” when translated back to Hebrew. Pym closes by discussing the critical nature of compensation, or the seemingly infeasibility of emulating one aspectual meaning of one language in another. In translating between English and Hebrew, this might look akin to translating “water(s)” to *mayim* but grappling with words like “sacrifice” (*zevach, mincha, ola*, etc.) or *halach* (go, walk, travel, die, etc.).

Translation demands taking an equivalent message and crafting two different codes for that message. Equivalence signifies that translation implies more than a simple, quick-fix between two languages. As a translator, I aim to accept the existence of acts of equivalence, more than a simple answer in the semantic realm, that demonstrates a deeper meaning and interpretation. Perhaps this is one reason why, professionally, these workers are not called

²⁹ Ibid, Chapter 2.

³⁰ Ibid, Chapter 3.

translators--they are called interpreters? When I translate Hebrew liturgy, for instance, I underscore that a translated prayer communicates that prayer's meaning. With this in mind, I would not recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* at graveside--that would be jarring--because this prayer's translation might in fact symbolize the religious and performative act itself as opposed to generating meaning from its pure semantic value. The same may be true for a *niggun*, a wordless melody, wherein recitation by way of the melodic line becomes the religious act itself. In these cases, sometimes linguists need no words.

If one were to define the act of translation as taking one message and formulating a different, equivalent code for that message, then this definition would necessarily need to illustrate that messages include plenty of significant information that are encoded beyond words. Culture and context, too, determine the meaning of a message, whether simple or sophisticated. Contemporary professor of philosophy Ray Jackendoff shares an example: when a server yells to a chef, "the ham sandwich in the corner wants another coffee," a regular at the local diner listening to the order may not think twice, whereas a non-native speaker who reads the interaction in a book may furrow their brow.³¹ Ideas are fundamental to understanding a sentence, and sometimes they are excluded from words that are read on a page. Translation theorists use the terminology "implicature" to explain the phenomenon that one must have access to context in order to truly understand a sentence.

When translators aim to make meaning, they uncover an imaginative process that requires a cultural repertoire and a text world to perform interpretation. In short, language only weakly

³¹ McNeil, T. "Exploring the Thought Bubble." Tufts Now, June 3, 2014.
<https://now.tufts.edu/articles/exploring-thought-bubble>. Quotation by Ray Jackendoff.

represents meaning. Scholars Jakobson, Pym, and Jackendoff teach me that that translation violently radicalizes a text. It is infeasible to translate the exact intent of the author. They also help me discern that not one, but a spectrum of paradigmatic styles of translation exist: one end incorporates a word-for-word equivalence and perhaps in a syntactically awkward manner, and one end features a poetic equivalence, more based in the translator's cultural context. Some argue that one style better arrives at the author's meaning; I believe that both styles deserve a place in the academic sphere. In this translation, I strive to bend toward the latter end of the spectrum, in hopes that the English-speaking Jewish world can honor and respect the text's greater meaning in their own language.

At times, my English translation might feel strange. This might be because I grappled with the above spectrum throughout my translation process, and I remember once considering a wish that I could revert to the poem's original, beautiful Hebrew state, but then readers would be left without it. Should the audience feel at odds with the text they are reciting, or should they have no text at all? Is this practical for the greater English-speaking Jewish world? There is no winning in translation. If I refine my philological skills and methods, I can only do the best I can. I believe readers deserve this text. I believe the tradeoff is worth it.

Psalms in the Rabbinic World: A Deep Dive into

Zecharia al-Dahiri's *Sefer HaMusal*

“The psalmist’s delight in the suppleness and serendipities of poetic form is not a distraction from the spiritual seriousness of the poems but his chief means of realizing his spiritual vision, and it is one source of the power these poems continue to have not only to excite our imaginations but also to engage our lives.”³²

Throughout the generations, theologians, liturgists, and rabbis have employed Psalms in order to root their literature in the ancient Jewish traditions. Specifically, the literature of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* seeks to understand the Psalms in many contexts, including translation, midrash, liturgy, and even magic. Rabbinic figures, following in the tradition of interpretation, continue to exegete the Psalms and make use of their imaginative poetics, spirituality, and intertextual prowess even in contemporary discourse. Even amongst other texts, the Book of Psalms feature prominently in al-Dahiri’s writings. In seeking to further understand the rabbinic usage of Psalms across time, this paper aims to elevate, translate, and analyze medieval Jewish literature, specifically the introduction and first chapter of *Sefer HaMusal* by Zecharia al-Dahiri, by building a heuristic taxonomy of allusions, references, and echoes, identifying how they are used in the author’s work, and understanding what these devices accomplish.

³² Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: The Perseus Books Group, 2011: 170.

Literary theory offers a variety of approaches and methods for how to consider relationships among different texts. In his book, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, Benjamin Sommer discusses how Deutero-Isaiah uses earlier parts of scripture in his prophetic agenda through the model of allusion and influence, a diachronic and historicist approach to textual analysis.³³ Sommer's introduction and first chapter in particular creates a categorical framework of certain stylistic elements such as allusion, influence, echoes, and exegesis, including their definitions, how they operate, and their accomplishments. In order to better understand how Psalms are used in al-Dahiri's work, prior to analysis, I draw upon Sommer's framework by building a heuristic taxonomy, beginning by defining such elements below.

In semiotic terms, and in the words of Carmela Perri, Sommer teaches that a literary **allusion** serves as a textual signifier with a dual-purpose: one, to refer to a sign in the text's own world, and also to a separate source text.³⁴ According to Ziva Ben-Porat, one can interpret an allusion by using the following four-step methodology: first, the reader recognizes in the alluding text a *marker*, "an identifiable element of pattern in one text belonging to another independent text."³⁵ Markers, simple or complex, may be a sentence, phrase, poetic idea, setting, or even theme, so long as they are shared in the evoked text. Second, the reader may identify an evoked text given a *marked sign*, that is, the same elements found within it as within the alluding text.³⁶ Third, and perhaps the most necessary step in the methodology, by bringing elements of meaning from the evoked text, one modifies the interpretation of the

³³ Sommer, B. *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1998.

³⁴ Ibid, 10-11.

³⁵ Ibid, 11.

³⁶ Ibid, 12.

marker within the alluding text by way of the interpretation of the marked sign in order to fulfill a rhetorical purpose.³⁷ Fourth, and optionally, the reader may bring thematic elements from the evoked text as a whole that shed meaning on the alluding text, without referencing markers or marked signs whatsoever.³⁸

Influence, however closely related, refers to “the affiliative relations between past and present literary texts and/or their authors [...] Influence-study generally entailed the practice of tracing a text’s generic and thematic lineage [...]. [Studies of influence focused] on the ways literary works necessarily comprise revision or updating of their textual antecedents.”³⁹ When a reader discovers influence, they often elevate the literary tradition as a whole, accumulating themes, styles, genre, and topics, unconfined to particular words or tropes, yet still inextricably linked to the text at hand.

Ben-Porat remarks that in order for a reader to recognize an allusion, they must follow at least the first three steps of her four-step process.⁴⁰ However, there are certainly literary cases in which a marker exists in a text that does not carry a strategic or rhetorical function, instead merely refers back to a marked element. Sommer would denote this instance an **echo**, comprising only the first two stages of Ben-Porat’s process, altering limited, if any, meaning upon the marker.⁴¹ Distinguishing between an allusion and an echo falls to the discretion of the reader. If a reader genuinely discovers a way in which a marked sign impacts the interpretation of a marker, then they may classify this case as an allusion. Another reader,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 16.

nonetheless, may either underread or fail to acknowledge claims of interpretation, thereby classifying this case as an echo.

Lastly, **exegesis** may be used in the case that a later text aims to interpret or explain the meaning of an earlier text.⁴² A text utilizing this literary method only exists in relationship with the marked sign; an exegetical text serves no purpose on its own.

Authors use widespread methods for relating markers with marked signs.⁴³ An **explicit citation** denotes an element in the alluding text that points directly to an older text. Examples in biblical literature include *kakativ batoratecha*, “as it is written in your Torah,” or *sh’ne’emar*, “as it is said.” More popularly, an **implicit reference** directs the reader to an older text without an explicit rendering. Al-Dahiri’s frequently refers to biblical literature in his work using key words or partial phrases; this analysis will call this relating mechanism an **indirect reference**. Lastly, **inclusion** relates the possibility when a text borrows complete sections from an older text and incorporates them into the newer text.

Al-Dahiri exercises each of the above scriptural elements, allusions, influence, echoes, and exegesis, in his poetry for a variety of reasons.⁴⁴ Authors may use these strategies in order to reckon with a lack of confidence or unworthiness, knowing that predecessors already display greatness and permanence. Additionally, authors may acknowledge influence in order to bolster the authority of their work by gaining entry into a canon or displaying shared knowledge. Conversely, authors may use these methods to create a distinct identity for their

⁴² Ibid, 23.

⁴³ Ibid, 20-21.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 18-19.

work, distancing it from those of previous authors in stark comparison. Lastly, the etymology of the word *allusion* roots in the Latin *alludere*, meaning to joke, mock, play with, or jest. Here, and perhaps most relevant to al-Dahiri's poetry, writers may offer their readers pleasure, mockery, or humor by way of allusions and echoes.

A significant portion of the author's poetry includes references to various parts of the Hebrew Bible. With much gratitude to the composition's editor, Yehuda Ratzaby, I have drawn from the editor's nearly-comprehensive footnotes in order to catalogue specific intertextual moments. The following pages attempt to identify the extent to which the author applies Psalms within the introduction and first chapter of al-Dahiri's *Sefer HaMusar*, their stylistic elements as categorized by the above taxonomy, including, but not limited to, allusion, influence, echoes, and exegesis, in addition to their operative motives in the text.

To begin, in the Introduction and Chapter One, two sections relatively equivalent in length, the total compiled biblical references equate to one hundred sixteen: the majority, seventy-three, are located in Chapter One, and only forty-three are found within the Introduction.⁴⁵ Also different, the number of Psalms references as a share of the total biblical references dramatically varies: in Chapter One, twelve percent of the total biblical references invoke the Psalms, whereas in the Introduction, twenty-one percent, nearly double the share, of total biblical references point to the Psalms. From this analysis, one may extrapolate that al-Dahiri's Introduction employs the Psalms to a greater extent than his work's chapters, whether for stylistic, ornamental, or exegetical purposes.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed chart, see Appendix A.

Of the eighteen references to Psalms in these two textual sections, al-Ḍahiri seems to employ allusion in five of them.⁴⁶ While not the principal usage of stylistic elements, these allusions both advance the author's elegant and artful prose in addition to rooting their interpretations in the context of the Psalter. In his introduction, al-Ḍahiri notably discusses his experience during the Ottoman conquest of Yemen and the Jewish persecutions therein: the author was weeping, hungry, consuming rubbish, and hotly pursued by enemies. The author borrows language from the Psalter: the enemies "*take their signs for true signs.*"⁴⁷ In the biblical frame, this poem reads like an amalgam of complaint, lament, and eschatological genres, as the poet cries out to God amidst the tumult, enemies, and imagery of burning sanctuaries. With no more prophets in the land, the poet cries out a phrase akin to, "why have you rejected us?" In *Sefer HaMusar*, al-Ḍahiri's language feels relevant to that of the Psalter's in his lamentation of his experience in Yemen, drawing upon the biblical poetry's lamentation, also likely referring to Jewish oppression.

The author continues to allude to the Psalter, specifically at the end of the Introduction, writing: "*and my heart exulted, so I will glorify God with my song.*"⁴⁸ In using Psalms 28, al-Ḍahiri derives meaning from this Psalm's witness genre, yearning for God to sustain him after he calls out in blessing. Bookending the Introduction with allusions toward Psalms renders his work particularly powerful by rooting it in the rabbinic project of interpreting Psalms.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed chart, see Appendix B.

⁴⁷ Psalms 74:4, אֵימָה could be a sign, true sign, divine sign, or even a warning

⁴⁸ Psalms 28:7

Another deep dive into al-Dahiri's allusions appears near the conclusion of Chapter One. When Avner finishes his tale about his attempt to reconcile with the Old Man's riddle, Mordechai reacts joyfully, so much so that he mentions how God has filled him with laughter, alluding to Psalms 126:2. Al-Dahiri writes: "Mordechai the Tzidonite spoke: "How great are your issues - God has made me chuckle!" [God] parted [my] jaws in a measureless gape⁴⁹ - and filled [my] mouth with laughter⁵⁰ [...].'" Mordechai's subsequent interleaved poem even describes his gratitude for the companionship and light that Avner has brought him during his dark moments. Literarily, one could argue that al-Dahiri draws upon the Psalter's dream for restoring Zion back to the days of the Temple, locating Mordechai in this redemptive, permanent happiness, at the end of each chapter when Mordechai and Avner reconnect and rejoice.

In the *Sefer HaMusar* texts I analyze, al-Dahiri tends to focus more so on exercising echoes than allusions, seeing a total of eleven echoes of Psalms in his Introduction and Chapter One.⁵¹ Near the onset of the Introduction, the author indirectly draws an expression from Psalms 109:30. The biblical context refers to the poet displaying the challenges of persecution, specifically how enemies spew hateful words and curses. The Psalter petitions God in order to convict them, make them lose possessions, curse them, or even kill them. In *Sefer HaMusar*, however, the author seems to be simply praising God by offering thanks for reaching this moment without carrying the Psalter's baggage. Decoratively and literarily, al-Dahiri mixes this reference with one from Proverbs in rhyme, both seemingly irrelevant to curses found in the Psalms.

⁴⁹ Cf. Isaiah 5:14

⁵⁰ Cf. Psalms 126:2

⁵¹ For a more detailed chart, see Appendix B.

In the medieval era, biblical texts were not only seen as a body of evidence to be explicated but also as a type of vernacular in challenging situations. In an additional instance, in spite of its proximity to allusory material of Psalms 28, the author crafts an echo from Psalms 83:11 using the same backdrop: the author was hungry, crying out, pursued by enemies, and, here, “like dung in the field [...]”⁵² The Psalms relate a stylistically beautiful, intense, and clean poem, full of perfect parallelism and mixed metaphors, in which Israel speaks to God about her enemies in a clear warcry genre, yearning for help. This particular verse references the last of Israel's enemies, those at *Ein Dor*, who had destroyed Israel in that location. In her work, *The Uses of Scripture in Zechariah al-Ḍāhirī's Sēfer ha-mūsār*, Tanenbaum significantly describes the history of the *maqama* and al-Ḍāhirī's work, in addition to detailing in depth the uses of scripture in *Sefer HaMusar*. Here, Tanenbaum would disagree with my position: “This evocative scriptural diction and imagery allows al-Ḍāhirī to assimilate the particular persecution and forbearance of his people to familiar biblical tropes, which suggests that they are part of a long cycle of suffering, but also of redemption.”⁵³ In my taxonomy, I posit that one can detect a different genre marker, more of a lament in the prose, as opposed to a warcry in the poetry, indicating to the reader the presence of an echo as opposed to an allusion.

Echoes comprise 78% of the entirety of Chapter One's stylistic elements. This data point should strike the reader to believe that, in his prose, the author uses biblical material for purposes of decoration rather than meaning. Tanenbaum concurs, “[a]t times, his choice of

⁵² Cf. Psalms 83:11

⁵³ Tanenbaum, A. “The Uses of Scripture in Zechariah al-Ḍāhirī's *Sēfer ha-mūsār*.” In *Exegesis and Poetry in Medieval Karaite and Rabbanite Texts*, edited by J. Yeshaya and E. Hollender, 154. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

biblical language is determined by the rhyme, which can leave the meaning somewhat obscure.”⁵⁴ Specific examples include echoes linking to:

- Psalms 147, an enthronement Psalm detailing God’s omnipotence, particularly how simple it is for God to cause hail to fall from the sky, whereas al-Ḍahiri simply uses this text to present the crisp temperature.
- Psalms 65:5, a Psalm of praise, glory, and enthronement, telling of God’s power to silence the raging seas, waves, and people, and those who praise God shall be blessed, whereas al-Ḍahiri leverages this text within Mordechai's first encounter with Avner, as Avner discusses his encounter with the Old Man and his offer to assist in decoding his textual conundrum, and the Old Man expresses gratitude in the form of hence this verse: *“happy is the man you choose and bring near to dwell in your courts.”*⁵⁵
- Psalms 73:9, where the Psalter chronicles his temptation to covet the wicked’s prosperity, whereas al-Ḍahiri speaks in a flowery manner about how the Old Man’s feet leap over the land in order that he may devour dates, pomegranates, and figs, in the same way that his feet “range over the earth,” with no sign of the Old Man’s wickedness.⁵⁶
- Psalms 148:8, an additional Psalm of praise, glory, and enthronement found within the *p’sukei d’zimra* sequence, depicts God’s control over the elements and God’s praiseworthiness. *Sefer HaMusar*, however, simply refers to the stormy weather outside, without much relevance to the biblical context.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 152.

⁵⁵ Psalms 65:5

⁵⁶ Cf. Psalms 73:9

Among others, these examples of echoes display how Zecharia al-Dahiri reads Psalms in his own time, rendering not only an allusive piece, lifting meaning from the biblical text, but also a stylistically interesting and ornamental work.

Infrequently, al-Dahiri applies influence in his work. Most notably, the author draws a parallel between Psalms 66:5 and his work, as Avner evokes God's name despite being afflicted by the cold: "The Awesome Actor brought me forward [...]"⁵⁷ Perhaps this serves as a reference to *El Nora Alilah* of Moses ibn Ezra, 12th-century Spanish *paytan*, linking al-Dahiri in a chain of medieval Jewish poets who value stylistics such as acrostics, rhyme, and meter. Similarly, the author's reference of Psalms 21:3, specifically the phrase *areshet s'fatav*, transports the reader to the liturgy of the *Yamim Nora'im* following each *shofar* blast. Al-Dahiri's draws on this terminology to offer how each reader can reap value from this text through their own language. Although seemingly in a different context from the Psalm, his usage remains literary, akin to the petition in the High Holiday liturgy, portraying it as an influence.

Exegesis represents a fourth stylistic element in al-Dahiri's work. In my analysis, I argue that the author's indirect reference of Psalms 78:6 appears to be an exegetical marker. This poem strikes the reader as a witness genre, bringing to mind Deuteronomy 32. The poem begs the reader to teach their children all of God's deeds, and to not be a wayward and rebellious person. In turn, God rewards the righteous but afflicts the sinner. At the onset of the author's work, he writes, evoking this Psalm: "We are the majority of the community who dwells in

⁵⁷ Cf. Psalms 66:5, perhaps also a reference to *El Nora Alilah* of Moses ibn Ezra, 12th-century Spanish *paytan*

the city of Tzan'a⁵⁸ - [it was] almost as if we were like sheep without a shepherd.⁵⁹ To inform the next generation⁶⁰ - I shall recite to them with strength."⁶¹ It may be that the author interprets the meaning of this phrase found in the biblical text, "[t]o inform the next generation," that is, one should not only teach their children God's deeds, but one should also teach about God's *lack* of deeds, perhaps present by the injustices that remain in this world, such as the oppression and persecution that underwent the author's community. In the remaining chapters, the author certainly capitalized on exegetical stylistic elements, with his biblical exegetical prowess shown by his Kabbalistic commentary on the Torah, *Sefar Šeidah la'Derech*, "Provisions for the Road," which filled the niche for an esoteric commentary in 16th century Yemen.⁶²

As expected, some difficulties arose in my investigation. I struggled to categorize the stylistic elements in the Psalms by way of one-to-one assignment. One example of such difficulty includes the author's implicit reference to Psalms 77:10, "during the Hebrew year 5328:⁶³ *Has God forgotten how to pity? Has God in anger stifled God's compassion [...]*"⁶⁴ Here, one cannot fully grasp al-Ḍāhiri's prolific wordplay: first, the author engages in poetic wordplay between the word in the biblical verse, השכח, and the year ה'שכח, as he successfully sought a verse including the term השכח in order to perfectly align with his year in discussion. One might believe the author uses allusion to reference the Psalm's complaint genre, as he, too, cries out to God in distress in a tale of darkness and gloom, having been imprisoned in

⁵⁸ Capital city of northern Yemen, pronounced: *San'a*.

⁵⁹ Cf. Deuteronomy 27:17

⁶⁰ Cf. Psalms 78:6

⁶¹ Morph. with throat

⁶² Tanenbaum, A. "The Uses of Scripture in Zechariah al-Ḍāhiri's *Sēfer ha-mūsār*." In *Exegesis and Poetry in Medieval Karaite and Rabbanite Texts*, edited by J. Yeshaya and E. Hollender, 147. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

⁶³ Secular year ~1567/1568

⁶⁴ Psalms 77:10; note the poetic wordplay between the word השכח and the year ה'שכח

Tzan'a. However, conceptual boxes tend to break or bleed into one another, and one might also believe that, due to the incredible wordplay, this element serves more like an echo for stylistic purposes.

Regarding relating mechanism, al-Dahiri cites most of his Psalms by way of even distribution of implicit and indirect references.⁶⁵ While the sample size remains too small for any statistically significant finding, it appears that allusions tend to follow implicit references and direct quotes from Psalms, whereas echoes veer toward indirect references, skewing the biblical verses toward the goal of rhymed and decorative stylistics. One challenge I faced was coding the opening reference, Psalms 119:91. This Psalm, the longest Psalm in the biblical canon, denotes a cry out to God, clinging toward piety in the face of persecution, and encountering a God that endures for the sake of humanity. In the author's work, this Psalm lays the groundwork underneath the title, yet before the prose actually begins. It would be clear to anyone who studied the *TaNaKh* that these words reference a Psalm, yet the author does not explicitly cite this reference. Due to the fact that this Psalm opens the narrative in a separate manner, I coded it as an explicit reference.

Upon translating the introduction and first chapter of al-Dahiri's poetic-prose text,⁶⁶ I have researched the referenced Psalms, compared them to their biblical context, catalogued a heuristic taxonomy of their stylistic elements, including allusions, influence, echoes, exegesis, and addressed their accomplishments. The author's creative work includes a mix of biblical interpretation and stylistic poetics, both of which offer insight into the workings of

⁶⁵ For a more detailed chart, see Appendix C

⁶⁶ For a draft translation, see Translation section

medieval Yemenite-Jewish poetry and the socio-historical context therein. The Psalms, a central feature in the larger canon, was certainly transformed once its rabbinic overlay was crafted. This applies to Zecharia al-Ḍahiri as well. The Book of Psalms serves as one canonical book that took on a life of its own, precisely in *Sefer HaMusar*: al-Ḍahiri's has taken to heart much of the Psalms' imaginative content, context, and stylistic as part of his own work, building a bridge between himself, his community, and the ancient Jewish world. Perhaps the very notion that Psalms have been cited, tattered, enveloped, and used by so many rabbis, across so many generations, is the exact conception that links the rabbis in a chain of tradition.

Translation: Selections from *Sefer HaMusal*

Written by Rabbi Zecharia al-Dahiri⁶⁷

Translated by Scott Goldberg⁶⁸

The Introduction of the Author

*They stand this day to [carry out] Your rulings, for all are Your servants.*⁶⁹

Spoke the youth Zecharia, son of Saadia, son of Ya'akov al-Dahiri:

After [offering] gratitude to The First Cause - and The Supreme Thought - this is the God who shall be blessed,⁷⁰ creator of the world ex nihilo⁷¹ - every creature shall raise their eyes toward God - committed and proper to appreciate God concerning all attributes⁷² - I shall praise God⁷³ *amidst the assembled congregation*⁷⁴ - I am proud⁷⁵ to tell of the histories that came our way⁷⁶ - including the troubles that assailed us. We are the majority of the

⁶⁷ Ratzaby, Y. (ed.) *Sēfer ha-mūsār: Maḥbērōt Rabbi Zekhariah al-Dāhirī*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1965.

⁶⁸ Footnotes include a selection of Ratzaby's notes in addition to the translator's notes and commentary. Implicit citations are all italicized. Those from biblical texts utilize the JPS translation, 1985 edition, with gender adaptations. Those from Talmudic texts utilize the Steinsaltz translation, 1965-2010, with gender adaptations.

⁶⁹ Psalms 119:91.

⁷⁰ Hebraism from Arabicism, meaning "God most blessed"

⁷¹ Latin for "out of nothing," commonly used in medieval Jewish commentaries referring to God's creation of the world

⁷² Cf. Mishnah Brachot 9:1

⁷³ Cf. Psalms 109:30

⁷⁴ Proverbs 5:14

⁷⁵ Morph. my heart lifts me up

⁷⁶ Cf. Esther 9:26

community who dwells in the city of Tzan'a⁷⁷ - [it was] almost as if we were like sheep without a shepherd.⁷⁸ To inform the next generation⁷⁹ - I shall recite to them with strength.⁸⁰

The onset of the incidents were - at the decree of Perfect Opinions⁸¹ - during the Hebrew year 5328:⁸² *Has God forgotten how to pity? Has God in anger stifled God's compassion?*⁸³ - there remained God's inheritance and People [Israel] - for in that year the Muslims strengthened⁸⁴ - over the people of Gomer,⁸⁵ and they struck them down,⁸⁶ even me⁸⁷ - they held us captive in prison, [we were] humiliated⁸⁸ - they would tax us in the midst of everything⁸⁹ - [even when] the pennies were all gone - we were in darkness and gloom - up to the point when the living few were coming to an end - and when their number of months were finished⁹⁰ - on the first day of the month of Av in the Hebrew year 5329,⁹¹ they scattered us in every prison - the impoverished, the destitute, and the indigent⁹² - we were weeping and sighing⁹³ - young boys alongside elders⁹⁴ - bound by iron cables - and every eye leaked tears - from them⁹⁵ their work is delivered [to the kingdom]

⁷⁷ Capital city of northern Yemen, pronounced: *San'a*.

⁷⁸ Cf. Deuteronomy 27:17

⁷⁹ Cf. Psalms 78:6

⁸⁰ Morph. with throat

⁸¹ Presumably a name of Yahweh

⁸² Secular year ~1567/1568

⁸³ Psalms 77:10; note the poetic wordplay between the word השכח and the year ה'שכח

⁸⁴ *HaYismeali* serves as a collective noun. Ratzaby notes: al-Dahiri often uses the word *HaYismeali* to denote Yemenite-dwelling Muslims.

⁸⁵ Saadia Gaon on Genesis 10:2; Gomer is a term to denote the Turks

⁸⁶ Cf. II Samuel 6:7, 3:27

⁸⁷ *B'sheli*- meaning uncertain

⁸⁸ Ratzaby notes: meaning unclear. Perhaps *l'mirmas* instead of *l'michmas*

⁸⁹ When the local Yemeni Shia Muslims defeated the Sunni Ottoman Turks in 1568, the ruling power heavily taxed and exiled the Yemenite-Jewish community, theorizing their sympathy with the Ottomans

⁹⁰ Job 21:21

⁹¹ Secular year ~1568/1569

⁹² Noting use of merism

⁹³ See Ezekiel 2:10, *van'hi* also refers to lamentation, bemoaning, wailing

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ The Jewish population of Yemen

and among them, those would mill [flour] in the prison ward⁹⁶ - in nakedness, hunger, thirst, and absence, every [...] - [...] ⁹⁷ and greedy for bread - *none gives them a morsel*⁹⁸ - to feed the hunger in their stomachs - the enemies *take their signs for true signs*⁹⁹ - for [the afflicted] saw [even] the wealthy embrace rubbish - each would inscribe slag for their fellow¹⁰⁰ - some would die without knowing, without burial¹⁰¹ - we were like dung in the field¹⁰² - *we have all become like an unclean thing*¹⁰³ - *we were hotly pursued*¹⁰⁴ - we were afflicted and there was no rest for us- our hope was nearly lost - our chances disappointed - with no one to gather our disgrace.

After all this, I said to myself - but how shall I satisfy my anger and sorrow?¹⁰⁵ - No breath remained within me¹⁰⁶ - yet I arose to strengthen my faltering¹⁰⁷ - to erect my failing knees - here they are, immediately becoming lost - while my hands grew fairly heavy¹⁰⁸ - I kept exerting myself - without strength, I stood - and wrote with my entire being¹⁰⁹ a piece to be

⁹⁶ Ratzaby notes: it seems to al-Dahiri that they would impose upon the Jewish prisoners to grind flour for the army's consumption, also for the Turkish people in the later era, who forced the Jewish inhabitants to grind grains for Turkish occupied military provisions

⁹⁷ Ratzaby notes: this line is missing in each manuscript

⁹⁸ Lamentations 4:4

⁹⁹ Psalms 74:4, אֵת could be a sign, true sign, divine sign, or even a warning

¹⁰⁰ *L'haver*- meaning uncertain. Translator posits a scribal error, thus theorizing לחבר

¹⁰¹ Morph. no [one] buries [him]

¹⁰² Cf. Psalms 83:11

¹⁰³ Isaiah 64:5

¹⁰⁴ Lamentations 5:5, noting shift in tense due to context. Morph: we are pursued up to our necks.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Isaiah 14:3

¹⁰⁶ Cf. I Kings 17:17

¹⁰⁷ Ratzaby notes: common poetic phrases in the words of the author, meaning to fortify oneself or to find solace

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Exodus 17:12

¹⁰⁹ Also translated as soul, breath, lifebreath, refresh, etc. See Exodus 23:12. Also for myself.

delivered to every bitter soul¹¹⁰ - which I recited in the heaviness of incarceration - The Book of Moral Instruction¹¹¹ - that everyone who reads it - of their own language or expression¹¹² - shall reap ethics from the trials and tribulations that came our way - for the enormity of our crimes and iniquities - so shall they take it to heart - to be like a servant before one's master - separating evil riders from their chariot¹¹³ - capturing his siege work,¹¹⁴ completely annihilating it¹¹⁵ - *but a wise man calms it down*.¹¹⁶ Aside from knowing the Holy Tongue¹¹⁷ - [the language] is proper to be upon the engraved tablet of our hearts¹¹⁸ - fluent in all corners - built for the armory¹¹⁹ - perhaps in it there shall be a balm for our blows - the Tree of Life is fruitful. However, I prepared it¹²⁰ referring to two folks unbeknownst to me - Mordechai the Tzidonite¹²¹ - and Avner,¹²² son of Helek, the Yemenite - yet their names are indeed counted¹²³ - and God shall be in the reason of my lips¹²⁴ - I divided this book into chapters¹²⁵ - speaking of different matters - addressing all that happened in my wandering¹²⁶ - imprisoned alongside my people, impoverished - according to the two listed men - that which is revealed and that which is hidden - to be that which is sweet for his seekers - pleasant for his

¹¹⁰ Bitter soul; perhaps about, or to, every sadness of heart that engaged in communication

¹¹¹ *Sefer HaMusal*, in Hebrew

¹¹² Cf. Psalms 21:3

¹¹³ Meaning unknown. Ratzaby notes: To set aside, to distinguish, to separate, to become distanced from. This language is either a pun or tongue-twister.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Ecclesiastes 9:14; *m'tzuda* could also more generally refer to a fortress

¹¹⁵ *Kahad* exhibits a wide semantic range, e.g., hide, efface, destroy, annihilate, etc.

¹¹⁶ Proverbs 29:11

¹¹⁷ The Hebrew language

¹¹⁸ Cf. Jeremiah 17:1

¹¹⁹ Cf. Song of Songs 4:4, perhaps an allusion to Jerusalem

¹²⁰ Perhaps wordplay between *l'hachin* (to prepare) and *kinui* (nickname)

¹²¹ Tzidon can be found in modern-day Lebanon

¹²² General of David, perhaps violent who did much of David's bidding

¹²³ Ratzaby notes: the *gematria* of Mordechai the Tzidonite and Avner, son of Helek, the Yemenite equates to 443, the same *gematria* of the author, Zecharia, son of Saadia [referencing that these two characters serve as the poet's alter ego]

¹²⁴ Ratzaby notes: this language comes from Emmanuel of Rome

¹²⁵ Also derived from the Arabic, *maqama*: a narrative poetry genre of medieval Arabic literature

¹²⁶ Ratzaby notes: intended for his travels and wanderings in Eastern lands

petitioners - one speaks and his fellow responds - [the first] one establishes songs,¹²⁷ both of joy and lament, and [the second] one

52 *** 53

builds their castles - [and] words of a document - mentioning good matters - revealed and headlined - *for dignity and adornment*¹²⁸ - everything shall follow these two pure men¹²⁹ - these are the heroes! - [They are] aware of every conversation and poetic turn-of-phrase - on their words, they made and broke camp¹³⁰ - we witness the pleasantness of their friendship - the courage of their friendship - and the goodness of their love. Rabbi Yehuda Harizi¹³¹ already predates me with his work - through the antics of Heyman of the East and Hever the Kenite as he articulated it - which he learned from the Arab Sage Al Hariri - master of rhetoric and register when compared to his brother, Yafri¹³² - a work truly unparalleled - in his discourse and praises - streams of honey are his inheritance - [which] went beyond the limits¹³³ in his riddles and rhetoric - flocks of parables relaxing in his work's dwelling place - in the light of his brilliance, an Arab dwells¹³⁴ - even though his mother tongue was Arabic - the truth shall teach his way - for his value is inestimable - surely the Sage spoke to his son

¹²⁷ In poetics, בית refers to a stanza

¹²⁸ Exodus 28:2

¹²⁹ *Navar* exhibits a wide semantic range, e.g., pure, innocent, gnawing, pecking, etc.

¹³⁰ Cf. Numbers 9:23; perhaps meaning that the protagonists will move forward in accordance with both the content and artistic style of his presentation

¹³¹ Ratzaby notes: the poet is meticulous to recite “Harizi,” the author of *The Book of Tahkemoni*, not “Alharizi,” in order to distinguish from the name Alhariri, the well-known author of Arabic *maqamas*, whose *maqamas* are translated by Harizi in the name of Itiel.

¹³² Cf. Hoshea 13:15, a brilliant play on the word אֲחִיר, meaning reeds. The prophet speaks: “for though he flourish among reeds.” Al-Dahiri possibly shifts the word to אָחִיר to introduce the reader to his brother.

¹³³ Morph. crossed the border

¹³⁴ Cf. Isaiah 13:20. The biblical text reads that even an Arab wanderer, living in desert tents, would not dare to dwell in Edom, a historically destroyed and condemned locale in the eyes of Isaiah and Israel. Al-Dahiri seems to renders this verse in an opposite way, perhaps polemical.

*when he has all he wants:*¹³⁵ - “*Who is rich? The one who rejoices in their lot!*”¹³⁶ Here I am, arriving at this moment - to restore my soul from sad sighing¹³⁷ - with merely a few ears of grain [for] gleaning, separating [myself] from other authors¹³⁸ - even though *I have never been a man of words*¹³⁹ - for I am fully supported by the Sage who speaks his aphorism: *anyone who recites song [to God] in this world is privileged and recites it in the World-to-Come.*¹⁴⁰ Thus advanced my exchange before The God. I shall praise God¹⁴¹ *amidst the entire congregation*¹⁴² - *and my heart exulted, so I will glorify God with my song.*¹⁴³

53 *** 54

This is the Table of Contents

The first chapter discusses the lust for learning, for in it exists the guidelines of justice that are constructed - through the honor of lodging - inside, *he yells, he roars aloud*¹⁴⁴ a song - about the one who does not annoy [the innkeeper].

¹³⁵ Job 20:22

¹³⁶ Avot 4:1

¹³⁷ Ratzaby notes: sighing (due to the Hebrew language) is sad

¹³⁸ Compared to other poets, the author seems to consider himself less fit for poetry. Al-Dahiri leverages a metaphor in which merely two ears of grain are used for gleaning. See Peah 6:5.

¹³⁹ Exodus 4:10

¹⁴⁰ Sanhedrin 91b, attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi

¹⁴¹ Cf. Psalms 109:30

¹⁴² Proverbs 5:14

¹⁴³ Psalms 28:7

¹⁴⁴ Isaiah 42:13

The second chapter discusses *lamentations, dirges, and woes*¹⁴⁵ - petitions, supplications, and wailings - at its end, praising the city of Damascus - for she is the most pampered of all cities.¹⁴⁶

The third chapter discusses the praise of knowledge [pertaining to] words of Kabbalah - for it is the beginning of all adoration - its ending praises Saadia, son of Joseph - and the status of exile for all who yearn.

54 *** 59

The First *Maqama*

Mordechai the Tzidonite spoke: I traveled from Amon of No¹⁴⁷ - to Mount Hermon - I am oriented toward the city¹⁴⁸ of Damascus - which, compared to all other cities, is dainty - I arrived at the City of Two Rivers¹⁴⁹ - in the afternoon - there I rented a home with a balcony - to simply rejoice in the beauties of oblivion¹⁵⁰ - I entertained myself in the waters of the Parpar and Amana - which irrigate every garden - but on that day a rainstorm commenced, the air blackened¹⁵¹ - *an endless dripping on a rainy day*¹⁵² - the cold and snow unified -

¹⁴⁵ Ezekiel 2:10

¹⁴⁶ Ratzaby notes: see Isaiah 47:8, perhaps this is meant to signify Babylonia

¹⁴⁷ Ratzaby notes: Amon of No can be read as Alexandria, to be compared with Targum Yonatan on Jeremiah 46:25 and Ezekiel 30:14

¹⁴⁸ *M'dina* exhibits a wide semantic range including state, land, and country, perhaps referring to "city" in this context

¹⁴⁹ Cf. II Kings 5:12, a reference to the land of Syria

¹⁵⁰ Ratzaby notes: this world, land

¹⁵¹ Though this word is found in *hif'il*, the root *kuf, dalet, resh* in *binyan kal* refers to darkening, blackening, becoming gloomy, or becoming sad

¹⁵² Proverbs 27:15

when Time¹⁵³ tossed down *hail like crumbs*¹⁵⁴ - so I dwelled in my abode, day and night¹⁵⁵ -
*in the dark hours of night*¹⁵⁶ - having neither neighbor nor friend - with whom to speak¹⁵⁷ -
Alone with my thoughts, I compose to the God of Splendor - *upon my couch at night*.¹⁵⁸

Still I speak to myself - about the magnitude of my sadness - when behold, a man outside
proclaims aloud, - “Where are they, those who possess integrity and aptitude? - I came from a
faraway land - my soul teeming and bustling - complete desolation, devastation [from
hunger]¹⁵⁹ - the rains cast embitterment upon me - soaking my headdress, belt, and all my
clothes - I seek a place to lodge - before the cold and snow annihilate me - [only] to lay out
my clothes, for they are torn and worn out¹⁶⁰ - not [a space] to eat or drink - around dawn I
shall be on my way - to garner sufficient that which I need.” I listened to his words - his
utterances were pleasing - for I knew that he was the man whom I desired - to satisfy my
questions through him - now he illuminates like the sun - “*I found the one I love.*”¹⁶¹ So, I
began lighting my candle - and telling myself, “*arise, shine!*”¹⁶² - When I descended to open
the door for the man - as a happy and joyful soul - I observed my candle burning - and alas,
[there stood] my comrade, Avner, son of Helek! - I exclaimed, “Hello! Peace - be on the one
who brought you here!” - Then I fell on his neck¹⁶³ - I asked him about his odes and musings
- about the places

¹⁵³ Perhaps Time is an animated element as opposed to a metaphorical construct. Time indeed exists as a being in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

¹⁵⁴ Psalms 147:17

¹⁵⁵ Noting use of merism

¹⁵⁶ Proverbs 7:9

¹⁵⁷ Morph. about whom my heart speaks

¹⁵⁸ Song of Songs 3:1

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Nachum 2:11; also could be read as emptiness and starvation, in the protagonists’ contexts

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Genesis 27:15; his clothes are also presumably wet

¹⁶¹ Song of Songs 3:4

¹⁶² Isaiah 60:1; perhaps also a callback to *Lecha Dodi*

¹⁶³ Cf. Genesis 33:4

he lived - and the reason for his arrival to me tonight - on an unpaved road.¹⁶⁴ I hastily offered him a place in my courtyard¹⁶⁵ - and he responded, “*I will not eat until I have told my tale.*”¹⁶⁶

He said to me: “My lord is well-known, beloved in my eyes¹⁶⁷ - O Mordechai the Tzidonite - for today I went to the markets and streets - my intestines waging wars¹⁶⁸ - at that very moment, I was crazy and blind¹⁶⁹ - from the strength that I lacked - I saw good-looking dates in the market - [and thought,] ‘what pleasant dates that they’re eating!’ - new fruits - both fresh and dried - I so wanted to buy some of them - desiring their flavors - [but] how do I stop this war of tremendous hunger? - I don’t have anything - I am still furious with famine - hopefully waiting for my God - and suddenly there was an old man who showed [me] something in his hand - laughing and crying with a depressed voice - saying: ‘Oh no, O Masters of Wisdom - O [Masters of] Esteemed Souls - who became lost from this world - from young to old¹⁷⁰ - O Subsister of Word, Former of Light¹⁷¹ - *bind up the message, seal the instruction*¹⁷² - oh, it is Time that buried all who understand and discern - woe unto those

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 18:15

¹⁶⁵ Ratzaby notes: with my permission, beneath me, or, perhaps, in my room

¹⁶⁶ Genesis 24:33

¹⁶⁷ Ratzaby notes: a common, poetic turn-of-phrase that the Yemenite-Jewish community uses to initiate letters

¹⁶⁸ Presumably from hunger

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Deuteronomy 28:28

¹⁷⁰ Noting use of merism

¹⁷¹ Cf. Isaiah 45:7; perhaps also a callback to the *Yotzer* liturgy

¹⁷² Isaiah 8:16; Ratzaby notes: the intention [of this verse] is that the Torah is bound and sealed with no one to interpret [it]

who are gone and no longer found.¹⁷³ I said to the weeping man, gnashing his teeth, - ‘what is your difficulty [that] I seek to resolve - and why do you moan and complain? - Your desire ends with me.’¹⁷⁴ He responded to me: ‘If your word is truthful - [then] *happy is the man you choose and bring near to dwell in your courts*¹⁷⁵ - however, my son, how did I woo at every house of study - and holy dwelling space - every tanna and ammora - despairing to assume their rationale [to be correct] - none of them spoke a word to me¹⁷⁶ - for I knew that the great pride of wisdom is broken.’ I responded to the Elder with a saying, ‘*Don’t look at the container but at that which is in it*,¹⁷⁷ - and now give me [the] draft document so that I may look at it - for perhaps I can study it, interpret it.’ At last, he placed this difficulty in my hands, relating [as follows].¹⁷⁸

O Sage of Secrets, O Judge Like No Other
an intelligent man, ranked highly.

Help me understand, teach me about a tower¹⁷⁹
it is true that the masses cannot climb it.

A man gathered to his people,¹⁸⁰ he has a brother

¹⁷³ Sanhedrin 111a, with חבֿל replacing חֵבֿל, seemingly a different manuscript from the Vilna edition. Ratzaby quotes Rashi on the *sugya*: “There is a great loss for the great ones who have been lost, for I cannot find other pious followers like them.”

¹⁷⁴ Ratzaby notes: your request will be fulfilled and completed by me

¹⁷⁵ Psalms 65:5

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Job 2:13

¹⁷⁷ Avot 4:20

¹⁷⁸ Acc. to Ratzaby, it seems as though this poem is printed and circulated in other medieval Yemenite-Jewish texts, see אוצר השירה והפיוט.

¹⁷⁹ Tower as a symbol of Avner’s difficulty

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Genesis 49:29; a euphemism for approaching death

this is his brother, who mourns for his [brother's] death.

He had a betrothed wife, and she has a brother
she remains alone after his withering.

Her brother, who took the inheritance
of the brother of the deceased,¹⁸¹ [it is him whose] plot was carried out.

Jewish law states: his wife's brother inherits [the deceased]
with no trial in his coming or going.

60 *** 61

When I saw this difficulty and its matters - my insight directed toward its center¹⁸² - I spoke to the Elder, - 'it is upon me to fix your difficulty - however, what is the interpreter's reward - that shall indeed banish your embarrassment?' The Elder responded, 'If you are the teacher - remove the growing root¹⁸³ from my heart - [then] my kin and I shall make you rich¹⁸⁴ - we strengthen you and we help you¹⁸⁵ - *we should like to honor you when your words come true.*'¹⁸⁶ I spoke back to the Elder, 'I request no wealth - for I am a master of integrity -

¹⁸¹ Perhaps an allusion to levirate marriage

¹⁸² Cf. Exodus 25:37

¹⁸³ See Deuteronomy 29:17. In the biblical context, this is a root that sprouts poison weed and wormwood, bitter and poisonous plants resembling wickedness.

¹⁸⁴ Perhaps a reference to I Samuel 17:25: the man who kills him will be rewarded by the king with great riches

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Isaiah 41:10; al-Dahiri seems to be using prophetic language to bolster the wise man's offering for Mordechai the Tzidonite

¹⁸⁶ Judges 13:17

nevertheless, considering my needs and duress - *provide me with my daily bread*¹⁸⁷ - it is my desire that you bring me some dates - and then we shall walk, *united as one*.¹⁸⁸

It was in the evening - when he arose like a beast in its lair¹⁸⁹ - the Elder walked with vigor - his feet range over the earth¹⁹⁰ - he took from some of the new dates - from the pomegranates and grapes - from the sweet strawberries - and various nuts and almonds - [until] he filled his sack - as much as he could - then he led me to his house - to fulfill his obligation. With him, I entered into [his] meager home - he offered me worn-out clothes - for he owned neither livestock nor assets - [he had] neither daughters nor sons - he arranged the fruit in front of me - and sat right before my eyes. He said to me: ‘know, my son, that lying is a despicable trait - and its damage is terrible - and now, do not let the dates tempt you - to acquire knowledge from me¹⁹¹ - I desire not that you consume my fruit - until you interpret my dilemmas.’ - I responded to the man: ‘before you recite, I shall answer¹⁹² - and I shall not *change what I have uttered*.’¹⁹³ I then replied:

Speak to the man who established questions

I shall bring forth the hiddenness of his heart and mind.

¹⁸⁷ Proverbs 30:8

¹⁸⁸ Judges 20:11

¹⁸⁹ The author uses phrases common to the Hebrew of Job 37:8 and Job 38:40. Juxtaposed, the relevant language from each verse follows: [...] וַתֵּבֵא תַיָּהּ בְּמוֹאָצָרָהּ ; וַיִּשְׁבּוּ בַסֶּכֶה לְמוֹאָצָרָהּ [...] , translating to “then the beast enters its lair [...]” and “[...] they lie in ambush in their lairs.” Al-Dahiri seems to be drawing on language from both verses, playing transforming *b’mo* to *k’mo* in his poetry.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Psalms 73:9

¹⁹¹ Perhaps an allusion to Genesis 2:17, the tree of knowledge of good and bad?

¹⁹² Cf. Isaiah 65:24

¹⁹³ Psalms 89:35

Let it be that I understand his cunning wisdom¹⁹⁴ and secret
let it be that I uncover and tell his truth.

This one who perished, who is initially mentioned
in his life, his son married his mother-in-law.

She conceived by way of him and bore a son for his inheritance
he later died, and, when the wailing period was over,¹⁹⁵

the child came to inherit that which belonged to his father
and, if you believe the truth, he would then be his wife's brother.

The riddle is affixed by The Wisdom of the Heart¹⁹⁶
his name is like the dew for you, the intelligence of his portion.

When I completed the solution - with a generous spirit¹⁹⁷ - then the Elder spoke to me: 'You
did well with your answer - behold, the fruits of your labors'¹⁹⁸ - I then arose, an embittered
soul, over the fruits - for hunger has bitterly bitten at me - I ate dates and grapes - a mixture
of strawberries and almonds - no one pitied them enough¹⁹⁹ - they became like nothing - the
Elder looked at me with an evil eye - and a terrible soul - the torrent and flow [of rain] on

¹⁹⁴ Ratzaby notes: *ermato* to be read as *hochmato* or *t'vunato*; "his cunning nature" to be read as "his wisdom" or "his understanding"

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Genesis 50:4

¹⁹⁶ Acc. to Ratzaby, the author of this riddle is named *Ḥakham Lev*, which in *gematria* calculates to *Ḥayyim*.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Psalms 51:14

¹⁹⁸ Morph. your religion

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Ezekiel 16:5

every route - *bountiful rain*²⁰⁰ - the night is dark - with snow falling on the land - angrily, the Old Man said - 'Swindler! Crook! - Get up, leave my house - do not sleep

61 *** 62

in the shadows of my rafters.' I retorted to the Old Man: 'But why - you do not own anything - no son, no daughter - not a wife stands before you'²⁰¹ - the rain watered the world - *and the skies provided their moisture*.²⁰² He turned to me like a lion - and said to me: 'Where is your wisdom - for a human who eats like this - there is no pity for their life'²⁰³ - [as] you consumed all that I acquired for your honor - if only my money was returned and it was in my bag²⁰⁴ - and now, perhaps your stomach is weak - defecating upon my holy bed - but there is more: another bitter soul from among [you] - they say that so-and-so killed a man - so now, get up, leave, if you have mercy on me - or if you shall bestow loving-kindness upon me - turn yourself right or left.'²⁰⁵

Thus, I departed, bustling and stormy - my heart burning against the Elder - the coming days holding me back - and the snow on my face pushing me around - Time sent its cold - *storm wind that executes [God's] command*²⁰⁶ - for I have been guided on my errand by Yahweh²⁰⁷ - The Awesome Actor brought me forward²⁰⁸ - to your place [God] has led me." Mordechai the

²⁰⁰ Psalms 68:10

²⁰¹ Ratzaby notes: the second stich of this rhyme concludes with a *segol* [whereas the first stich concludes with a *patach*], a common element of Yemenite-Jewish poetry.

²⁰² Zechariah 8:12, noting shift in tense due to context

²⁰³ Morph. reality

²⁰⁴ Cf. Genesis 42:28

²⁰⁵ Cf. Genesis 24:49

²⁰⁶ Psalms 148:8

²⁰⁷ Cf. Genesis 24:27; the author flips the words נָחַי and יי in order to complete the rhyme that follows

²⁰⁸ Cf. Psalms 66:5, perhaps also a reference to *El Nora Alilah* of Moses ibn Ezra, 12th-century Spanish *paytan*

Tzidonite spoke: “How great are your issues - God has made me chuckle!” [God] parted [his] jaws in a measureless gape²⁰⁹ - and filled [his] mouth with laughter²¹⁰ - in the moment when God placed [his] heart concerning [the adventures of] Avner - adding fuel to the fire - he removed from himself turbans and waistbands - *taking off vestments and putting on other vestments*²¹¹ - the entire night, he would relay parables - sometimes with words of wisdom, other times in jest - Mordechai arose after he finished - *he took up his theme, and said*:²¹²

Had it been in the days of Avram
in the days of Mamre, Eshkol, Aner²¹³

you illuminate hot as the sun²¹⁴
even at night [you] are like a lamp for them.

They say that “the name has an impact”²¹⁵
thus, [we] let us call your name, Avner.²¹⁶

Avner spoke: “I am absolutely in awe - at the Everlasting Studious One - Pursuer of Understandings; his dawn, his exhaling - with their gold and silver - this, and the like - that is

²⁰⁹ Cf. Isaiah 5:14

²¹⁰ Cf. Psalms 126:2

²¹¹ Leviticus 6:4, noting shift in tense due to context

²¹² Numbers 23:7

²¹³ See Genesis 14:13; these are three brothers who are mentioned as *ba'alei vrit Avram*, Avram's allies

²¹⁴ *Hama* exhibits a wide semantic range, including hot, pleasant, hot-tempered, etc.

²¹⁵ See Brachot 7b, perhaps a translation of *sh'ma gareim*

²¹⁶ One can break down the name Avner into two component parts: *av* (meaning “father”) and *ner* (meaning “light” or “lamp”). Avner's name depicts him as “the source of light,” according to Ratzaby.

what The Prophet spoke about in his writing²¹⁷ - O lovers of statutes and Torah - for them, it is fitting to understand and instruct [these laws] - yet it is not proper for the sage to conceal their query - *in their image-covered chambers*²¹⁸ - rather, one may influence those holding other perspectives - citizens and foreigners alike.”

Thus spoke the poets:²¹⁹

One who conceals wisdom²²⁰

hiding inside the heart

What is its benefit, for not having learned

from The Supreme Thought?

One who receives from The Elite

influences [even] the Lowest Realm.

62 *** 63

For the Sage provides from their waters

to every disciple turning their heart to them.

²¹⁷ Ratzaby notes: *HaNavi bichtavo* refers to Moses, our Rabbi, who was commanded to “enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings” as found in Exodus 18:20

²¹⁸ Ezekiel 8:12

²¹⁹ Ratzaby notes: this is not a quotation, but rather this is a poem written by the author himself

²²⁰ Ratzaby notes: the one who conceals his wisdom in his heart and does not teach it to others, indeed this person is useless, for this one does not behave as the Supreme Sage, suckling from The Elite Creator, slanting toward the underworld

[As for] the one who withholds grain,²²¹ they are furious with such person
for they would not supply the first crops.

The God shall send the son of David
that he may construct the Temple of the City of Zion.²²²

Mordechai was impressed²²³ with the quality of his logical idiom - and the purity of his
tongue - he spoke: “Praised be the one who, in glory, distributes a portion²²⁴ - to Avner, son
of Helek.”

In the morning, they stood to pray - to offer thanks and praise - they arranged the fire in the
firepans²²⁵ - they arose to eat and drink - and when Avner sent forth his hand toward his
clothing he had left - suddenly the wind *blew upon them, and they dried up*²²⁶ - he tried with
all his might - to remove the ornamented tunic which was upon him²²⁷ - Mordechai spoke:
“Do not be like a sailor or a pest - for I gave [it to you] for the sake of possession”²²⁸ - Avner,
son of Helek, responded - with a mouth [full] of locust and grub,²²⁹ - “Your contribution is

²²¹ Cf. Proverbs 11:26, Sanhedrin 91b-92a

²²² It seems that the author writes *ir tziona* (as opposed to *ir tzion*) in order to stylistically align the rhyme scheme in each second stich of the poem

²²³ *Tamah* exhibits a wide semantic range, e.g., to be amazed, to be astonished, to wonder, etc.

²²⁴ Perhaps an allusion to Brachot 58a, “one who sees kings of Israel recites: ‘Blessed... Who has shared of [God’s] glory with those who revere [God],’” although the author liberally adjusts the syntax for purposes of rhyme

²²⁵ Ratzaby notes: for the purpose of cooking breakfast, or in order to warm themselves up in the cold?

²²⁶ Isaiah 40:24, noting shift in tense due to context

²²⁷ Cf. Genesis 37:3

²²⁸ Ratzaby notes: that you may put aside the world-class borrowed tunic, and perhaps the intention is that you should take possession of it [as] an ordinance

²²⁹ Ratzaby notes: this is to teach you that, from within [his] craving to obtain the tunic, who spreads out like a locust upon the vegetation

greater than the Pishon River - your latest deed of kindness is greater than the first²³⁰ - for the torrent Kishon swept away²³¹ all of my possessions.” He arose to depart on his journey - wishing to trek to Akko. Mordechai spoke: “A sentence [about] hospitality - at least thirty days²³² - for here are my cupboards before you - dwell with us and we shall be generous with you”²³³ - Avner declined to sit down - for no caravan is delayed - he stood up opposite him - and delivered his fable:

All who desire shall greet
their teacher on the New Moon.²³⁴

*Visit your neighbor sparingly*²³⁵
and learn, my brother, from The Holy.²³⁶

A fool shall increase, even keeps trying
only to be like ash, trampled down.

Mordechai stood up, his passions awaited God - they kissed and wept - he commanded [him]
to fulfill his word - and according to his composition and poem - he accompanied him to the

²³⁰ Cf. Ruth 3:10

²³¹ Cf. Judges 5:21

²³² Ratzaby notes: thus, this is the custom until today among *mizrachim*

²³³ Cf. Numbers 10:29

²³⁴ See Sukkah 27b and II Kings 4:23

²³⁵ Proverbs 25:17

²³⁶ Ratzaby notes: that the High Priest of Israel would enter into the Holy of Holies once per year

K'rit River - [where] the two of them signed a treaty - he²³⁷ departed towards *the land of his kinsfolk*²³⁸ - but Mordechai the Tzidonite *returned to his place*.²³⁹

Spoke the youth Zecharia, son of Saadia:²⁴⁰ “When I completed the first *maqama* - and edited every proper turn-of-phrase - so it occurred to me to recall our exile - how *the crown has fallen from our head*²⁴¹ - by way of flowery phrase - *it had barely budded, when out came its blossoms*²⁴² - these two men, in my mind, are related to me - Avner, son of Helek, the Yemenite, and Mordechai the Tzidonite.”

63 *** 64

The Second *Maqama*

Mordechai the Tzidonite spoke: I traveled from Egypt's land - my face oriented toward Yemen - I hired a boat on the River Pishon²⁴³ - indeed, I rely upon The First Navigator²⁴⁴ - on that path, I have neither lips nor tongue²⁴⁵ - for Avner, son of Helek, like a pupil, is hidden - he separated from me, I still have not seen him - *I sought, but found him not*²⁴⁶ - nevertheless I heard a rumor - and know that Avner - remained in the land of Uzal²⁴⁷ - *a turtledove, and a*

²³⁷ Avner, son of Helek

²³⁸ Numbers 22:5

²³⁹ Genesis 18:33

²⁴⁰ Ratzaby notes: the author's epilogue that aims to elevate the memory of Zion at the end of the *maqama*

²⁴¹ Lamentations 5:16

²⁴² Genesis 40:10

²⁴³ See Genesis 2:11; according to Saadia Gaon, this is the Nile River

²⁴⁴ Ratzaby notes: the Holy Blessed One directs their creations on the Day of Judgment (language of supplication, 'God is a King, sitting upon a throne of compassion')

²⁴⁵ Ratzaby notes: because Avner, son of Helek, is not with him, that he would get someone to talk

²⁴⁶ Song of Songs 5:6

²⁴⁷ Regarding Uzal, Ratzaby notes: a Hebrew nickname for the Yemenite capital of *San'a*; see Genesis 10:27, for here Saadia Gaon translates according to his Yemenite-Jewish version

*young bird*²⁴⁸ - so I sojourned to restore that which Avner robbed²⁴⁹ - my eye leaking with tears²⁵⁰ - for twenty days I walked alongside the river - in the presence of the Awe-filled and Frightening One²⁵¹ - and then, from the river I departed - my heart fluttering - I trudged three days on dry land - with a weakened body - until we encamped by the coastline - in the place where the Israelites remained stripped of their finery²⁵² - from there, I bridled the chariots of separation - gathered provisions for my journey - and rented a ship for twenty silver pieces - my heart longs for Avner - I [must] arrange my dwelling place for it²⁵³ - I set sail upon my fleet - but after ten days there was a mighty wind - *the ship was in danger of breaking up*²⁵⁴ - weakness sank into my heart - so I lifted my eyes to *The One Who Made A Road Through The Sea*²⁵⁵ - [God] heard my groan and saved me - led me from the depths of the sea toward serenity - we dwelled roughly one and a half moons - the God of Israel offered my salvation - I went to replace my garments - upon arriving at Tzalif Port - I departed for the dry land - with new spirit - from there we traveled west of the city - in the month of Tammuz, the heat burned - it was in the morning of the full moon - I arrived close to the land's border - I slept, fatigued and wearied - and suddenly a dream informed me of my purpose - I saw a lunar eclipse²⁵⁶ - no light remained from it - when I arose in the morning, I panicked - lest its rays stick to me and I shall die - there is a hint in my heart²⁵⁷ - about what happened to our

²⁴⁸ Genesis 15:9

²⁴⁹ Cf. Leviticus 5:23

²⁵⁰ Cf. Lamentations 2:11

²⁵¹ Cf. Machzor Rosh Hashanah Ashkenaz, Unetane Tokef

²⁵² Cf. Exodus 33:6

²⁵³ My heart

²⁵⁴ Jonah 1:4

²⁵⁵ Isaiah 43:16

²⁵⁶ See Sukkah 29a; it seems like an eclipsed moon is a bad omen for the enemies of the Jewish people because the Jewish people calculate their calendar primarily based on the moon

²⁵⁷ Ratzaby notes: in addition to the dream, a lunar eclipse also served as an ominous sign for the poet, also the date of the dream, the month of Tammuz, that on the seventeenth day, five calamitous matters occurred to our ancestors (see Taanit 26b and Hilchot Ta'anit 5:2). They write: the tablets were broken, the daily offering was discontinued before the destruction of the first Temple, the walls of Jerusalem were breached before the destruction of the second Temple, wicked Apostomos burned the Torah and set up an idol in the Temple.

ancestors in the month of Tammuz - thus I entered the land, my heart burning - bustling and stormy - and I asked, “where is the sanctuary?” - in order to offer

64 *** 65

praise to God.²⁵⁸ While I was speaking, behold! [There was] a group of minors - who were whistling and talking - *all her pursuers overtook her in the narrow places*²⁵⁹ - for I knew my luck had run out²⁶⁰ - in the city of Uzal - one of the minors approached and began to weep - with a broken and crushed heart²⁶¹ - he cried out, voice embittered - he delivered his fable:

My father left me
who stole my heart
plowed across my back²⁶²
when my father separated from me.

His mother cries out²⁶³
embracing a refuse heap²⁶⁴
suckling on tears
every day, never ceasing.

²⁵⁸ It seems that Mordechai wishes to pray order to deflect any bad omens that may come his way

²⁵⁹ Lamentations 1:3; when he was praying, a group of young kids caught up with him

²⁶⁰ Morph. the luck had fallen

²⁶¹ Cf. Psalms 51:19

²⁶² Cf. Psalms 129:3

²⁶³ Ratzaby notes: perhaps he means “and *my* mother” inasmuch as the author writes this in third person [and the rest of the poem is written in first person]

²⁶⁴ Cf. Lamentations 4:5

My mother is abandoned
clothing herself in blackness²⁶⁵
trampled upon like dust
yet my father is in the tower.

Listen to my voice
O God of Israel
from the hand of Ishmael
redeem my poor and low self.²⁶⁶

When I heard his words and idioms - I said to him, “This is the son, *let us exult and rejoice on him*”²⁶⁷ - for I imagined his voice to be that of my comrade, Avner - member of my covenant - I asked about the boy - an Old Man who rebukes in his final throes - said to me: “This is the boy who illuminates like a flame - the root of Avner - for you understand the words of the Sage - ‘the father merits the son.’”²⁶⁸ I was astonished by the boy and his phrases - how he formulated his words into four rhymed verses - of them, he included a complete prayer - aiding [others] toward redemption - the Old Man said to me - [as] he pondered and arranged his words²⁶⁹ - “Why, my lord, are you amazed - could it be that you recognized the boy’s father - and now, by your grace, let me know - if you are Mordechai the Tzidonite - whom the boy’s father praises - but regarding your separation cries bitterly.”²⁷⁰ I

²⁶⁵ Cf. Isaiah 50:3

²⁶⁶ Cf. Zephaniah 3:12

²⁶⁷ Psalms 118:24

²⁶⁸ See Sanhedrin 104a: “The son confers merit upon the father, as it is to the father’s credit that he raised a righteous son; but the father does not confer merit upon the son.” This is to say that, in his poem, the author reverses the content of the *sugya*.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Ecclesiastes 12:9

²⁷⁰ Cf. Zephaniah 1:14

responded to the Old Man with an incredible secret in all of its details - that I am indeed that
one who knows him and his closest comrade - the Old Man wept and complained - then
delivered his fable:

Listen up, O Tzidonite
words of lament,
pay attention to eight
lend your share to seven.²⁷¹

You'll break your heart
and uncover your head
listen to what happened
to Avner, son of Helek.

Delivered over to the kingdom
his eye never lacking [tears]²⁷²
scorned by those who see him
breached and destroyed²⁷³ from his home.

Time caught up with him
he could be compared to dirt

²⁷¹ Cf. Ecclesiastes 11:2

²⁷² Ratzaby notes: the source of the tears in his eyes have no shortage, that is to say he cries with no rest. Cf. Jeremiah 8:23.

²⁷³ Ratzaby notes: in *nit 'pa'el*, this root does not exist. He believes it to be synonymous with verbal hendiadys *nifratz v'neherav*.

crushing his fate

chasing him to Yemen.²⁷⁴

Because he transgressed the laws

his flowing tears

distress surrounded him

like an abundance of locusts.

The king frighteningly woke

the notables of the city

young and old

and distributed them to prisons.

65 *** 66

When the Old Man completed his lamentation - at that point I understood the matter in its

entirety - I cried without law - until my voice could be heard from afar²⁷⁵ - the boy

understood that my eye was constantly tearing up over his father's departure - he said: "*Do*

not desert your friend and your father's friend"²⁷⁶ - as he stood in front of me, my light

shined - and he spoke "Peace be upon you, my great teacher" - so I embraced him - and loved

him forever²⁷⁷ - he led me to his home - and placed before me that which he discovered - I

²⁷⁴ Ratzaby notes: Time pursued after him until [he arrived in] Yemen, and his hand caught up to him there (hardship in Yemen came to him after he returned from his wanderings in the East)

²⁷⁵ Cf. Ezra 3:13

²⁷⁶ Proverbs 27:10

²⁷⁷ Cf. Jeremiah 31:3

spoke to the boy: “is this yet another trick - of any size²⁷⁸ - to see the face of your honored father - as I am his faithful friend?” The boy retorted: “if you are able, you could ignore him - before you know it, you will get hooked.”²⁷⁹ I responded: “Indeed I know this matter in its entirety - *I must go and see [him] before I die.*”²⁸⁰

I walked with strength after having eaten - on an open path - day and night²⁸¹ - I shifted my concern - letting saliva run down my beard²⁸² - as I looked outside, O, the tower, its peak in the clouds - at that time, my heart melting like water²⁸³ - when I drew near to the tower, I sat in amazement - terrifying as well - if I speak, my guilts shall be revealed - but [if] *I say nothing, my limbs would waste away*²⁸⁴ - for the cursed descendents of Hagar²⁸⁵ - if they had known that I deceived them - they would have bound me up and imprisoned me - *struck me and bruised me*²⁸⁶ - I inquired of some poor folk - I said: “[there is] *a time for throwing stones*”²⁸⁷ - regarding Avner and his actions - what would become of his fate - under the rule of the Muslims - in this tower, descending and ascending - a nomadic pauper said to me, “Avner gives drinks to the king - from the waters flowing beneath the tower - from that place the prisoners offered water.”²⁸⁸

²⁷⁸ Noting use of merism

²⁷⁹ Ratzaby notes: this is a challenging phrase. Perhaps it means: you don’t know [how] to devote yourself or make efforts in order to find that which you are seeking?

²⁸⁰ Genesis 45:28, noting shift in object from Joseph’s father to “this matter”

²⁸¹ Noting use of merism

²⁸² Cf. I Samuel 21:14

²⁸³ Cf. Psalms 22:15

²⁸⁴ Psalms 32:3, noting shift in tense due to context

²⁸⁵ Ratzaby notes: Muslims, that these are the children of Ishmael, who is the son of Hagar

²⁸⁶ Song of Songs 5:7

²⁸⁷ Ecclesiastes 3:5

²⁸⁸ Cf. Genesis 29:2

I walked with haste toward the flowing spring - my heart with trepidation - *I had scarcely finished* talking to myself²⁸⁹ - and no spirit is left in me²⁹⁰ - when suddenly there was a man wearing his mourning clothes - with fetters on his feet²⁹¹ - his stature hunched over from his pain - walking innocently to the well - *he had not pared his toenails, or trimmed his mustache*²⁹² - guards all over him, from every which way - at this instance, I knew for sure that this was Avner - but he did not recognize me, as I was disguised - so I jumped up - kissed his hand - wept over his neck²⁹³ - then he noticed the sound of my voice - that I am Mordechai the Tzidonite - so he embraced and kissed me - like *the loincloth clings close*,²⁹⁴ he stuck to me. He said to me with a bitter soul - and clear tongue - “Where

66 *** 67

have you come from, staff in hand?” - I responded to him: “Your love is faithful.” He said to me: “Do you even know what happened to us?”²⁹⁵ - The king *who massacred us - and planned to exterminate us*?”²⁹⁶ I replied to him: “I see how they oppressed you - your son, the issue of your loins”²⁹⁷ - then I remembered him, his son - and the purity of speech - the words that he spoke - and the dirge which he composed - his eyes dribbled like water - and he fell on his face - he arose in my honor, his heart scorched - he delivered his fable and said:

²⁸⁹ Genesis 24:45

²⁹⁰ Cf. Daniel 10:17

²⁹¹ Cf. Psalms 105:18

²⁹² II Samuel 19:25

²⁹³ See Genesis 33:4

²⁹⁴ Jeremiah 13:11

²⁹⁵ Acc. to Ratzaby, the syntax of *qarah aleinu* is rare. It likely means something similar to *sh'eira lanu*, meaning “that which happened to us.” In this case, the indirect object marker, *al*, is a negative referent, foreshadowing Avner’s troubles and distress.

²⁹⁶ II Samuel 21:5

²⁹⁷ Cf. I Kings 8:19

Open up my mouth with a song of mourning
a lament, a cry
for those who have gone into captivity
under the Muslim rule.

I choose for myself dirges
of different matters
I abandon joyful melodies
for what more songs do I have?

Let me speak of wonders
to the next generation
instruction to the simple
schemes for the young.²⁹⁸

Grief approached me
in the Hebrew year 5329²⁹⁹
I covered my upper lip³⁰⁰
like mourners [do] for first-born sons.

My days [full] of work

²⁹⁸ Cf. Proverbs 1:4, per both this and the previous stich

²⁹⁹ Secular year ~1568/1569, same year as in al-Dahiri's introduction

³⁰⁰ Cf. Leviticus 13:45, that which a leper does after the priest pronounces them as impure

my nights, banishment

my years, loneliness

my life, cursed.

I well up with tears

my body aches

as the month of Av begins

and all we recall [with it].

For every trouble, there is a leader

Holy Spaces were plowed³⁰¹

[they] forced me to drink headwater³⁰²

and wormwood bitters, too.

The enemy hoped to persecute

the Elder and his student

during [the month of Av], my eyes [were] constantly

flowing with tears.

Let me calm my heart³⁰³

let me voice lamentations

³⁰¹ Ratzaby notes: in the month of Av, the First and Second Temples were destroyed, and the holy land was plowed; see Jeremiah 26:18

³⁰² Cf. Jeremiah 8:14

³⁰³ Ratzaby notes: in medieval Yemen, oppressed Jews would try to calm their hearts with dirges, but they failed to succeed, as there were not appropriate dirges in the repeated prayers

yet they cannot be heard
in the repeated prayers.

Upon the people and community
imprisoned in exile
with God's agreement
[and] the Seventy Ministers.³⁰⁴

Depressed and tortured
articulating like doves
in a eulogy like jackals
with broken hearts.

We suffered pain
tortured in fetters
the magnitude of mourning
the destruction of [our] cities.

There was no bread
inside or outside the home
my prayer unreceived
my tears flowing.

³⁰⁴ Ratzaby notes: might these be the ministers of the seventy nations of the world?

Communities praying
weeping at every instance
spilling hearts [in supplication]
sipping bitter waters.

Scattered in the West
[enduring] icicles and heat waves³⁰⁵
every affliction that drew near
[caused] by the heads of strongholds.

67 *** 68

How many beloved ones at the threshold³⁰⁶
yearning for a morsel of bread
gathering in the gulches?
None entered into graves.

Many of them acclaimed³⁰⁷
they wandered like blind folk
they expired in the fortress
in the eyes of the enemies.

³⁰⁵ Noting use of merism

³⁰⁶ Ratzaby notes: many dignitaries were wiped out from famine

³⁰⁷ Ratzaby notes: well-known and important

Those who dwelled in riches
[became] like doves in the valleys³⁰⁸
like Keidar and Nevaïot³⁰⁹
sold for nothing.³¹⁰

Fluttering [on] the forehead³¹¹
seeking frontlets³¹²
is it not topsy-turvy,
all the waves of suffering?

An eye, ablaze
embraces refuse
every day, crying out
urgent and broken blasts.

A tongue, improving
in countless wisdom
[is now] licking up dust of the earth
night and day alike.³¹³

³⁰⁸ Ratzaby notes: they were exiled from their homes and wandered like doves in the valleys

³⁰⁹ Used to designate Arabs

³¹⁰ Cf. Isaiah 52:3

³¹¹ Ratzaby notes: rising, majestically lifting *tefillin* that is upon [one's forehead]

³¹² Ratzaby notes: from here until line 92, [the poet] offers in every line of poetics one part of the body, beginning with the forehead, then the eye, etc., concluding with feet

³¹³ Noting use of merism

A face, illuminating³¹⁴

for God's laws

[is now] covered in sackcloths

darkened with guilt.

Ears, afflicted³¹⁵

in the moment when enemies grow furious

how does gold become dull³¹⁶

and [how are] well-known folks recognized?

Hands, managing³¹⁷

the shift toward labor

dragging millstones

many of them bound.

Legs, walking

[to fulfill] the commandment of the Sovereign One³¹⁸

the wealthy and the pauper³¹⁹

[all] halted by chained fetters.

³¹⁴ Ratzaby notes: illuminating with the light of Torah

³¹⁵ Ratzaby notes: when the enemy abuses and swears, and curses arrive in one's ears--these are the afflictions of the ears

³¹⁶ Cf. Lamentations 4:1

³¹⁷ Ratzaby notes: hands that used to be stretched out in prayer have now been forced into debased labor by pushing heavy millstones

³¹⁸ Perhaps a double meaning [of retribution theology], both an allusion to God and a reference to the king in charge of the imprisoned Jews?

³¹⁹ Noting use of merism

An additional soul
longing for a beloved one
but now, cursed and despised
by one of the rocks.³²⁰

Hearts, torn
hips, shifting
tycoons drowning³²¹
by the hands of the cruel.

How might I discover respite
or assuage my soul?
[Who might comfort my shaking heart from]³²² the mud and mire
toward the majestic waters?³²³

Grief [came to] factions
foundations were destroyed³²⁴
on Sabbath eves
honored in the flames.³²⁵

³²⁰ Ratzaby notes: when we were [in] prison on the [mountain] peaks

³²¹ Ratzaby notes: descending into the depths, inside the pit of prison

³²² Ratzaby proposes this addition

³²³ Cf. Exodus 15:10

³²⁴ Cf. Psalms 11:3

³²⁵ Ratzaby notes: the lights of Shabbat; also perhaps the flames of destruction?

The planted stock³²⁶
its happiness has shifted
on the New Year
and the Day of Atonement.

Humanity of blows
awaiting wisdom
[at] the Festival of Booths
during the height of pain.

My loins stumble³²⁷
my body shudders
when a festival looms:
The Feast of First Fruits.

*The rains are over and gone*³²⁸
the wicked gained power
hope has not sprouted³²⁹
on the joyful celebration of Purim.

68 *** 69

³²⁶ Ratzaby notes: the Jewish people; see Psalms 80:16

³²⁷ Note the poetic wordplay between homonyms: *moed* meaning “appointed time” and *moed* meaning “to stumble”

³²⁸ Song of Songs 2:11

³²⁹ According to Ratzaby, meaning uncertain

None to offer me compassion
to strengthen my feebleness
my legs remained
tangled in thorns.³³⁰

None listened attentively
*with none to say “Give back!”*³³¹
like an unconsidered offering
like burning corpses.

Forget not my thoughts
sense my beliefs
seeds have shriveled³³²
warriors have been dismayed.³³³

Let me purify my soul
let me collapse upon my abdomen³³⁴
toward the One Who Raises the Sun³³⁵
and The One Who Speaks Evenings into Being.

³³⁰ Cf. Nachum 1:10

³³¹ Isaiah 42:22

³³² Cf. Joel 1:17

³³³ Cf. Obadiah 1:9

³³⁴ Ratzaby notes: I bow down my body until [I reach] my abdomen; see II Samuel 2:23

³³⁵ Ratzaby notes: to the place where the sun rises and the evenings begin, in a sense (compare to *ma'ariv aravim* prayer: “who speaks the evenings into being”)

I move [my] lips
bowing down in stature
toward the Spirit, washed away
and a ruined life.

I destroy my bones
in the Kingdom of the Lame One³³⁶
[both] the citizen and the stranger³³⁷
[have] pangs and pains.

He³³⁸ desires my brokenness
*he has made my paths a maze*³³⁹
he is quenched by my tears
hills and mountains.

The [Jewish] community was neglected
joy was forbidden
always groaning
*they are renewed every morning.*³⁴⁰

³³⁶ Ratzaby notes: a derogatory nickname for Imam Al-Mutahhar

³³⁷ Noting use of merism

³³⁸ Ratzaby notes: Imam Al-Mutahhar

³³⁹ Lamentations 3:9

³⁴⁰ Lamentations 3:23

The son of a handmaid³⁴¹ conquered
with wrath and fury³⁴²
over the innocent dove³⁴³
like wild beasts and leopards.

Some of them were depressed
they would weep at every instance
there were those stricken by boils³⁴⁴
and others by sudden blindness.³⁴⁵

None showed regard³⁴⁶
none graced the elders
parents upon their children
bound up in fetters.

Who will feed the infants
on the day of [our] torment?³⁴⁷
among them, a father was kidnapped
they were full of bitter weeping.³⁴⁸

³⁴¹ Ratzaby notes: Ishmael, son of Hagar, maidservant of Sarah; perhaps here symbolic of Muslims in general

³⁴² Cf. Deuteronomy 29:27

³⁴³ Ratzaby notes: the community of Israel; see Song of Songs 5:2

³⁴⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 28:27

³⁴⁵ Cf. Genesis 19:11

³⁴⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 28:50

³⁴⁷ Use of *segol* instead of *kamatz*, perhaps indicating pronunciation patterns in medieval Jewish-Yemenite circles

³⁴⁸ Cf. Jeremiah 31:15

Who shall shine light
to the scholars of Torah
and lead in a line
the eager children?

Women in early mourning
abandoned widows
repeating their dirges
recounting their spouses.

I shall secure the breaches
amidst the People, like a thorn
and [God] is a Righteous Judge
in choosing the upright.

How can one not envision Yah,
those children in confinement
but how long will it be
until the Gates of Heaven close?³⁴⁹

But there exists another Gate:
one must not delay a tear

³⁴⁹ Perhaps an allusion to the *n'ilah* service during *Yom Kippur*

I am a forever supporter
and who can close [this Gate] for me?³⁵⁰

My God, pay heed
my weeping, dribbling eye
that you shall be written
in the Book of Life.³⁵¹

Shift not your faith
breach not your comradeship
but if your judgment ceases³⁵²
we would be delivered.

69 *** 70

At a time when you would peddle children
remember the covenant of [our] ancestors
I pray, damage not, O God
the status of the Beloved Ones.³⁵³

For if my transgression overpowers

³⁵⁰ Ratzaby notes: there exists no creature who can close the Gates of Tears

³⁵¹ Perhaps an allusion to the Book of Life metaphor throughout the High Holy Day liturgy

³⁵² Ratzaby notes: and even a judgment has come before you after all, we would deliver ourselves in accordance with the sanctification of God's name

³⁵³ Ratzaby notes: in the presence of Mount Sinai

and my heart would not break³⁵⁴

pray, look toward the pure ones

and deliver those who remain.³⁵⁵

Be [our] stronghold and shelter³⁵⁶

to a people, dumbstruck, like a kid

covered in your shadow

and set your flocks free.³⁵⁷

Show us favor, O God

we have had more than enough contempt³⁵⁸

pray, redeem us

as [you did] from the hands of the Egyptians!

Speak, please, The Almighty God,

for our troubles are enough!

Respond to our oppressors

kings and ministers!

You shall harden their hearts³⁵⁹

and degrade their thoughts

³⁵⁴ Ratzaby notes: [my heart] would not surrender to *teshuva*

³⁵⁵ Ratzaby notes: act for the sake of the righteous and deliver the remains of their virtues

³⁵⁶ Perhaps an allusion to the *uv'chein* series in the *kedusha* segment of the High Holidays *amida*

³⁵⁷ Ratzaby believes this stich alludes to Exodus 23:5; *adarim* refer to the flocks of Israel

³⁵⁸ Cf. Psalms 123:3

³⁵⁹ Cf. Isaiah 63:17, perhaps also references the Exodus narrative, despite using קשה instead of כבד

the messiah shall arrive

our horn elevated!³⁶⁰

When the son of Amiel shall come³⁶¹

to comfort Israel

[regarding] the descendent[s] of Ishmael

[he shall] destroy and excommunicate [them].

Turn toward their sins

reduce their joy

force their castles upside down

*as overthrown by strangers!*³⁶²

I shall herald the exiled communities

from the depths of their subjugation

let us heighten them to the upper realms

elders and youth alike!³⁶³

May you increase in knowledge

as a sown field

[may your] wisdom flow³⁶⁴

³⁶⁰ Cf. Psalms 89:18

³⁶¹ Ratzaby notes: Menachem, son of Amiel, and he is the king of the messiah

³⁶² Isaiah 1:7

³⁶³ Noting use of merism

³⁶⁴ Cf. Proverbs 18:4

like the seas and streams.

Deliver me, O One Who Draws Me³⁶⁵

to my feet, from my failure

may my soul live

praise at the gates!

Turn me back from my exile

hear my joyful song

are you not the one who restores

souls to dead bodies?³⁶⁶

At the end of days³⁶⁷

[when] the innocent [shall dwell] in the Garden of Eden

I shall give thanks in the presence of all the people

with an illuminated face.

When Avner completed his dirge - what happened regarding his people and community -

how he arranged his prayer - and *all his mighty and powerful acts*³⁶⁸ - we wept a vigorous sob

- until the floodgates³⁶⁹ were breached - he spoke to me with good intentions - “anyone who

³⁶⁵ Cf. Psalms 22:10

³⁶⁶ Perhaps an allusion to the daily *Elohai Neshama* prayer, as *n'shamot lifgarim* is an implicit reference

³⁶⁷ Ratzaby notes: after the days on earth, you shall bring the innocent people, those without sin, to the Garden of Eden

³⁶⁸ Esther 10:2

³⁶⁹ Morph. of *g'vul*: border, borderline, extreme, limit, bounds

departs from you, departs from their life³⁷⁰ - but what shall I do against the oppressors - and the *taskmasters [who] pressed!*³⁷¹ - Thus I arose, trembling in fear - and I enticed the guards with a little bribe³⁷² - so I could speak personally to Avner, to calm him - *as a mother comforts her son*³⁷³ - I spread out my hands to the God of the Heavens³⁷⁴ - my pupils flowed with water³⁷⁵ - Avner was immediately astonished - he spoke, “another plague?”³⁷⁶ - none of the other times are important - the bad or the good³⁷⁷ - however, my loins collapse³⁷⁸ - when the time draws near - we are [still] in prison cells - the guards grasp hold of us - [we bear] pressure from the enemies and foes - for the[se festivals] have already passed - on account of our sins and misfortunes³⁷⁹ - the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Booths - with so many wounds and blows - but we had no guidance - when Passovers came - our homes were ruptured - our fences

70 *** 71

smashed - and the Crown’s Jewels³⁸⁰ was put on display - how is it possible without Four Cups? - To gaze upon the wine, [but] *you do not take note of it*³⁸¹ - you will look at where it was, but it will be gone³⁸² - at a terrible time - *no grapes left on the vine, no figs on the fig*

³⁷⁰ Ratzaby cites Mikvaot 1:19. I found this implicit reference from Sifrei Bamidbar 10:8.

³⁷¹ Exodus 5:13

³⁷² Ratzaby notes: he bribed the guards in order that he may lengthen his conversation with Avner

³⁷³ Isaiah 66:13

³⁷⁴ Cf. Ezra 9:5

³⁷⁵ Cf. Jeremiah 9:17

³⁷⁶ Cf. Exodus 11:1; an additional hardship of spending Passover in prison

³⁷⁷ Noting use of merism

³⁷⁸ Cf. Psalms 69:24

³⁷⁹ Because we were in prison for our sins, *mipnei hata'einu, galinu me'artzenu*

³⁸⁰ Ratzaby notes: a nickname for exiled Jews in prisons

³⁸¹ Job 35:14

³⁸² Cf. Psalms 37:10

*tree*³⁸³ - but listen now - for it is as if you are sailing on a boat³⁸⁴ - pay heed to my second lamentation.

He continued:

Behold, the festival days have already arrived
to the people, swallowed by their enemies.

What is for me, for a day of happiness, let me bless and rejoice even more
I gird [a mourning sackcloth], like those who wandered blindly through the streets.³⁸⁵

The People who were miraculously redeemed by the hand of the Chosen One³⁸⁶
[as] Pharoah and the Egyptians sank in the sea.

The People whom God carried upon the wing³⁸⁷
of an eagle,³⁸⁸ in the desert, they camped and traveled.

Well water they drank, quail they ate³⁸⁹
[every] evening, and they were satiated by manna in the morning.³⁹⁰

³⁸³ Jeremiah 8:13

³⁸⁴ Ratzaby notes: anxious and worrying as if he sails his ship, as one endangers himself at sea

³⁸⁵ Cf. Lamentations 4:14

³⁸⁶ Ratzaby notes: Moses, the chosen one of the Prophets

³⁸⁷ Noting use of enjambment

³⁸⁸ Cf. Exodus 19:4

³⁸⁹ Noting use of enjambment; an allusion to the *b'er Miriam* and the quail that God brought them

³⁹⁰ Cf. Exodus 16:8

With the Clouds of the Glorious One in a pillar³⁹¹

lowering and lifting [them] as they became known.³⁹²

The People whom God chose [for God] as a people

they surrendered to the holiness and truth of [God's] word.

The arrows of time have hit their bullseye

indeed they sank down within a pit of darkness.

When they recalled the Festival [of Booths], they sighed and became gloomy

[the Festival passed,] and their eyes wept tears.

And when the Days of Passover occurred, just like the seas roared³⁹³

every spring of tears erupted.³⁹⁴

Their bread and tears, mixed, for³⁹⁵

they found neither comfort nor peace.

They discovered neither wine nor true matza

when they mentioned [the Passover offering], they encountered bitter times.³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Noting use of enjambment

³⁹² Ratzaby notes: by way of what they spoke in the *midrash*, that the standing cloud would guide the generations before the People of Israel in the wilderness: lifting up the valleys and lowering the mountains

³⁹³ Cf. Isaiah 17:12

³⁹⁴ Perhaps a reference to the splitting of the Red Sea; see Exodus 14:16

³⁹⁵ Cf. Psalms 102:10

³⁹⁶ Perhaps a dual meaning: the bitterness of their life *and* the bitter herbs of Passover

They were drunk with the wine of exile atop the cliff peaks,³⁹⁷ and amidst³⁹⁸

the prison wards, they erected their tents.

Ha, oh my! I lack status

O the niceties over which they perished.³⁹⁹

Kedar,⁴⁰⁰ having destroyed the Edomites and their settlements⁴⁰¹

encamped in their tents and showed no restraint.

71 *** 72

The Lame One⁴⁰² and his gang will descend toward The Pit

hardly are they eternally uprooted, hardly are they planted.⁴⁰³

A handmaid⁴⁰⁴ and her great-grandchildren will be burdened

as a lion whose teeth are already broken.⁴⁰⁵

[In] their courtyards and castles⁴⁰⁶ they dwell

³⁹⁷ They were used to being in exile; Ratzaby notes: when we were caged in prisons on the mountain peaks

³⁹⁸ Noting use of enjambment

³⁹⁹ Perhaps another reference to living in exile

⁴⁰⁰ Often a reference to local Arab Muslims

⁴⁰¹ Ratzaby notes: the Turks, despite the fact that this particular nickname does not reference Muslims

⁴⁰² Ratzaby notes: the Master of the Decree, [Imam] Al-Mutahhar

⁴⁰³ Cf. Isaiah 40:24

⁴⁰⁴ Perhaps a reference to Hagar and her Arab Muslim descendents

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Job 4:10

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Genesis 25:16

but they are all like altars that are cut down.⁴⁰⁷

They abandoned them, children and women, crying out
they rent garments over the[ir] exiled father.

To those who journey,⁴⁰⁸ they hope every day
a time they would depart, and a time they would arrive.

They also kissed their hands and feet so that
the children would send word for their wandering parents.

Bitter and gloomy they grew, they even cried out
to a God who decrees, they bellowed tears.

Remember the covenant [you made to the] ancestors of [our] rebellious children⁴⁰⁹
they stumble in judgment,⁴¹⁰ they are quite dazed.

They went astray in their vanities, they transgressed teachings
violated laws⁴¹¹ in the sea without recoiling.

⁴⁰⁷ Ratzaby notes: their fates were like the altars of *Ba'al* that were commanded [to be torn down]; see Deuteronomy 12:3

⁴⁰⁸ Ratzaby notes: presumably the captives were imprisoned in the fortresses in coastal cities (e.g., Moka, Hadida, etc.) until they were praying for the *ovrei yamim* in order that they would pass into their peaceful centers toward their families. Perhaps the intention of *ovrei yamim* generally refers to travelers and not precisely those who set sail on the sea.

⁴⁰⁹ Perhaps a reference to the concept of *z'chut avot* in High Holiday liturgy. Ratzaby also notes: language of complaining against God

⁴¹⁰ Isaiah 28:7

⁴¹¹ Cf. Isaiah 24:5

And so, look at the various sufferings they reaped
for one hundred years⁴¹² they sowed.

Weigh their hardships opposite their evil deeds⁴¹³
he ascended to high peak, they caused [them] to bow.

Let not the enemies say “take them, kill
them on the mountain tops,” yet they were not saved.

My neighbor, *let me be, I will weep bitterly*⁴¹⁴
over my handiworks which they have implemented.

This is the moment I shall recall my sin, akin to sighing jackals
I tear open my heart, *that is why I spoke recklessly*.⁴¹⁵

How can I petition [God] on behalf of my *unhappy, storm-tossed ones*⁴¹⁶
I arrange my prayers, yet they are not received.

But alas, O God, who lives in your glorious throne
to whom the angels on high shout for joy.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹² Cf. Genesis 26:12

⁴¹³ Read: the punishment ought to fit the crime

⁴¹⁴ Isaiah 22:4

⁴¹⁵ Job 6:3

⁴¹⁶ Isaiah 54:11; Ratzaby believes that this is a reference to the Yemenite Jews living in the diaspora

⁴¹⁷ Ratzaby seems to believe this is a reference to Job 38:7

Listen to my prayers and the song of your people

bowing down, prostrating before you.

Hear their supplications, mind their callings out

in their worshipping you forever; were they not pierced?

At the time of their redemption, they will be praised through you

always,⁴¹⁸ and they shall express the mentioning of your goodness.⁴¹⁹

Atop the hills of Zion, they chant joyously

“Behold, the Days have already arrived!”⁴²⁰

72 *** 73

Upon listening to his second lament - and his words about the *unhappy, storm-tossed ones*⁴²¹

- the pleasantness of his true prayer - at first I blessed him in the name of Yahweh - I bowed

down on my knees before him - kissed him - and spoke - “*see, you have encouraged many*”⁴²²

- with [your] pleasant affairs! - For how long must tragedy surround you - disaster

encompass you? - Now, rise up, share the sufferings of your soul - *for she has received at the*

⁴¹⁸ Noting use of enjambment

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Psalms 145:7, perhaps also an allusion to the *ashrei* series in the *p'sukei d'zimra*

⁴²⁰ Ratzaby seems to believe this is a reference to Isaiah 52:7 and an allusion to the end of the Yemenite-Jewish exile

⁴²¹ Isaiah 54:11; Ratzaby believes that this is a reference to the Yemenite Jews living in the diaspora

⁴²² Job 4:3

*hand of [Yahweh,] double for all her sins*⁴²³ - she will lead oral prayer⁴²⁴ - and be of great fame⁴²⁵ - speaking in your presence - [they will be] *yours alone, others having no part with you*⁴²⁶ - may Yahweh be gracious and heed your prayers - with the fruits of your faith - and the produce of your parlance - *honor [Yahweh] with your wealth!*⁴²⁷ - Avner then arose and spoke, “Here I am - fulfilling the word of Mordechai the Tzidonite - my tongue like *a sultry east wind*⁴²⁸ - I bring forth my third [lament]!”⁴²⁹ - He lifted his voice - added to his parable - and spoke:

At first, offer a beloved soul
provide respect to The Awesome Acting God.

Bow down before [God’s] home and collapse⁴³⁰
in supplications in the dead of night.

Remember [my] deeds in the days of your youth
as you progress through severity and mildness.

The arrogance of your heart: is it not written in The Book?⁴³¹
Alas, it did not contain, so they wrote [another] scroll.

⁴²³ Isaiah 40:2; “she” refers to “soul”

⁴²⁴ Ratzaby notes: according to the composed poetry, you will lead your soul in prayer to God

⁴²⁵ Perhaps an allusion to the first verse of 16th century *piyyut*, *Lecha Dodi*

⁴²⁶ Proverbs 5:17

⁴²⁷ Proverbs 3:9

⁴²⁸ Jonah 4:8

⁴²⁹ Cf. Zechariah 13:9

⁴³⁰ Noting use of enjambment

⁴³¹ Cf. Obadiah 1:3

Your days: are they not over and gone
in the sea of naivete, sunk in the depths?

In place of the Palace of Desire and Delicacy⁴³²
[lies] truth, disdain, and exile⁴³³ at the mountain peaks.

You are dressed in silks and embroidered garments
furnished with royal purple sandals [made of] dolphin leather.⁴³⁴

How your honor fell to the earth
your crown slipped away, like Samson with Delilah.⁴³⁵

I shall always guard obstacles from my mouth
the silence of my soul is praise.⁴³⁶

Nonetheless, let me encounter my confined soul through your deep anguish
that I shall send you through to traverse the way.

As you walk, the northern place lies before your eyes
the approach to the mountain and the lowland plains.

⁴³² Perhaps refers to a land full of wheat, honey, oil, and balm; see Ezekiel 27:17

⁴³³ Cf. Isaiah 49:21

⁴³⁴ Cf. Ezekiel 16:10

⁴³⁵ Cf. Judges 16:19

⁴³⁶ Cf. Psalms 65:2

Refuge you shall never have for yourself

until you see Tziklag and K'ilah.⁴³⁷

May your encampment lay in the city of Zion

Jerusalem has become a city of mourning.⁴³⁸

You arrived during a full moon⁴³⁹

your hour shall be a terrific one.

73 *** 74

Drink secretly in the Land of Aid

spill out your heart and increase your prayer!

From there, healing shall come before us

exceeding in rank, honor, and mercy.⁴⁴⁰

For those who returned to her open gates⁴⁴¹

to be defiled before them, [they are] locked.

⁴³⁷ Two places in I Samuel: in the former, David seeks refuge, and in the latter, David drives out the Philistines and saves the city's inhabitants

⁴³⁸ Perhaps a juxtaposition on *ir shalem* and *ir ha'avela*, a complete city but an empty city

⁴³⁹ Ratzaby notes: when we experience the full moon on the 15th of a month. This day is considered blessed, and the sun is a good omen. Weddings in Yemen occur until this date (from the 15th of month onward, they do not set weddings).

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Genesis 49:3

⁴⁴¹ Perhaps the gates of Jerusalem or those of the land

God is there, and God's name is called out,⁴⁴² The Which Is Sufficient⁴⁴³

has great strength and eternity with grandeur.

It shall be a gift to every [being], formed and created⁴⁴⁴

I despise the one who cheats the truth with a burnt offering.⁴⁴⁵

First, speak to [God] my greetings of peace

recall [God's] highest praise!

Recount the suffering of the incarcerated

their common sense has turned aside, none are of sound mind.

In that terrible time, there was no sweetness⁴⁴⁶

that was not principally diluted with evil.

*My bowels are in turmoil,*⁴⁴⁷ they grumble inside me

all of my days have become like a stolen year.

My eye is wasted away from so much sobbing⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴² Cf. II Samuel 6:2

⁴⁴³ Noting use of enjambment

⁴⁴⁴ Ratzaby believes that this is a reference to Jerusalem, and he notes: Jerusalem was given as a gift to every person and nation, as it is said in Isaiah 56:7, "For My House shall be called A house of prayer for all peoples"

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Isaiah 61:8

⁴⁴⁶ Noting use of enjambment

⁴⁴⁷ Job 30:27

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Psalms 6:8

my sickness is akin to an ostrich.⁴⁴⁹

If only I were amidst a group of ants
with so much meagerness, even an ant could carry me.

I am a pedestal, and [my] troubles are planks⁴⁵⁰
no moment exists without double distress.

I truly discovered all of the world's brokenness⁴⁵¹
many evil deeds follow [me] upwards.

Poverty and shortage both greatly increase
but what strength do I have [to stand opposite] their mighty hand?

Naked in the cold, with no clothing
to cover my exposed flesh.

My morsel of bread mixes with my wells of tears
they are my portion, my cup for eating.⁴⁵²

Only slightly did Time turn aside [from] troubles

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. Micah 1:8

⁴⁵⁰ Ratzaby believes that this may be a reference to the pedestals and planks of the Tabernacle; see Exodus 26:19

⁴⁵¹ Ratzaby notes: all of my present injuries and great tragedies frequently came to me

⁴⁵² Perhaps a reference to the three ways in which a human can be judged, by way *kos*, *kis*, *ka'as*; see Eruvin 65a

a cubit's length would [Time] turn away from me.

74 *** 75

I consider my joyful tune a lament

I call my song's voice a wailing voice.

For if I shall not emerge from my confinement

I shall descend, grieving, in Sheol.⁴⁵³

I may never see my sons, daughters

but their love is planted within my heart.

O my two abandoned wives

I may not take care of my bereaved mother!

Who may bring light to my eyes on this troubling day?

Who may reveal my uncircumcised ear?

Is my soul, which was created, not dear?

It is indeed dear, [emanating] from the Honorable Throne!

One day God shall remember God's servants

⁴⁵³ Cf. Genesis 37:35

and my course lies in the presence of [God's] Path.

O Eternal Master, O One Who Frees Captives⁴⁵⁴

redeem me! I jump for joy [yet writhe] for you in agony.⁴⁵⁵

It is fitting for the Former of Deceitful Materials

It is proper for you, O God of Forgiveness.

I shall bow down before you days and nights⁴⁵⁶

I shall spread open my hand during mincha and n'ila.

Let me grow stronger in accordance with the strength of your servant

Let me have compassion upon the poor and improve my deeds.

O One Who Answers Wails, your name is called

O One Who Raises The Weak, One Who Supports The Fallen!

Let The Rock grant true mercy upon [God's] servants

draw The End closer and summon redemption.

One day, [may God] awaken those who sleep in the earth⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁴ List of names for God, taken from medieval *piyyut Adon Olam* and the *Nissim B'chol Yom*

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Job 6:10

⁴⁵⁶ Noting use of merism

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Daniel 12:2

but at first, offer a beloved soul.⁴⁵⁸

Morechai the Tzidonite spoke: “When I heard Avner’s words and intentions - his lament and his prayer - I was astonished by his dazzling language - and the magnitude of his musing - for this man was in prison - but even more, he lay under the hand of Imam Al-Mutahhar - he would bend over toward the ground - hasten his heart” - so I spoke: “like you, there doesn’t exist anyone under the firmament⁴⁵⁹ - and you shall defeat every tongue that contends with you at law.⁴⁶⁰ My wish was that you would be free from labor - when I saw you in Damascus” - but when I mentioned to him satisfaction and serenity⁴⁶¹ - he screamed a great scream - and groaned a hearty groan - when he finished - he delivered his fable:

The one who dwelled atop ashes
in his great duress, he wore a sackcloth.

He will establish his abode as a dwelling space⁴⁶²
Damascus will be his resting place.⁴⁶³

He puts his intelligence in the teaching of God
and minimally engages in trivial work.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁵⁸ Noting somewhat of a chiastic structure. Ratzaby notes: the lamentation concludes with the opening stich, “offer a beloved soul,” thus beautifying the opening and closing sections of the poem.

⁴⁵⁹ Ratzaby notes: there is none like you in the world

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Isaiah 54:17

⁴⁶¹ Ratzaby notes: a common Yemenite-Jewish turn-of-phrase to mean “happiness”

⁴⁶² Interestingly enough, the Hebrew verb *ravatz* is often used for animals, not humans

⁴⁶³ Cf. Zechariah 9:1

⁴⁶⁴ Ratzaby notes: make your Torah permanent and your work occasional (see Brachot 35b)

He shall greatly strengthen in wisdom

like the waters of the rock that will not be stopped.⁴⁶⁵

75 *** 76

It was when Avner completed his pleasant poem - as the sun was setting - I arose to embrace him - my thoughts wandered *the Valley of Baca, regarding it as a place of springs*⁴⁶⁶ - it is not within my power to save him from his imprisonment - *alas, it cannot redeem a man, or pay his ransom to God*⁴⁶⁷ - in his seeing that my words are truthful - he started to fill his water bag - in my hand, I gave him - some of my own silver and gold - I said to him: “your health: if you lift up your eye - toward the One Who Brings Forth Something From Nothing⁴⁶⁸ - perhaps [God] will heed by way of miracles and wonders - rescuing a prisoner from captivity, from the dungeon⁴⁶⁹ - may we meet face-to-face in the city of Jerusalem - *our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy*”⁴⁷⁰ - he departed with the guards - and I traveled on the path toward the Sea of *Avarim*.⁴⁷¹

76 *** 77

The Third Maqama

⁴⁶⁵ Ratzaby notes: as spring waters flow from the rock with none to cease [them]

⁴⁶⁶ Psalms 84:7; the Valley of Baca could also be translated as the Valley of Tears

⁴⁶⁷ Psalms 49:8

⁴⁶⁸ Ratzaby notes: a name for God

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Isaiah 42:7

⁴⁷⁰ Psalms 126:2

⁴⁷¹ Ratzaby notes: there is no sea by this name, and perhaps the author refers to *Har haAvarim* or *Harei haAvrarim*, see Numbers 27:12; Numbers 33:47

Mordechai the Tzidonite spoke: I traveled from Bavel to Arbel⁴⁷² - while I suffered the yoke of exile - and accepted both good and evil⁴⁷³ - there were many cities on the way - they camped by the Tigris River - great ones and small ones⁴⁷⁴ - in one of them [there was a] synagogue, *nothing like it has ever happened*⁴⁷⁵ - there Daniel, Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria are buried⁴⁷⁶ - and those Jews who stand⁴⁷⁷ there - are full of sin, transgression, and offense - all my intention is toward my paved way - after the communities - to see their good deeds - in the presence of The Awesome Actor.⁴⁷⁸

Onward I departed with a bitter soul - to save myself from trouble - the way toward the aforementioned Arbel - in the heights of the town⁴⁷⁹ - I heard there may be respected people - those who tremble by the word of God⁴⁸⁰ - to take the lowly poor into their homes⁴⁸¹ - I arrived at the city streets after nine days - I rented for myself a magnificent home with an upper chamber - [all that was] in it, a bed, a table, and a lampstand⁴⁸² - after a fixed three days - I retreated to the markets and streets - to observe the face of the land - adored in the high heavens - still I watch and examine the marketplace - my intelligence arose and touched

⁴⁷² *Bavel* might refer to Baghdad. Regarding *Arbel*, Ratzaby notes: a city in northeastern Babylonia, near the Persian border.

⁴⁷³ Cf. Job 2:10, also noting use of merism

⁴⁷⁴ Noting use of merism

⁴⁷⁵ Joel 2:2

⁴⁷⁶ Ratzaby notes: there exist various traditions regarding the place of Daniel's grave. According to Benjamin of Tudela and R. Petachiah of Regensburg, the grave was established in the city of Shushan. The tradition of Baghdadi Jews place the grave of Daniel and his relatives in Kirkuk, and even today for Jews of Kirkuk prayer is customary said upon his grave.

⁴⁷⁷ Ratzaby notes: read "dwell there," from Arabic influence

⁴⁷⁸ Ratzaby notes: the intention of the author, with regard to his travels and visitations of Jewish communities, is to see Jews, that their deeds are pleasant and fair before God

⁴⁷⁹ Cf. Proverbs 9:3. Ratzaby notes: perhaps the city of Arbel was built upon mountain peaks

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Isaiah 66:5. Ratzaby notes: the author seeks to find homeowners within the city who are accustomed to welcoming guests

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Isaiah 58:7, Lamentations 1:7; 3:19

⁴⁸² Cf. II Kings 4:10

the tip of the scepter⁴⁸³ - I don saddlecloths⁴⁸⁴ - clean of mud and slops - behold, there appeared a group people - young and old folk alike⁴⁸⁵ - wearing clothing of the sages - sitting and becoming sanctified through Torah⁴⁸⁶ - I walk, facing them - to observe their intelligence and conversation - their fortress, a *mighty stronghold*⁴⁸⁷ - in their seeing me walking toward them - they stood up, from their small ones

77 *** 78

to their great ones - speaking, "Peace, peace be unto the visitor - who, in our group of comrades, is akin to flowering myrtle" - I responded to them, "May Yahweh be with you⁴⁸⁸ - and bring peace for your activities⁴⁸⁹ - this is the community in which I delight - I love it forever⁴⁹⁰ - *here I will dwell, for I desire it*⁴⁹¹ - lovingly and affectionately, the people replied - "Welcome!"

When we sat down - we thanked God - conversed about sagely matters - both revealed and hidden⁴⁹² - once regarding parables and riddles - and once about oral wisdom - until we reached words of mysticism - the most treasured of them all⁴⁹³ - we spoke about the Mystical Spheres, their actions - the names attributed to them - and the limbs upon which virtues ride -

⁴⁸³ Cf. Esther 5:2

⁴⁸⁴ Cf. Ezekiel 27:20; Ratzaby notes: ministerial, fancy clothes

⁴⁸⁵ Noting use of merism

⁴⁸⁶ Ratzaby notes: engaging in words of Torah and holiness

⁴⁸⁷ Proverbs 21:22

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. Ruth: 2:4

⁴⁸⁹ Cf. Isaiah 60:17

⁴⁹⁰ Cf. Jeremiah 31:3

⁴⁹¹ Psalms 132:14

⁴⁹² Noting use of merism. Ratzaby notes: the simple explanation and the secret meaning

⁴⁹³ Ratzaby notes: for the People of Israel who are called *Treasured Ones*, see Exodus 19:5

until one of the people stood up - we fell silent - on his head [lay] a ritual headdress - fifty cubits or more⁴⁹⁴ - the radiance of his splendor - *like a groom coming forth from the chamber*⁴⁹⁵ - he spoke: “listen to me, my brothers, my people - for if you heed my speech - one of you shall compose a song - awaken this wisdom⁴⁹⁶ - it shall be composed of ten Mystical Spheres - their names illuminated - they shall be like an arranged marriage - There Is No End, The Reason Of Reasons - and when you complete my command - stand by my home⁴⁹⁷ - and should one of you fulfill my word - you may *eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks*⁴⁹⁸ - in this person’s honor, I shall arrange a feast for those near and far⁴⁹⁹ - [as for] the composer, I shall carry them in my hands⁵⁰⁰ - I shall offer him a double portion.”⁵⁰¹ Everyone responded, saying: “You have spoken well - you have scattered charitable and generous wisdom - but the thistle has no courage - *you would help without having the strength*⁵⁰² - through our transgressions, we shall walk hunched over - for these matters - from the days of yore⁵⁰³ - *the more such years*⁵⁰⁴ - my followers have already been numbered and studied - *bind up the message, seal the instruction with my disciples.*”⁵⁰⁵ The man listened and became concerned - and, like a lion, roared a great roar⁵⁰⁶ - “How can he not find that which he desires - and miss the mark?” - Upon hearing their words, which I hid in my heart - I

⁴⁹⁴ Ratzaby notes: this is hyperbolic usage

⁴⁹⁵ Psalms 19:6

⁴⁹⁶ Ratzaby notes: the wisdom of mysticism

⁴⁹⁷ Ratzaby notes: stand up and come to my home

⁴⁹⁸ Nehemiah 8:10

⁴⁹⁹ Noting use of merism

⁵⁰⁰ Cf. Psalms 91:12

⁵⁰¹ Cf. I Samuel 1:5

⁵⁰² Job 26:2

⁵⁰³ Ratzaby notes: [the author] means “the wisdom of ancient Kabbalah”

⁵⁰⁴ Leviticus 25:16; Ratzaby notes: it’s intention: the wisdom of Kabbalah can only be found amongst elders and wise folks

⁵⁰⁵ Isaiah 8:16; Ratzaby notes: that is to say, words of Kabbalah are transmitted from mouth to ear, and there are those who conceal them

⁵⁰⁶ Cf. Psalms 104:21

smiled⁵⁰⁷ before them - and sat *enthroned like a god*⁵⁰⁸ - then I arose, light and speedy - and shared with myself, “*in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man*”⁵⁰⁹ - and so I spoke to them: “If you surely request - this is the matter which you seek - the explanation will come from me.” - They chanted in one song - “*Pay me my wages; if not, don't*”⁵¹⁰ - so *why talk nonsense?*⁵¹¹ Spoke the man whose tear dribbled like water - ‘*the remnant of Israel shall do no wrong and speak no falsehood!*’⁵¹² - Let me gird my loins - and repair my matters! - Let me recite a poem and song - let me respond:

78 *** 79

My friend: if you should choose
to discern the secret of the Zohar
please, rise at dawn
in the hour of radiance.⁵¹³

Their openings, they are great
ten are documented⁵¹⁴
their chariots are broad⁵¹⁵

⁵⁰⁷ Meaning uncertain. Ratzaby posits *hayachti*, meaning “smiled”

⁵⁰⁸ Ezekiel 28:2

⁵⁰⁹ Avot 2:5

⁵¹⁰ Zechariah 11:12

⁵¹¹ Job 27:12

⁵¹² Zephaniah 3:13

⁵¹³ Ratzaby notes: wake up, as you rouse yourself in the morning, and engage with the work *Sha'are Orah*, that is to say, in the work *Sha'are Orah* by Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, he discusses the wisdom of Kabbalah and the Mystical Spheres

⁵¹⁴ Ratzaby notes: this intention is the ten gates that within the book dedicated to the ten Spheres

⁵¹⁵ Cf. Psalms 104:3. Ratzaby notes: the poet counts the Spheres, from low to high, in the same manner as they are brought forth in *Sha'are Orah*

in the Kingship of The Awesome One.⁵¹⁶

Its name, alef dalet⁵¹⁷

nun yud, is valuable

justice operates

against those who transgress the Torah.

The second chapter⁵¹⁸

its Foundation is in my dwelling place

the Living God shall answer me

when a righteous one calls out.

Eternity and Splendor

thighs⁵¹⁹ in a mystery

they influence the Foundation

and, among them, the Crown as well.⁵²⁰

By way of wonderful names

God of Hosts⁵²¹

⁵¹⁶ Ratzaby notes: [in the work *Sha'are Orah*,] the first Sphere is on the ground. The other Spheres ride atop it like clouds.

⁵¹⁷ Ratzaby notes: the first chapter [of *Sha'are Orah*] is Kingship, which is called by the [Holy] name of *Adonai*

⁵¹⁸ The attribute of Foundation is called "The Living God"

⁵¹⁹ Ratzaby notes: These two Spheres [Eternity and Splendor] are named "Thighs" because they are close together, resembling thighs

⁵²⁰ Ratzaby notes: Eternity and Splendor draw an abundance of the higher Spheres toward the Foundation, and of those three, this abundance descends toward Kingship, which is also known as Crown

⁵²¹ Ratzaby notes: from Eternity and Splendor, they offer the name "God of Hosts," the Prophets absorb their prophecy

Prophets of all genders⁵²²

know their place!

Your consideration, my friend

of the Middle Pillar⁵²³

I express to you my knowledge

and the glory within it.

Yud and Hey are its origin

Vav and Hey are its end

the emotional mind is its consciousness⁵²⁴

through a pure soul.

One hides not from you

O Shoulders of Eternity⁵²⁵

the strength of their action

O Great One and Mighty One.⁵²⁶

79 *** 80

⁵²² Noting use of merism

⁵²³ Ratzaby notes: [another name for] the Sphere of Beauty

⁵²⁴ Ratzaby notes: the name of *Yahweh* is orally expressed only in a place in which one recognizes it, toward which one directs their heart, and through which one conveys with a pure heart

⁵²⁵ Ratzaby notes: [pertaining to] the attributes of Kindness and Severity. Kindness is nicknamed the “Right Shoulder” and Severity the “Left Shoulder.”

⁵²⁶ Ratzaby notes: the Hosts on the right are called by the name “Great One;” the Hosts on the left: “Mighty One.”

My God is on the Right

God is on my Left⁵²⁷

the Secret is miraculous⁵²⁸

ascribed for the Master of Scripture.

Your watch is until now

your intention is good⁵²⁹

may your end be positive

in wit and in form.⁵³⁰

The remaining three⁵³¹

they are first⁵³²

in the depth of matters

of *abundant authority*.⁵³³

They are: Crown, Wisdom

but Understanding is hidden

behold, they are complete

⁵²⁷ Ratzaby notes: The attribute of Kindness is nicknamed “The Right One” and “God” [*El*]. The attribute of Severity is nicknamed “The Left One” and “God” [*Elohim*].

⁵²⁸ Cf. Judges 13:18. Meaning of *pele* unknown. Perhaps compare it to *m'farash* in Targum Jonathan on Judges 13:18?

⁵²⁹ Ratzaby notes: as many as the lower seven Spheres, it is permissible to explore and investigate thought and intention

⁵³⁰ Ratzaby notes: soul

⁵³¹ Ratzaby notes: the remaining three Spheres: Understanding, Wisdom, Crown

⁵³² Ratzaby notes: When counting is completed from top to bottom. These three Spheres are of deep importance and [many] have not significantly explored them.

⁵³³ Isaiah 9:6

the Ten Spheres!

Their names: “I shall be”

and “Yah,”⁵³⁴ constitute present and future

by way of them, you truly live

a careful soul.⁵³⁵

Through Understanding, there are secrets

of God within the vowels⁵³⁶

through four appointments⁵³⁷

[Understanding] is crowned by them.

There Is No End to Praises

O Reason Of Reasons

Fulfiller of Wishes

for every created being.

When I concluded the poem and its quality - he returned to his high place, for his home was there⁵³⁸ - the people rejoiced in a great delight - their voice was one of *tumult*⁵³⁹ - then the

⁵³⁴ Ratzaby notes: “I will be” is the nickname for Crown; “Yah” is the nickname for Wisdom

⁵³⁵ Ratzaby notes: the soul guarded from all sin shall receive these three attributes: blessing, life, and mercy

⁵³⁶ Ratzaby notes: The Sphere of “Understanding” is written using the name *havaya* but with vocalization of the word *elohim*

⁵³⁷ Ratzaby notes: the vowels within the name *elohim* are intended to “crown” the name *havaya* in the Sphere of “Understanding”

⁵³⁸ Cf. I Samuel 7:1, noting that *Ramah* here could simply refer to an arbitrary elevated location, therein lays his home

⁵³⁹ Ezekiel 1:24; Cf. Jeremiah 11:16

man rose and embraced me - he offered me a stall-fed calf - we strolled with him into his abode - he showed them all his treasure-house⁵⁴⁰ - each of his delicate vessels - he gathered all the people of the place and made a feast⁵⁴¹ - thus we ate and drank - [surrounded by] good scent and incense⁵⁴² - he did all that he had promised. It was

80 *** 81

in the early evening - our minds clear - the men split into groups of two - [using] their good eyes - *they cast lots*⁵⁴³ - *in dance with timbrels*⁵⁴⁴ - to set up a feast and all its elements - organized in every way - among them were slaughterers - furriers⁵⁴⁵ - officials, and judges - others would sail after the spices - and others would gather from amongst the greens - some were chefs and others bakers - some strong and others weak - some were esoteric interpreters and visionaries⁵⁴⁶ - for what is good and beautiful - *and the lot fell on Jonah*⁵⁴⁷ - upon me and upon the organizer of the fatty feast - to compose songs - open the eyes of the blind⁵⁴⁸ - by way of poetic idioms and riddles - parables and secrets - the man sat beside me - after I had been alone - spoke the men - *those who sanctify and purify themselves*⁵⁴⁹ - “since we heard wonderful things today - secrets and wonders - like words of prophecy - and now, *hatch a*

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. II Kings 20:13, noting that *n'choto* contains an *alef* in al-Dahiri's work

⁵⁴¹ Cf. Genesis 29:22

⁵⁴² See Brachot 42b, perhaps refers to a Yemenite-Jewish tradition where one blows incense over guests

⁵⁴³ Jonah 1:7

⁵⁴⁴ Exodus 15:20

⁵⁴⁵ Ratzaby notes: animal skins [as prepared] by the slaughterer

⁵⁴⁶ Ratzaby notes: there are those who would only participate in preparing the feast if they would wait and look forward to praiseworthy and beautiful shares

⁵⁴⁷ Jonah 1:7

⁵⁴⁸ Perhaps an implicit reference to the *nisim b'chol yom*, the blessings for daily miracles, in the liturgy? There it reads: blessed are you, the Eternal, our god and sovereign of the universe who opens eyes that cannot see.

⁵⁴⁹ Isaiah 66:17; Ratzaby notes: here as a positive commandment, to immerse and sanctify oneself for the feast

*plot*⁵⁵⁰ - using poetic phrase - compose a poem about the Zohar - *like the very sky for purity*⁵⁵¹
 - tell of its praise and magnificence - *the splendid glory of its majesty*⁵⁵² - appreciate the great
 enlightened one who refreshes the souls of humanity - my Rabbi, Shim'on, son of Yoḥai.”
 When I heard their words - the pleasantness of their utterances - my heart inclined toward
 them - however, I spoke a reason for my cancellation - that the first poem is my fate, my pain
 - and that was result from all of my labors⁵⁵³ - now, our master speaks - ruler of our joy - he
 satisfies us with good things in the prime of life⁵⁵⁴ - the man listened and laughed - for upon
 him the lot fell - to bring from that which lies near or far⁵⁵⁵ - I understood not the reason for
 his laughter - because his laughter was not his usual⁵⁵⁶ - neither his custom nor his time - I
 had no rest - *I commune with myself*⁵⁵⁷ - *the man gave a start and pulled back*⁵⁵⁸ - by way of a
*sign and a portent*⁵⁵⁹ - he raised his voice - and delivered his fable:⁵⁶⁰

Alas, folks, I shall call out from every mountain top

come and learn the Book of Zohar!

⁵⁵⁰ Isaiah 8:10

⁵⁵¹ Exodus 24:10

⁵⁵² Esther 1:4

⁵⁵³ Cf. Ecclesiastes 2:10. Here, the poet shifts the semantic object from wealth [in Ecclesiastes] to laborious tasks.

⁵⁵⁴ Cf. Psalms 103:5

⁵⁵⁵ Noting use of merism

⁵⁵⁶ Ratzaby notes: [it was] not of his way

⁵⁵⁷ Psalms 77:7

⁵⁵⁸ Ruth 3:8

⁵⁵⁹ Isaiah 20:3

⁵⁶⁰ This poem's stylistics rely heavily on structure. Its form is clearly an acrostic based on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with *alef* and ending with *taf*. This form occurs frequently in the Hebrew Bible, most prominently in the Writings. See Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145; Proverbs 31:10-31; Lamentations 1, 2, 3, and 4. The alphabetic acrostic form also appears frequently in medieval Jewish poetry, composed during the author's lifetime. Roelie Van Der Spuy's work, "Hebrew Alphabetic Acrostics – Significance and Translation," teaches that this form offers readers a helpful mnemonic, poets a constraint in composition, and the entire literary community beautiful aural and visual aesthetics along with a sense of order and completeness in an otherwise chaotic world. This translation emphasizes the value of meaning over the stylistic while also attempting to shift the acrostic into the English alphabet.

Be merry, seek out its hidden treasures⁵⁶¹

from its illumination, it shall shine [like] a crescent moon.

Come near, gather its secrets

those who know it *may go up on the mountain*.⁵⁶²

Declare it the Way of Truth⁵⁶³

the one who is accustomed to it shall emanate goodness.⁵⁶⁴

Elegance: it is indeed the way of elegance⁵⁶⁵

for the anxious one shall become enlightened by it.⁵⁶⁶

For *it instructed me and said to me*⁵⁶⁷

“The one who desires me shall be cautious of sin!”

Good and righteous, [his] name is invoked in blessing⁵⁶⁸

Rabbi Shim'on⁵⁶⁹ is like a glowing light!

⁵⁶¹ Cf. Obadiah 1:6

⁵⁶² Exodus 19:13, referring to Mount Sinai

⁵⁶³ Cf. Isaiah 35:8

⁵⁶⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 31:12

⁵⁶⁵ See Jeremiah 46:20, *yafefiah* is a hapax legomenon

⁵⁶⁶ See Isaiah 32:4, 35:4

⁵⁶⁷ Proverbs 4:4; Ratzaby notes: [the subject] is altered to refer to the Book of Zohar

⁵⁶⁸ Cf. Proverbs 10:7

⁵⁶⁹ Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai, the attributed author of the Zohar

He exposes everything, all of its delights
every hidden secret returns toward purity.⁵⁷⁰

The **intentions** behind hidden commandments⁵⁷¹
one may leave them and fail.

[But] the one who recognizes them and their structure
justice they shall pursue, and all they do shall be pure.

All who **know** it shall encounter life
even more [life] if they can interpret it.

Lo, those who deeply consider it shall not hunger⁵⁷²
nor shall they thirst for river water anymore.

Man gave his *hand*⁵⁷³ from all that is sweet
new grain, wine, and oil, he rejected your keep.⁵⁷⁴

One's soul shall be satiated from richness

⁵⁷⁰ Ratzaby notes: bright and clear

⁵⁷¹ Ratzaby notes: all who abandon the system of interpreting the commandments by way of The Secret shall fail, in comparison with all who know the rationales of The Secret and its structure shall pursue justice

⁵⁷² Cf. Isaiah 49:10, Amos 8:11

⁵⁷³ Hosea 7:5

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 11:14

and their strength shall be like a galloping steed.⁵⁷⁵

People always turn toward its discipline

it shines for them, the sages of the generations.

Quality and honor, those who lead from afar⁵⁷⁶

every tree: cedar, cypress, and elm.

Reincarnation, God operates its secret⁵⁷⁷

for each man whose mother conceived him.

Screaming from amidst his pains

about it, he knew not before he was conceived.

The Holy One dwells in the heavens above⁵⁷⁸

redeems [God's] servant from captivity.⁵⁷⁹

*My heart is astir*⁵⁸⁰ with a poem from the Psalms

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. Nahum 3:2

⁵⁷⁶ Ratzaby notes: ministers of the Torah and heads of the generation are comparable to cedar and cypress trees, granting honor to the Book of Zohar

⁵⁷⁷ Ratzaby notes: reincarnation occurs for all males. Al-Dahiri's understanding is that one Kabbalistic sect is of the opinion that reincarnation occurs for males yet not for females.

⁵⁷⁸ Siddur Ashkenaz, Shacharit, Amidah, Kedushah

⁵⁷⁹ Perhaps the past few lines refer to the pains of childbirth? Rather, might this line serve as a linkage between childbirth and the author's experience in captivity?

⁵⁸⁰ Psalms 45:2

unto God, like the children of Izhar.⁵⁸¹

Vigorously working to fulfill all its promises

turning transgression into *white wool*.⁵⁸²

You may let me live, and it shall offer **zestful** praise⁵⁸³

forever, until the throat snores.

My name dwells, sitting upon a pillow⁵⁸⁴

half of The Name, Yah, is like the dawn.

When the man concluded speaking - shattering the Rocks of Reason - *the men looked at one another in astonishment*⁵⁸⁵ - and I observed the pattern of his appearance - but when I saw his utter majesty⁵⁸⁶ - I discovered his secret within me - he whispered in my ear - “are you Mordechai the Tzidonite?” - I returned to him the depths of my concern - “are you Avner, son of Helek, the Yemenite?” - At that time, he hugged and kissed me - but I could not question him about the depths of matters - for I knew he would be deceitful - we hid our understanding - from the men before us - the men spoke in one voice - “*How good*

⁵⁸¹ Ratzaby notes: the poet begs before God in this poem that he composed, like the children of Izhar, who are related to the Levite tribe, who would sing the Psalms of David in the Temple. From the authority of this previous stanza, one can perhaps have an understanding of the fact that the poet and the rest of the imprisoned Jews were praying to God for salvation and reciting from the Psalms.

⁵⁸² Ezekiel 27:18; Ratzaby notes: the author's desire from God, that the retribution for which he strives to fulfill is to turn his transgression upside down, from crimson red to that of dazzling wool

⁵⁸³ Cf. Psalms 119:175

⁵⁸⁴ The final line of the poem breaks from the acrostic, beginning with *ushmi*. Ratzaby notes: a riddle based upon the name of the poet Zecharia. *Zayin* = seven, plus כר = pillow, plus *Yah* is half of the name of God.

⁵⁸⁵ Genesis 43:33

⁵⁸⁶ A hendiadys often utilized by the Psalter; see Psalms 104:1, 66:6, 145:5, 45:4, 21:6, 111:3

*and how pleasant it is that siblings dwell together*⁵⁸⁷ - Blessed be Yahweh, God of Israel - who has not ceased redemption through wisdom!”⁵⁸⁸

One of the invited guests approached - he spoke: “My lords, desirous of creations - heads of adoration - whose souls derive from the First Thought and Deeds - I came across a rich, poetic turn-of-phrase - pure like the sun - written in Arabic - from beginning to end you shall recite [it] - even from end to beginning, you may discover [it] - standing in its exalted strength - no letter fails to appear⁵⁸⁹ - and I request of you, like this phrase in its essence - in all its aspects - to oppose⁵⁹⁰ the man in our midst - whom I used to consider trustworthy - I brought him closer, as my freewill contribution⁵⁹¹ - *my eyes [rest] upon trustworthy ones, to have them at my side*⁵⁹² - he compels evil in the place of good - by way of inferior spirit - his tongue maimed me⁵⁹³ - *he insulted me outrageously*⁵⁹⁴ - but now, my will: it is time that anyone who sees this turn-of-phrase and memorizes it - *let it be like the cloak he wraps around him, like the belt he always wears*⁵⁹⁵ - let this new phrase - exist in our Holy

⁵⁸⁷ Psalms 133:1

⁵⁸⁸ Cf. Ruth 4:14

⁵⁸⁹ Cf. Isaiah 40:26

⁵⁹⁰ Ratzaby notes: to whip, beat

⁵⁹¹ Cf. Deuteronomy 16:10

⁵⁹² Psalms 101:6

⁵⁹³ Cf. Exodus 11:7; the meaning seems to be dogs barking or cutting tongues. Perhaps: he spoke out in evil against me?

⁵⁹⁴ I Kings 2:8

⁵⁹⁵ Psalms 109:19

Tongue⁵⁹⁶ - we shall grant it to all people⁵⁹⁷ - *a cake made in a pan and a raisin cake*⁵⁹⁸ - the group of friends appreciated his words - and the decisive statements - every one of them promised him - saying: “*we will faithfully do!*”⁵⁹⁹ - Avner stood up, trembling - his tears were falling⁶⁰⁰ - in his eyes, this request was great - mighty and solid - I spoke to him: “why must your tears fall - when I have redeemed you - since the two of us here have no fear? - Whereas if someone - should fall from their place - on high - [is there] *no companion to raise him?*”⁶⁰¹ - So I spoke to the man⁶⁰² whose soul was caught - “let not your spirit wallow in your midst⁶⁰³ - *make your ears like a funnel.*”⁶⁰⁴ I continued, saying: “O Efratite, *do not be terrified*,⁶⁰⁵ for you have arranged the table, and you have plentifully bestowed mercy upon the stranger - but alas, but you walked away, spread yourself out⁶⁰⁶ - you fled and captured a swindler, a judged person.⁶⁰⁷ A hating fool would say: ‘get lost, parch yourself - destroy, burn, and annihilate yourself. Let the curse come! Excommunicate the wicked, his foot shall weaken and collapse; let him desire leprosy that may never heal!’”

The man observed my riddle and recited it aloud - with everything he turned over, he lifted it and set it down⁶⁰⁸ - perhaps he may find within it

⁵⁹⁶ It seems like medieval Yemenite Jewry might have been aware of the development of language. Perhaps people didn’t really speak Hebrew, apart from the educated. In order to create *m’litzot*, one needed to borrow language from Arabic. This is a fascinating linguistic note.

⁵⁹⁷ Noting use of merism

⁵⁹⁸ II Samuel 6:19

⁵⁹⁹ Exodus 24:7

⁶⁰⁰ Perhaps a reference to Jeremiah 48:5?

⁶⁰¹ Ecclesiastes 4:10

⁶⁰² Likely referring to “one of the invited guests” at the beginning

⁶⁰³ Ratzaby notes: this is to teach “do not lose hope”

⁶⁰⁴ Hullin 89a

⁶⁰⁵ Joshua 1:9

⁶⁰⁶ Noting use of verbal hendiadys

⁶⁰⁷ Meaning of *mileit* unknown. Interesting to note that, here, the poet loses his rhyme and stich stylistic in their entirety. It seems as though, apart from being stylistic, the rhyme exhibits minimal meaning except when the rhyme deviates from its typical mode of operation.

⁶⁰⁸ Ratzaby notes: he lifts up the letter and lays it to rest. That is to say, he checks it on each side in the event he were to find a flaw.

[some] hindrances - *to practice deeds of wickedness*⁶⁰⁹ - I arose to speak to the yearning man
 - the one who disagrees with my riddle - “if you desire to listen to a poem of this genre⁶¹⁰ -
 then you will laugh at violence and starvation⁶¹¹ - now, satisfy yourself with your ideas - the
 Battalions of Joy are with you⁶¹² - and if you open your eyes - then you shall see a well of
 water⁶¹³ - and offer thanks to God in Heaven.” I continued to respond:

Happy is the one who gathers wealth
 a wicked villain robs in the garden.

The symbol of jealousy ends all goodness⁶¹⁴
 an angry wanderer groans under taxation.⁶¹⁵

The evil king strengthened, he mocked⁶¹⁶
 master of wealth, storing [it] all [away].

⁶⁰⁹ Psalms 141:4

⁶¹⁰ Ratzaby notes: a poem that is written in the style of receding letters

⁶¹¹ Cf. Job 5:22

⁶¹² Ratzaby notes: a poetic turn-of-phrase customary in the words of our author as understood [in the following way]: your faces shall glow from great joy. Essentially, this phrase is taken from the Arabic language.

⁶¹³ A redemptive motif, Cf. Genesis 21:19

⁶¹⁴ Ratzaby notes: a wicked villain robs the garden. The attribute of “jealousy” ends every good portion.

⁶¹⁵ Ratzaby notes: the impoverished receives pains under the burden of taxation

⁶¹⁶ Noting hapax legomenon, see II Chronicles 36:16. Ratzaby notes: an evil king agreed, and he boasted [about himself]

My body stood on end, judged by the Holy Name⁶¹⁷

the fool rules, disappeared, crushed.⁶¹⁸

When I concluded my poem and its construction - [it was] *a phrase well turned*⁶¹⁹ - the group of friends could not answer it, so dumbfounded were they on account of him⁶²⁰ - they spoke to me: “You have comforted us - *you have not oppressed us, nor you have not robbed us*”⁶²¹ - they stood up, Those Who Have Been Carried Since Birth⁶²² - obligated themselves to observe - those days as days of gladness⁶²³ - *while sorrow and sighing flee*⁶²⁴ - we sat underneath garden plantings⁶²⁵ - every pleasant fruit hanging out on their branches - [next to] *pools of water*⁶²⁶ - [fed by] *the rains of heaven*⁶²⁷ - the myrtle blooms - upon them a turtledove, a swift⁶²⁸ squawks - *the mandrakes yield their fragrance*⁶²⁹ - every one of them offered a cake made in a pan and a raisin cake, too - all people⁶³⁰ - they threw a feast - there had never been anything like it, the reward of friendship⁶³¹ - *since Ephraim turned away from Judah*⁶³² - one of them lit up like a candle⁶³³ - he spoke to Avner: “My lord, may it be my will

⁶¹⁷ Ratzaby notes: a trembling came over me, fearing for the Day of Judgment

⁶¹⁸ Ratzaby notes: when an evil king reigns, he tramples and abuses all of humankind. This poem, as an interpretation before [us], diminishes in its letters. Further, the content in the poem’s first line is good and positive, whereas here he ends negatively.

⁶¹⁹ Proverbs 25:11; Rashi comments on this verse, read: every word spoken in its proper place

⁶²⁰ Cf. Genesis 45:3; read: the crowd around me could not respond to it, they were overwhelmed by it

⁶²¹ I Samuel 12:4

⁶²² Cf. Isaiah 46:3; Ratzaby notes: a nickname for Israel

⁶²³ Cf. Esther 9:27

⁶²⁴ Isaiah 35:10

⁶²⁵ Ratzaby notes: trees in the garden

⁶²⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:6

⁶²⁷ Deuteronomy 11:11; Ratzaby notes: the pools of water would become full of showers from the heavens

⁶²⁸ Cf. Jeremiah 8:7

⁶²⁹ Song of Songs 7:14; See Genesis 30:14

⁶³⁰ Cf. II Samuel 6:19

⁶³¹ Ratzaby notes: this language is difficult

⁶³² Isaiah 7:17; referencing the separation of the two kingdoms of Israel

⁶³³ Ratzaby notes: sculpted, erect, and glowing like a candle. The description of this praise is found in Yemenite poetry

that you compose for me a poem, sharp, with double meanings⁶³⁴ - *built to hold weapons*⁶³⁵ -
 may it be recited horizontally and vertically⁶³⁶ - square, like a wide-scale cushion - with
 prepared language, like the joyful day of the killing of Haman's kin, Aspatha, and Dalphon⁶³⁷
 - in the work of R. Abraham, son of Ḥalfon⁶³⁸ - Avner arose, sat beneath the palm tree -
 deduced, spoke - and delivered his fable:⁶³⁹

84 *** 85

God is **merciful, vengeful, and zealous**
gathers the dispersed and leads the believers!⁶⁴⁰

Merciful for the poor, also for God's people
 those taken from the Four [Corners],⁶⁴¹ tested by exile.

Vengeful on behalf of God's people, restoring them to their pleasant dwellings⁶⁴²
 they were forsaken, bound, and tortured in captivity.

⁶³⁴ Cf. Isaiah 41:15

⁶³⁵ Song of Songs 4:4

⁶³⁶ Ratzaby notes: in rows and columns

⁶³⁷ Cf. Esther 9:7

⁶³⁸ Ratzaby notes: a Yemenite poet who lived, as it seems, before the 16th century [...]. It seems as though our author's poem is built on the structure of a poem similar to "Purim" by Abraham, son of Ḥalfon [...]; It also seems like Ratzaby likens the destruction of the Jews of Yemen to that of the Jews in Persia.

⁶³⁹ This poem's stylistics rely heavily on structure: the words from the first two stichs serve as each line's opening word, an acrostic of sorts. This stylistic should seem familiar when compared to those of other medieval Kabbalistic poems, such as *Lecha Dodi* or *Yedid Nefesh* that use one letter to begin each line, except this interleaved poem uses one word instead.

⁶⁴⁰ Ratzaby notes: these are Israel; see Lamentations 4:5

⁶⁴¹ Ratzaby notes: those taken in captivity, and these people are dispersed across the four corners of the land

⁶⁴² Ratzaby notes: God is vengeful--in retribution of God's people from their enemies hands, God returns them to their land

Zealous, yet comforting, restoring their dwelling places
sold in the West,⁶⁴³ through fetters and laws.⁶⁴⁴

Gathers the taken, sold into captivity
through harsh heat and bitter cold, their faces grimacing.

Dispersed across the Four [Corners], forsaken in the West
with bitter cold upon them, shaded by darkness.⁶⁴⁵

Leads those in exile, locked in fetters
with blackened faces, from all of those transgressions.

Believers [were] tested and tortured, laws⁶⁴⁶
were strange and offensive, transgressions became white.⁶⁴⁷

When Avner completed his poem - I marveled over his electric radiance⁶⁴⁸ - all who stood
there blessed him - furnished him⁶⁴⁹ with their riches - he spoke to them: “My friends, dearly
beloveds - acknowledge that the sages would have considered this [poem] to be nothing⁶⁵⁰ -
for the greatest wisdoms - are achieved by those who have been enlightened - and all that is
doubly good - before The Awesome Acting God - are the sages of Kabbalah - for they are in

⁶⁴³ Ratzaby notes: who were incarcerated in the land of *Almagarab*

⁶⁴⁴ Ratzaby notes: difficult sentences

⁶⁴⁵ Ratzaby notes: their skin became dark and blackened by all of their work for their kingdom

⁶⁴⁶ Noting use of enjambment

⁶⁴⁷ Cf. Isaiah 1:18

⁶⁴⁸ Ratzaby notes: a nickname for his incredible poem

⁶⁴⁹ See Deuteronomy 15:14

⁶⁵⁰ Ratzaby notes: [...] when compared to the critique of rationalists and the wisdom of Kabbalah

the first class - in the kingdom⁶⁵¹ of knowledge and understanding - eternal reward shall be for them” - they said to each other: “*Shout for joy!*”⁶⁵² - Their souls inhaled⁶⁵³ the Supreme Light - in many sacred spaces⁶⁵⁴ - in each sanctuary [lies] a holy, inner place and a lampstand - every precious stone⁶⁵⁵ - a soul remains in excess over that of its fellow⁶⁵⁶ - *indeed, over all the glory shall hang this canopy*⁶⁵⁷ - but I, because of my many transgressions⁶⁵⁸ - my struggles grew countless - behold, my soul is likened to exalted worthlessness⁶⁵⁹ - exile after exile - I found neither comfort nor respite - *my life is spent in sorrow, my years in groaning*⁶⁶⁰ - I travel from city to city - but no wisdom can be found⁶⁶¹ - his face reddened - his eyes dribbled like water - he embittered himself - and delivered his fable:

In God’s Garden of Eden, every precious [stone]
[is] adorned with sapphires, completely covered.⁶⁶²

Palaces and canopies contain a lampstand
their cornerstones are trimmed⁶⁶³ according to their value.

85 *** 86

⁶⁵¹ Cf. Esther 1:14

⁶⁵² Zechariah 2:14

⁶⁵³ Meaning uncertain, see Job 5:5, Psalms 119:131

⁶⁵⁴ According to Jastrow, *chuppah* could be a wedding canopy, or, alternatively, Divine Majesty or sanctuary. Perhaps a more accurate rendering lies in between?

⁶⁵⁵ Cf. Ezekiel 28:13

⁶⁵⁶ Ratzaby notes: that is to say, every soul rises up over those of its fellows in its [own] canopy, all according to their value

⁶⁵⁷ Isaiah 4:5

⁶⁵⁸ Cf. Ezekiel 28:18

⁶⁵⁹ Cf. Psalms 12:9, meaning uncertain. Ratzaby notes: cheap and nothing.

⁶⁶⁰ Psalms 31:11

⁶⁶¹ Cf. Job 28:12

⁶⁶² Cf. Song of Songs 5:14

⁶⁶³ Cf. Psalms 144:12

Crowns of understanding lay upon the heads of the pious⁶⁶⁴

their thrones covered in disguise.⁶⁶⁵

The clean of hand⁶⁶⁶ and pure heart within

shall place truth in judgment⁶⁶⁷ and carry away a blessing.⁶⁶⁸

At the opening, a band of graceful angels⁶⁶⁹

only a short distance drawn from the Dinur River,⁶⁷⁰

to immerse pure souls within it⁶⁷¹

to clean the Needy Soul

in order that it may merit reception

to be greeted by the Living God, and it shall not remain in the dark.⁶⁷²

Happy is the one who vindicates himself

grants mercy unto [their soul], saving [it] from catastrophe.

⁶⁶⁴ Ratzaby notes: crowns of wisdom and understanding. Cf. Brachot 17a: “[in the World to Come,] the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendor of the Divine Presence [...]”.

⁶⁶⁵ Ratzaby notes: the thrones of the righteous are covered in silver and gold

⁶⁶⁶ Read: the innocent one

⁶⁶⁷ Talmudic phrase pertaining to bringing Torah to places that do have Torah

⁶⁶⁸ Cf. Psalms 24:4-5

⁶⁶⁹ Ratzaby notes: see Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis 20: there are two ruby gates in the Garden of Eden, and many ministering angels placed upon them [...]

⁶⁷⁰ A fiery river. For location reference, see Daniel 7:10, Lamentations Rabba 3:8, and Hagiga 13b.

⁶⁷¹ Ratzaby notes: according to the Babylonian Talmud’s interpretation (Hagiga 13b) that the Dinur River flows over the head of [all] wicked ones in Gehenom

⁶⁷² Ratzaby notes: see Yalkut Shimoni, Isaiah 26: after the wicked suffer in Gehenom, Michael and Gabriel uplifted them before the Holy Blessed One, because they were deemed worthy

The straight path is for those who seek [it]
as for the one who despises, [the path is] long and wide.

If only my Time would release me
my stubbornness is its arrows and primed bow.⁶⁷³

Let me seclude myself in study halls
may the balm of Gil'ad restore a great healing.⁶⁷⁴

Yet, it was as if my days were swept away in a fury
with great grief and embarrassing imprisonment.

If I should run toward a howling cub or lion
attacked by a bear, or bitten by a snake,⁶⁷⁵

at the end, I delve deeper, rise toward the heavens⁶⁷⁶
my inquiry is for the Master of Rulership.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷³ The author here seems to be personifying Time, i.e., “if only Time were to let me be...”

⁶⁷⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 8:22; Ratzaby notes: the study halls [*batei hatvuna*], in the sense of “my balm” [*tzori*], for it heals his pains.

⁶⁷⁵ Cf. Amos 5:19, Job 4:10. In Amos, the protagonist runs “from” the lion, whereas here the poet flips the idiom to show the character running “toward” the lion.

⁶⁷⁶ Ratzaby notes: in the study halls, one engages in [the study of] Torah and ascends

⁶⁷⁷ Ratzaby notes: that is to say, I requested from God, God’s reign, that I may merit entering into God’s Garden of Eden

May God grant me to be rejuvenated⁶⁷⁸ in [God's] Eden
may I take delight in Blessed Zion.

My name is Seven, and chaf with resh in the middle
yud with hey attached at the end.⁶⁷⁹

When Avner completed his poem - his friends and [other] city dwellers stood up - they
comforted him - and instructed him about the following matter⁶⁸⁰ - he should no longer cry -
while he trickled tears down his cheeks - thus does Scripture express [that]⁶⁸¹ - The
Compassionate One desires the heart⁶⁸² - the Talmud cries out each day - whether one brings
much or little, *as long as they direct their heart toward Heaven* [they are worthy]⁶⁸³ - if your
imaginings are satiated with much anxiety - *as they camp, so they shall march*⁶⁸⁴ - Avner
was comforted, he despised his grief - after taking it across the stream⁶⁸⁵ - he roared a lion's
roar, a cub's howl⁶⁸⁶ - and spoke to them: "Know that

86 *** 87

⁶⁷⁸ See Genesis 18:12; *edna* could refer to pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction, rejuvenation, etc. Sarah after being pregnant

⁶⁷⁹ Ratzaby notes: *sheva* = *zayin*, + *chaf* + *resh* + *yud* + *hey* = *Zecharia*, the the first name of the author

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. Exodus 19:7

⁶⁸¹ Cf. Sanhedrin 38b

⁶⁸² Cf. Sanhedrin 106b

⁶⁸³ Brachot 5b; Ratzaby notes: in this passage, his friends comfort him because, in his eyes, he did not contemplate Torah enough

⁶⁸⁴ Numbers 2:17; Ratzaby notes: its intention: future events are to pass as they come

⁶⁸⁵ Cf. Genesis 32:24; Ratzaby notes: this is to teach: he sent them away and removed them

⁶⁸⁶ Cf. Job 4:10; Ratzaby notes: after he shook off his grief, he cheered up

I - inform you the reason for my weeping *in my land of affliction*⁶⁸⁷ - I recall a great man in our land - he is *the crown on our head*⁶⁸⁸ - he has collected kind attributes - grasped them with all ten fingers - with pleasant deeds - he has a name among the great ones - Saadia, son of Yoseif⁶⁸⁹ - he gathers all wisdom - he has *a monument and a name*,⁶⁹⁰ through The Twenty Four⁶⁹¹ - yet without him, no one shall lift up hand or foot⁶⁹² - and in the six orders of the Mishnah - [he is] a master of discernment - buried within his mind - is the work⁶⁹³ of our Rabbi Moses, son of Maimon - enlightening the corners of forgetfulness⁶⁹⁴ - is the commentary of our Rabbi Saadia⁶⁹⁵ - when I remember his company - the season from which I am separated - I weep - during the days I spent in my city - I recited my poem about him:

The one who inclined, ascended toward⁶⁹⁶ the heavens

like sapphires, a mirror cast of firm [metals],⁶⁹⁷

wheels circling in their movements

and rain pouring down upon the land.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁸⁷ Genesis 41:52

⁶⁸⁸ Lamentations 5:16

⁶⁸⁹ Saadia Gaon

⁶⁹⁰ Isaiah 56:5

⁶⁹¹ Ratzaby notes: books of the Hebrew Bible. Thus the Hebrew Bible is called [The Twenty Four] by Yemenite Jews to this day.

⁶⁹² Cf. Genesis 41:44

⁶⁹³ Ratzaby notes: the Mishneh Torah

⁶⁹⁴ See Psalms 88:13, *n'shia* is a hapax legomenon

⁶⁹⁵ According to Ratzaby, it seems the editor believes this refers to either 15th century [South Yemenite] Talmudist Saadia ben David Adani, who studied Jewish lore, law, and calendar systems as they relate to the Yemenite-Jewish community (see Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition) and wrote a commentary on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah. Or, perhaps this is Saadia Gaon?

⁶⁹⁶ Ratzaby notes: Spread out. Surrounded by God.

⁶⁹⁷ Cf. Job 37:18

⁶⁹⁸ Cf. Ecclesiastes 11:3

Earth over emptiness, it is suspended⁶⁹⁹

[God] built and erected its corners.

[God] chose Israel for [God's] self, a treasure⁷⁰⁰

for the sake of the covenant [God] had established.⁷⁰¹

The One Who Created Miracles In Egypt

has placed strength through the mouths of infants and sucklings.⁷⁰²

Through divine wisdom, [God] endowed law at Sinai⁷⁰³

to Israel through thunderous sounds and lightning strikes.⁷⁰⁴

It is perfect, it renews life⁷⁰⁵

through many decrees, laws, and rules.⁷⁰⁶

[God] bequeathed grace through it, to certain special individuals

both simple explanations and deep secrets.⁷⁰⁷

Genius of the generation, Saadia, son of Y'hoseif⁷⁰⁸

⁶⁹⁹ Cf. Job 26:7

⁷⁰⁰ See Psalms 135:4, Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2

⁷⁰¹ See II Chronicles 21:7

⁷⁰² Cf. Psalms 8:3

⁷⁰³ Noting use of enjambment; Ratzaby notes: perhaps this should read: *and wisdom?*

⁷⁰⁴ See Exodus 19:16-19

⁷⁰⁵ Cf. Psalms 19:8

⁷⁰⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 6:20

⁷⁰⁷ Noting use of merism

⁷⁰⁸ Perhaps the author includes an extra syllable in the word "Y'hoseif" for the sake of meter?

his fame informs the markets.

His prowess with The Twenty Four

their intricacies are carved in his heart.

His name is well-known in “the business”⁷⁰⁹

he understands the four chapters.⁷¹⁰

He holds a position⁷¹¹ and exudes humility

retort on his lips,⁷¹² many sweet words [as well].⁷¹³

For this reason, graceful angels protect him

they promise to guard him from harm.

When his soul loathes evil⁷¹⁴

and the virtues of truth are longed for,

⁷⁰⁹ Ratzaby notes: in the discourse of Torah

⁷¹⁰ The editor seems to note his understanding of Torah’s complexities, extolling his brilliance through *p’shat*, *remez*, *d’rash*, and *sod*. According to the editor, it also seems as though the author is referring to the first four chapters of Foundations of Torah. This would make sense, as Maimonides was beloved by Yemenite Jewish scholars. Ratzaby notes: known wisdom in the words of those who entered the orchard (See Hagiga 14b, also see Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, Foundations of Torah, 4:13).

⁷¹¹ Ratzaby notes: it seems as though Saadia, son of Yoseif, served an honorable position as a preacher, exegetist.

⁷¹² Cf. Psalms 35:18; Saadia Gaon was well-known as a polemicist, attacking sectarian Jewish movements, Karaites, and Christianity.

⁷¹³ Noting use of parallelism throughout both stichs

⁷¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 7:15

Out of his sweetness,⁷¹⁵ they join,⁷¹⁶ gather together
out of his wisdom, they supply our storehouses.⁷¹⁷

All who draw from his fountains of water
they are pious, acquitted of their sins.

Time adorns its witnesses through him,⁷¹⁸ he illuminates⁷¹⁹
the face of the Earth, like the lily of the valleys.⁷²⁰

87 *** 88

Some surround his circle of guests
the Anakites fail to surpass him.⁷²¹

I also failed to praise him enough
my energy and purpose are far [from success].⁷²²

If his comrades indeed take part⁷²³

⁷¹⁵ Morph. from his honey

⁷¹⁶ Meaning uncertain. Ratzaby notes: desires, wishes?

⁷¹⁷ Perhaps the subject is “the pious” from the next line? Cf. Psalms 144:13

⁷¹⁸ Ratzaby notes: he praises Time and [Time’s] witnesses

⁷¹⁹ Noting use of enjambment; Ratzaby notes: we return to Saadia, son of Yoseif, no longer Time

⁷²⁰ Cf. Song of Songs 2:1

⁷²¹ Ratzaby notes: they are plural, those who wish to walk in his footsteps, to run circles in his path, even the Anakites [see Deuteronomy 1:28], but they tire in their chase

⁷²² Ratzaby notes: all of the poet’s strength and ideas do not stand to arrive at the purpose of praising Saadia, son of Yoseif

⁷²³ Noting use of enjambment

in loving him [once], I do so nine times over.⁷²⁴

My soul longs for the honey on his tongue⁷²⁵

like a ram crying out for water.⁷²⁶

God guarded him like a pupil [of an eye]⁷²⁷

[the God] who set a stone upon the land.⁷²⁸

I offer thanks to The One Who Enlightens Their People⁷²⁹

through a good teacher⁷³⁰ who redeems the oppressed.

I plead before Home⁷³¹ with all my heart

my soul calls out from the depths.⁷³²

I hope to gaze upon the Holy of Holies

which leans toward the heavens.⁷³³

⁷²⁴ Ratzaby notes: all the friends of Saadia, son of Yoseif, participate once in his love, whereas the author participates nine times

⁷²⁵ Ratzaby notes: his sweet phrases

⁷²⁶ Cf. Psalms 42:2

⁷²⁷ Cf. Deuteronomy 32:10

⁷²⁸ *Arka* seems to be the Aramaic word for *aretz*. Cf. Job 38:6; Ratzaby notes: God who set the cornerstone of the Earth.

⁷²⁹ Ratzaby notes: the [Jewish] communities of Yemen

⁷³⁰ Ratzaby notes: Saadia, son of Yoseif

⁷³¹ Ratzaby notes: the home of God, the Temple

⁷³² Cf. Psalms 130:1

⁷³³ Ratzaby notes: the poem concludes with the poem's opening stich, thus beautifying the opening and closure

When Avner completed his matter - we were amazed by the purity of his verse - and the greatness of his musing - we ate and drank for eight days - and did not depart from the garden - but rather we [were] happy - in a few words, all are straightforward to the intelligent one⁷³⁴ - buds and blossoms in our hands⁷³⁵ - and after these days - *God is concerned for the needs of the blameless*⁷³⁶ - the entire group arose and lifted him up - they accompanied him to his home - on the way, he commanded me - forbade me from departing - until he would speak with me - for he did not understand my plot⁷³⁷ - when they arrived, facing his house - *all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of their tent*⁷³⁸ - they departed for eternity⁷³⁹ - they left him in peace.⁷⁴⁰

There I remained, with him and an old man - I figured he must have owned the place⁷⁴¹ - the three of us entered the home - to renew our joy - the old man spoke: "Welcome - [you are from] the seed of the righteous and prophets!" - He went to bed and slept - for his strength had grown weary⁷⁴² - so I began to ask Avner about all his poems - the interest behind his secrets - and why he left his wife, children - and homeland - he responded to me: "I left [my home] and all of its goodness - the dwelling place⁷⁴³ and all within it - because the oppression of the authorities has dominated, deceit and deviousness⁷⁴⁴ - *the sword shall deal death*

⁷³⁴ Cf. Proverbs 8:9. It seems like Avner could be the object.

⁷³⁵ Ratzaby notes: The rationales of Torah. By way of what Rav Yosef interpreted "Israel shall sprout and blossom" (Isaiah 27:6) [as] "these are the Torah scholars in Babylonia, who add buds and blossoms to the Torah" (b. Shabbat 145b).

⁷³⁶ Psalms 37:18

⁷³⁷ Ratzaby notes: he did not understand my intention

⁷³⁸ Exodus 33:10

⁷³⁹ See II Chronicles 33:7

⁷⁴⁰ Ratzaby notes: They separated from one another in peace.

⁷⁴¹ The reader will soon learn that this man is Avner's father-in-law; Ratzaby notes: host, landlord

⁷⁴² Ratzaby notes: become old, weak

⁷⁴³ Ratzaby notes: his room and his home

⁷⁴⁴ Perhaps this refers to a Yemenite King, as during the Ottoman conquest of Yemen, the Jews supported the Ottomans and were thus persecuted by the prevailing Yemenite kingdom?

*without, as shall the terror within*⁷⁴⁵ - so I shared: *'The ground lies waste and desolate'*⁷⁴⁶ - I
prioritize my travels, provisions⁷⁴⁷ - I hitched my departing carriage - until I arrived in this
land - with the help of The One Who Dwells In Habitation⁷⁴⁸ - I then donned a new spirit⁷⁴⁹ -
and this elder gave me his daughter as a wife - when he saw in me straightness - and the
epitome of aptness⁷⁵⁰ - he knew my secret - *and all that he owns he has placed in my hands*⁷⁵¹
- so I forgot my land and city - regarding them I spoke my poem:

Depart a land that devours⁷⁵²
its inhabitants,⁷⁵³ distance oneself.

If Time should write evil for [that land]
may it erase your journey.⁷⁵⁴

It shall drown in its own misery
they may laugh at it from afar.

Stay not for [your] goal
the struggle of Time displaces.⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁴⁵ Deuteronomy 32:25

⁷⁴⁶ Isaiah 6:11

⁷⁴⁷ Ratzaby notes: he turned travels and wanderings into his daily routine

⁷⁴⁸ See *Nirtzach* section in Pesach Haggada, *zach shochen m'ona*, pure one who dwells in habitation. Ratzaby notes: God.

⁷⁴⁹ See Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, and 36:26

⁷⁵⁰ Ratzaby notes: the elder let me marry his daughter after he revealed within me straight and proper qualities

⁷⁵¹ Genesis 39:8

⁷⁵² Noting use of enjambment

⁷⁵³ Cf. Numbers 13:32

⁷⁵⁴ Ratzaby notes: if catastrophe were to fall upon this land, may you be rescued from it by means of the journey

⁷⁵⁵ Ratzaby notes: do not dwell within the land lest it turn [your] goal into disasters of Time that displace creation

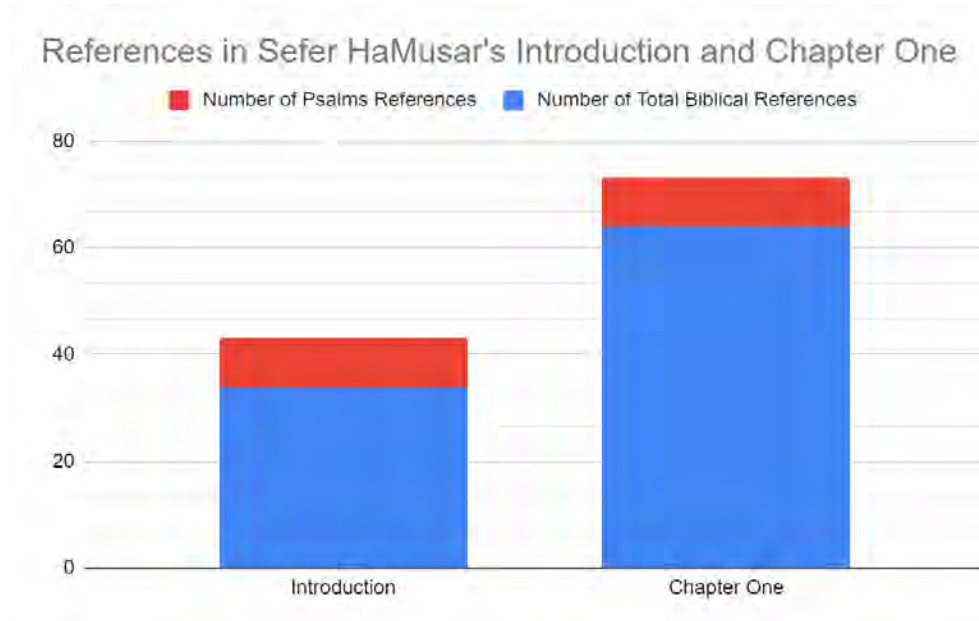
When Avner completed his poem - I knew he rejected his hometowns⁷⁵⁶ - in that moment, I remembered this important tradition - it is forbidden to sleep in a chamber in which a husband and wife are resting⁷⁵⁷ - the prophets shared about it in their works - they cast out the women of my people from their pleasant homes⁷⁵⁸ - so I arose - hugged and kissed Avner - and went on my way.

⁷⁵⁶ Cf. Isaiah 33:8

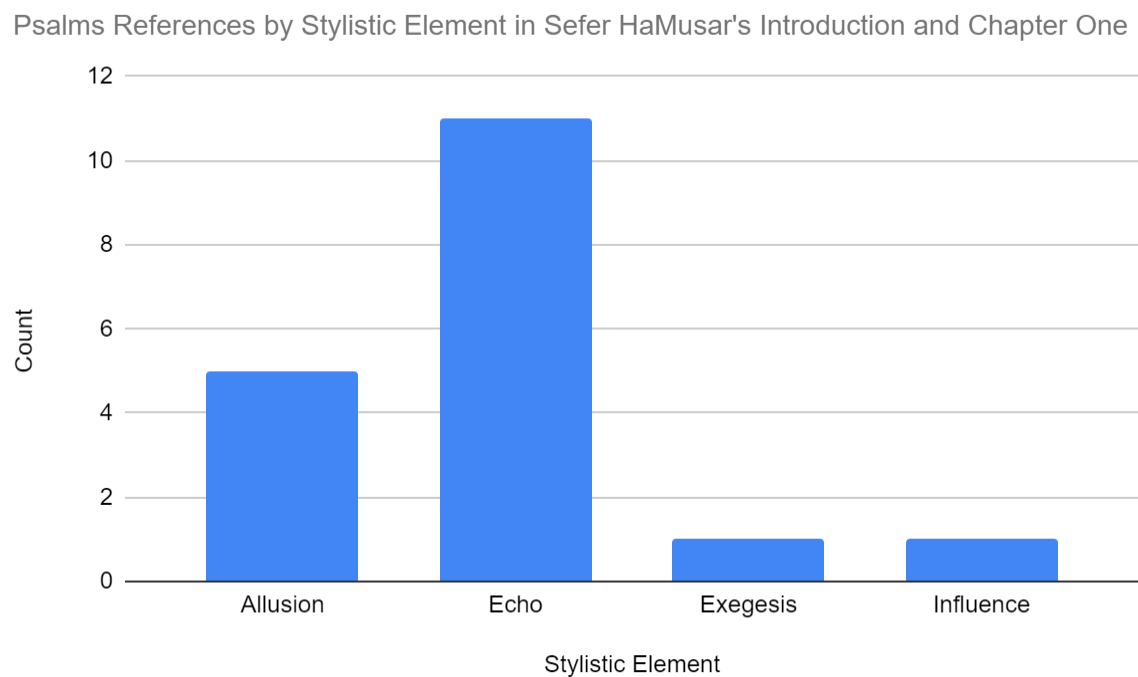
⁷⁵⁷ Cf. b. Eruvin 63b

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid., Cf. Micah 2:9. Ratzaby notes: Rashi's interpretation is that they were embarrassed by him.

Appendix A: Psalms References



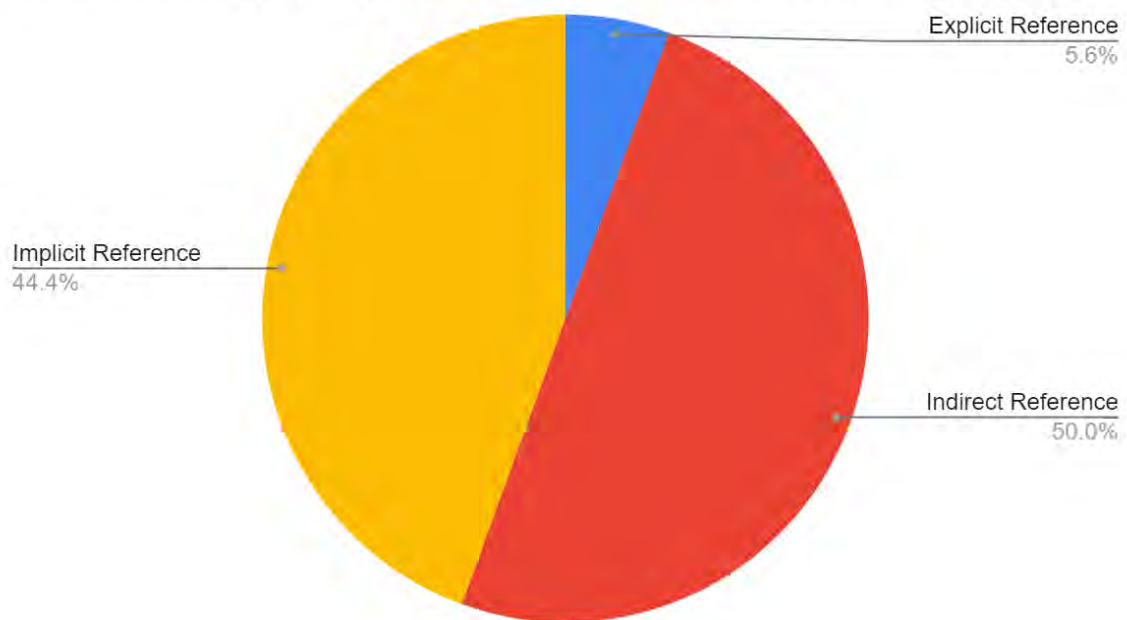
Appendix B: Psalms References by Stylistic Element



Appendix C: Psalms References by Relating

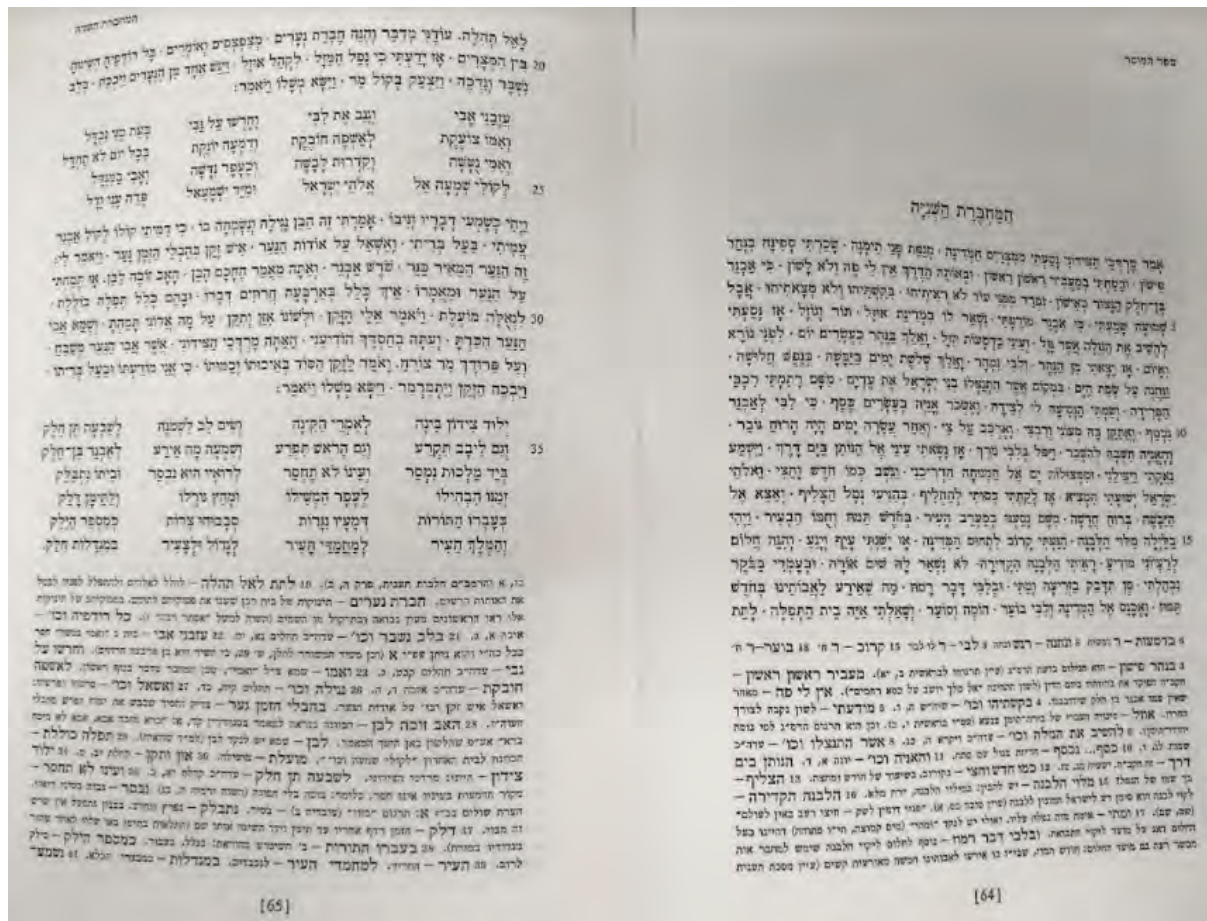
Mechanism

Psalms References by Relating Mechanism in Sefer HaMusal's Introduction and Chapter One



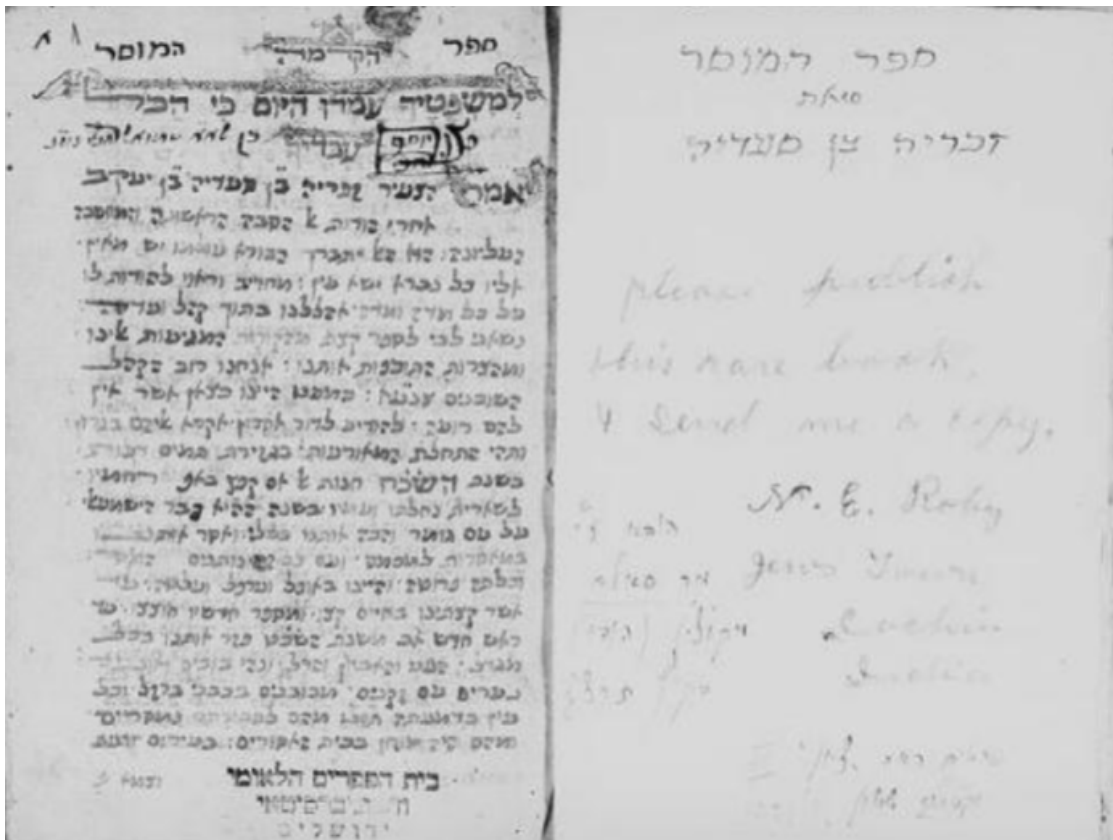
Appendix D: Texts

The following photos document this capstone's usage of text, as well as various manuscripts upon which the utilized text is based:

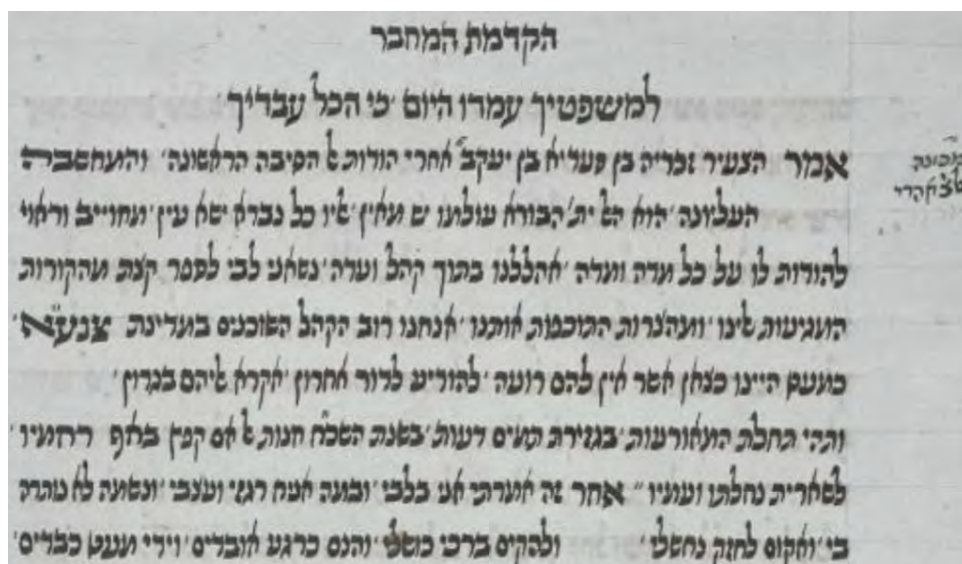


Edited by Yehuda Ratzaby, Jerusalem, 1965⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁹ Ratzaby, Y. (ed.) *Sēfer ha-mūsār: Maḥbērōt Rabbi Zekhariah al-Dāhirī*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1965.



The National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel, Ms. Heb. 28°637, Yemen, 1819



The British Library, London, England, Or. 11337, 18th century

המחברת הלל בוללת שני עינים מפורשים כל אחד .
 שמה אב ובן כפי תמות אמן . המחברת הלל בוללת סימני בע אדם
 למיניהם . הרשעים אויבם . והישרים חסדיהם . ואני ידעו כסיל ופגור
 גם במעללי יתגבר וער . המחברת הלל בוללת לדבר יועץ אש .
 ערבי נריב . נפשות כל הנדיים האדמה . ושמו הרשום תחכם . ושור
 מעשהו למען תחכם . המחברת הלל בוללת שבת יצחק אברבנאל
 כפי ידו נחלת חבות . כל רואיו יחפצו קדבות . שבת המישור החסיד
 אפילו פשהו מאומות העולם לא הפסיד . המחברת הלל בוללת
 מעשה בעשאת ההפוך בנקודתו אשעב . ועונם עיני שכלותו . והידיע
 סוד תבור כתיבתו הרמזה תשובתו כס שם ביתו . המחברת העל מוהר
 ענין גלות המחבר וחזרתו ומתסרו . ואיך הוא מענתם עלי ציאתו מארץ
 יורל . ושם ערך שיר . המחברת הלל מספרת ענין ר' אברהם אשכנזי
 וקדחתו בדוא ארץ התומן . זכינו לשאוב ממעיכו הטומן . ומעשו

Bar-Ilan University Library, Ramat Gan, Israel, Ms. 465, 1861

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