

ATTITUDES TOWARD ARABIC MUSIC AND METER
OF
SAADYA GAON, MOSES MAINONIDES AND YEHUDA HALEVI

by

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I

INTRODUCTION

When we survey the writings of the representative Jewish authors (and authorities) or the question of Arabic meter and music, we are right at the outset confronted with a maze of halachic, aesthetic and nationalist motivation that is so involved, that it will be hardly possible to clearly extricate and separate the constituent concepts from one another. Nonetheless, this task has to be undertaken, if we mean to gain insight into the complex ideology of the main authorities.

In order to bring some order into this involved situation, we shall first take up the question of metrical poetry and afterward that of Arabic (metrical) music. For the same reason, we shall order the statements according to halachic, aesthetic, and nationalist reason adduced by the respective authors. In the following pages we shall pay special attention to the following authors: Yehuda Halevi, Saadia Gaon, Yussuf Ibn Achnin, Moses Maimonides and Dunash Ibn Labrat. They represent the mainstream of thought during the critical centuries (10th to 14th). Of Arabic authors, our chief sources are the Ikhwan es-Safa, Al Kindi, Alfarabi, and Ibn Sina.

THE HALACHIC OPPOSITION TO METRICAL POETRY (Pivvutim)

In his illuminating and profound study "The Attitudes of the Sages of Palestine and the Attitudes of the Gaonim Towards the Piyyut" (in Ginzay Schechter II, pages 505-527, N.Y. 1929), Louis Ginzberg pointed out the difference of opinion between the Gaonic school of Sura and the one in Pumbeditha, the former of which remitted a certain latitude in the use of piyyutin while the latter prohibited them strictly. Today we can trace the lenient attitude of Sura to the stand taken by Rabbi R. Yehudai Gaon in favor of piyyut and the Chazaaan.¹ The apple of discord seems to have been the controversial interpretation of Mishna Berachot I:4

3 ח 1 ע 1 ח 3 ק 3 ד

This Mishna refers to the Berachot which precede and follow the Sh'ma. Saadia Gaon, as a faithful successor to Yehudai Gaon, appears to understand this passage as stating that "if one so desires, one may lengthen the prayer, or if one desires otherwise, one may shorten it." Such an interpretation gives sufficient halachic leeway for the insertion of all sorts of prayers beyond the stipulated and mandatory liturgical framework. The school of Pumpedita understood the passage in the same way as Rashi, who explains it to mean that one specific lesson with the Sh'ma is longer and another is shorter (both interpretations do justice to the "Pshat" of the Mishna).

1. cf. E. Werner, "The Doxology in Synagogue and Church"
in H.U.C.A.

Dr. Ginsberg goes one step further. He proves conclusively that the subsequent passage of the Mishna which seems to invalidate one statement occurs only in a later edition, which cannot have existed in the version known to the Gaonim. Otherwise it would be incomprehensible, why the authorities of Pumbeditha founded their prohibition on this second passage although it would have been a striking argument in their favor.²

Neither of the two opposing schools throw any light on the origins and causes which brought the piyyut into existence, indeed, into the Synagogue. Steven S. Schwarzschild, in his essay "Opposition to Chazzanuth and Paytanuth" states: "These two considerations would not yet demonstrate in any way how Paytanuth actually arose; they only show how it was legally possible for Paytanuth to arise." This latter question is answered by Ginsberg (ib., p. 523f.) along with others who agree with him on this point, on the basis of a statement by Samuel ben Yechiyah al-Marabi in his polemical, anti-Jewish book, "The Silencing of the Jews." He says there (cf. Schreiner, in "Hayerachon," 42, pp. 219f): "At a time of persecution the Jews began to make use of Chazzanuth-Paytanuth -, and it was then that they started to sing Piyyutim in which parts of the prayers were incorporated." Already Zunz ("Gottesdienstliche Vortraege" p. 401) assumed that "Wohl moeglich, dass die Furcht

2. cf. Ginsay Schechter II, p. 523

vor Verfolgungen . . . " caused the actual rise of Paytanuth. The historical situation to which the statement of Samuel seems to refer was created by the Justinian Novellae which forbade the Jews the exposition and teaching of scriptural interpretation and, apparently, also the recitation of certain prayers. This circumstance would explain the fact that the literary form of the Piyutin is essentially a conglomeration of prayer and traditional Midrash. By its means it was hoped to circumvent the destructive decrees.

In this connection another statement from Al-Marebi which Ginsberg quotes (ib.) deserves greater attention than it has apparently received hitherto. He says: "The prayer is said by the Cantor alone, whereas the Piyutin were recited by the Cantor and the congregation together." This statement conclusively refutes the often repeated theory that the members of the congregation did not participate in the recitation of the Piyutin. Cf. e.g. Zuna, "Ritus" p. 154: "Da damals der Vorbeter allein den Piut rezitierte . . . " In the light of this knowledge, that the entire congregation seems to have joined in the recitation of the Piyutin, paragraphs 76f., Part II, of Rabbi Yehudah Halevy's "Kusari" also make sense for the first time; it is to this custom that he must be referring when he has the Chaver say: "Have you never witnessed how a hundred people join together in the reading as if they were one man; they stop at the same time and continue

at the same time? Answers the Kusarite: "I have, indeed, observed this custom, and I have never seen anything like it in Edom or in Arabia. It certainly seems unfeasible in the reading of poetry." (The next sentence then opens another matter.)

Lastly in this connection, it must be noted that Ginzberg himself expresses some dubiousness as to whether the Justinian, or any other, persecutions were really the cause, or one of the causes of the rise of Paytanuth. (op. cit. p. 526).

A second cause of the rise of Paytanuth seems to have been the rapidly decreasing knowledge of Hebrew and general Jewish learning among the wide masses of Jews. The less the general populous was capable of handling the language of the liturgy itself, the more important became, of course, the role of the public chazzan. Once the Cantor came to usurp the exclusive role of worshipper, however, he also took it upon himself to compose his own prayers, since he was no longer under the necessity of adhering to the custom of his congregation. (cf. Zuns, "Ritus," p. 6f, Idelsohn, "Jewish Music," p. 106). The Gaonic statement which Zuns brings in this connection (loc. cit.) and which is quoted in the original by Ginzberg (op. cit., p. 509) describes this situation and its implications very picturesquely: "In the academies and in all places in which there are learned men nothing is changed in the order of the prayers as it was arranged by the sages; no Piyutin are said

and no Chazzan is introduced into the synagogue who might indulge in Paytanuth. In a synagogue in which Piyutim are recited, the members thereby testify to their own ignorance."

A third cause for the creation of liturgical poetry of the type which is called Paytanuth was the encounter of the young Islamic, Arabic culture with the tradition of Judaism. As will appear from the criticisms directed at Paytanuth by such eminent partial products of the Mohammedan culture as Rabbi Yehudah Halevi and Ibn Ezra, Parhon, etc., rhymes as well as meter were not considered indigenous to Jewish literary expression in Hebrew, - rightly so, it would appear. In this respect, therefore, Paytanuth is an ancient form of internal Jewish assimilation of external non-Jewish accomplishments.

In scattered opinions still other factors are believed to have played their part in the rise of Chazzanuth and its own, new form of prayer. Zunz, "Ritus," (loc. cit.) mentions the denominationalism of Karaism as having produced new prayers and, perhaps, also new forms of prayer. Idelsohn (loc. cit.) adds that at that time a new esthetic demand seems to have made itself felt in Jewish circles, perhaps connected with the growth of Islamic culture, in answer to which the liturgical poetry and the melodies to which they were sung may have been created. However much truth there may be to these claims, it seems certain that the three chief factors in the origination of Paytanuth were: (1) the necessity to circumvent anti-Jewish

prohibitions; (2) differences in liturgical customs and laws; (3) the influence of Arabic culture.

Eric Werner in his "Sacred Bridge" says; concerning Rabbinic attitudes to piyyutim: "As in all Churches, the introduction of new liturgical compositions of non-scriptural origin into the Synagogue at first met with stiff opposition from the ecclesiastical authorities, in this case, the Rabbis. We cannot elaborate on the often highly technical and legalistic arguments brought forth by both sides pro and contra the piyyut. It may suffice to state that in Babylonia, where most of the Jewish authorities lived and taught, the introduction of new poetry, to be inserted into canonized prayers, was considered a danger to the integrity of the service." The same attitude was taken three centuries earlier at the Council of Laodicea. Specially strong was the Rabbinic argument that the first three eulogies of the T'filah must under no circumstances be interrupted, as did the new Kereva. A number of authorities, e.g. Y'hudah ben Barsilai, demanded that now, under Arabic rule, where Jewry had freedom of worship, all insertions, hymns, etc., should again be eliminated. The accumulation of laudatory epithets of G-d, as they occur in many piyyutim, are termed a blasphemy in accordance with the Talmudic doctrine, since even the attempt to enumerate G-d's attributes must lead to sacreligious anthropomorphism. In spite of all banishments and condemnations by the supreme authorities, the piyyut completely conquered

the hearts of the Jewish masses. There were several reasons for the success of the new style of prayer. It rendered the service more flexible; it added variety. But most important was the fact that the piyyut as a new form was capable of reflecting the ideas of its author, the tendencies of the era, and that it was open to all important trends of its time. It was flexible, actual, and provided variety. Elbogen justly remarks: "It was most meritorious that, through this new form, the religious ideas, the edifying legends, the comforting promises of the midrash were transmitted to all circles of Jewry. How much devotion has the piyyut aroused; to how many fainthearted has it given courage, to how many desperate souls new hope!"

Inseparably connected with the piyyut were its tunes, which enlivened and gave new splendor to the congregations of the Diaspora. In the course of time, great poets arose, who could match the exultant language and the profound piety of the Psalmist. Our study does not extend beyond the 12th and 13th centuries, when this summit of poetic accomplishment was reached, so memorable through the illustrious names of Y'huda Halevi and Solomon Gabriol.

THE AESTHETIC CONTROVERSY

שאו קינה בקול מרה (Metrical example)

כי הוצרן הכה משקל השירה היה מ'מ' אזותנוי עם אצנתם

Translation: This form of meter existed from the time our ancestors were in their land. (Nehemiah Iloni,

"Torat Hamishkalim")

ורק המכריע של חכמי ישראל וצווי יפה כי מקרים של שירה הערצות

Translation: The sages, however, knew that the source of this meter was in Arabic song. (Nehemiah

Iloni, "Torat Hamishkalim")

ויתרום עהם ע משקל הערצות כי שירי הערצות נוסדו תורת המשקלים יחזקם שירה מה שאין כן בשירה הערצות

Translation: In Hebrew song, the study of metrics developed with that form of song, which was not the case with Arabic song.

This shows the difference in attitude existing between the Jews and Arabs toward meter and song.

Schwarzschild in his "Opposition to Paytanuth" says: "In his commentary to Ecclesiastes 5:1, which reads, 'Be not rash with thy mouth and let not thy heart be hasty to utter a word before G-d, for G-d is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few,' Ibn Ezra lets loose an entire harangue against Paytanuth as such and against its perhaps most famous exponent, Kalir, in particular. Though this little essay of his sounds quite spontaneous and like an angry outpouring, it

is, nevertheless well constructed so as to bring out most of these objections: " . . . Therefore it is forbidden that a man introduce *Piyutin* into his prayers whose meaning he does not understand. He may not rely on the belief that their authors must have had a good meaning in their minds when they composed them, for there is no man that does not sin; even so the ancient composers can well have sinned in this respect. In general it may be said that there are four objections to the poems of Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir:

1. "Most of his poems are riddles and puzzles . . . Why do we not learn from Solomon who had no peer after him and yet his prayers are comprehensible so that everyone who understands the holy tongue can understand them. They are neither riddles nor puzzles. The same is true of the prayers of Daniel. Truly, all these prayed only in easily comprehensible words, for they were wise men. How much the more should this be in the case with such men as pray for a lot of other people, {cantors}, who are not all sages! Equally, all the prayers for workdays and for holidays which our ancients stipulated contain neither riddles nor puzzles. (In addition to the legitimate objection to the difficult and involved syntax as well as thought sequences of Kalir, a definite though slight note of traditionalism cannot be gainsaid to this statement."

2. "His poems mix up the Talmudic language. It is well known that there are several languages in the Talmud which are not Hebrew . . . Oh who brought us to this pass that we pray in alien tongues! (The nationalistic note in an otherwise linguistic argument!) Did Nehemiah not prohibit the use of the Edomite language? How much more careful should one be in prayer! Why should we pray in the language of Media and Persia and Edom and of the Ishmaelites?"

3. "Even in those words which are in the holy tongue there are many great errors. For example, he uses the phrase: " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל " "I will magnify my King." Why did he not say: " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל " or " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל " or " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל "? He only chose this phrase in order to prove his wisdom to those who would listen. But we must always be careful with the grammar of Hebrew, so that we will not err like those who say, " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל " "We have whored" instead of " 'ס'ל כס'ל נס'ל " -- "We have eaten" when they recite the grace after meal . . . Furthermore, the holy tongue in the hands of R. Eliezer HaKalir is like a city whose wall has been broken down: there are no protections for the masculine nouns that they not be turned into feminine nouns and vice-versa."

4. "All his poems are full of midrashim and Aggadeth, whereas our sages said: The words of Scriptures are to be understood according to their simple meaning. Therefore, prayer must always be kept in the bounds of the Peshat and not

be conducted in such a manner as to contain secrets or parables or as to express views which are not in accord with the law or which are open to different interpretations . . . I cannot explain one thousandth part of all the mistakes which the Paytanim made. The best thing, in my opinion, is not to use them at all but rather to employ only those prayers which are fixed by the liturgy. Finally, he returns to the scriptural verse which he is presumably interpreting and says: "Let your words be few, therefore, and you will not fall subject to the penalties of the law."

Less consistent and yet more interesting, is Yehuda Halevi's stand which is in some respects paradoxical. He states that the word "SPAR" means calculation and weighing of the created bodies. The calculation which is required for the harmonious and advantageous arrangement of a body is based on a numerical figure. Musical harmony is also based on the number expressed by the word SPAR. He goes on, . . . music is one of the four sciences, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. This view was common to most scholars who considered music an esteemed profession if dealt with as a science and not as a performing art. Nevertheless, as we see in part II of the *Cusari*, Yehudi Halevi calls music as practiced by David and Samuel, who were performers and not scientists, a highly esteemed art.

In his thoughts concerning meter he becomes far more subjective. The following translations are taken from the *Cusari*.

PP.69. "Your purpose with this and other arguments is to bring it (Hebrew) on a level with other languages; but where is its superiority? For other languages have over it poetry built upon melodies."

Comment by Dr. Zifroni: The Cusari says, "thou wilt only succeed in placing it on a par with other languages." But where is its pre-eminence? Other languages surpass it in songs metricaly constructed and arranged for tunes.

PP.70: "It has already become clear to me that there is no necessary connection between melody and the rhythm of speaking regardless of the number of syllables, you can have the same melody. For example, the verse, "Hodu Ladoshem" can be sung to the same tune as "L'ose Niflo-os." This applies to Nigunim (songs) which are performed with grammatical construction, but metrical songs which are recited and in which a good meter is noticeable, there the Jewish people were not sensitive, because of a higher advantage which is of more availand superior, that is oral communication."

PP.71: "What is this?"

PP.72: "The purpose of speech is the entry of what is in the soul of the speaker into the soul of the listener and this goal cannot be attained fully except face to face because words spoken have a superiority to words written. (Quote:) "Rather learn from the scribes than from the books" because we are helped in spoken communication by halting where there should

be a stop and continuing where there should be a connection and by the strengthening of speech its weakening and by hints and winks which are of question or declaration, hope and fear, calm or motion. And with this vestige which remains from our healthy language can be found fine and deep ways to understand things and to replace those actions of face to face communication -- these are the musical notes with which scripture is read and by which we indicate the place of stopping and continuing and separate the place of a question from that of an answer, and that of raising a topic. Someone who has the intention of giving full clarity to his expression undoubtedly will respect meter, because meter cannot properly be pronounced except in one way, but, in practice, one connects generally what should be separated and separates what should be connected and cannot enact this principle without great trouble."

PP.73: "Indeed, our aural virtue is pushed aside by a content virtue because a poem gives pleasure to the hearing, but this tradition includes the subject matter; and yet I see you (the Jews) laboring to achieve poetry and to resemble other nations and you put Hebrew into their metrical forms."

PP.74: "This fact is one of our errors and rebellions. It is not enough for us that we abandon this advantage, but we actually destroy the substance of our language which is established for society (universal speech patterns) among the Jews. And, by introducing meter we return it to discord."

where it cannot validly be introduced. Were Hebrew accessible to this literary form, surely we would have had it before any other nation." And Yehuda Halevi repented before his death and never wrote piyuteem again. This conflict within him is more acute and more direct than in the case of the Ramban who only expressed two different opinions concerning the listening to music. The former, however, actually wrote and became famous on a contradiction of his own views. This is not easily understood and is probably a different topic of discussion in itself.

Cassel, in his edition of the *Cusari*, notes that Parhon, a literary critic of the Spanish-Hebrew poets, does not make a distinction between permissible and prohibited piyyutim.³

Parhon, who considers himself a disciple of Yehuda Halevi⁴ surveys and summarizes all the arguments of his predecessors:

" . . . Therefore before they came to live in the midst of the Arabs and learned their ways, Israel never used to engage in writing piyutim and other metric poetry, because the Holy Tongue is unlike every other language . . . In the Temple there used to be great singers; how, then, is it possible that

3. Cf/D Cassel, *Cusari* II pp. 69, 72ff.

4. *Machbereth Ha-arruch* ed. S. Rappaport, Pressburg 1844, p. XXII f.

these never wrote piyyutim and metric poems like the Arabs, whereas we, with all our limited intelligence, can write them in our time!" (Here the traditionalist argument recurs, but, when compared with Ibn Ezra, for example, in a much less palatable form, for Parchon practically says that the ancients cannot have been wrong, and, therefore, must have had good reason for not engaging in Paytanuth, whereas his teacher was seen (cf. p.9) to declare that also the great sages of the past may well have been wrong.) But, when we were exiled and observed the Arabs composing metric poems, etc." (see page 15).

Before we leave the criticism of Paytanuth which is peculiar to the spirit of Spanish Jewry, one more aspect must be brought out, that was put forward by Maimonides. Whatever else his reasons for objecting to Paytanuth may have been, the outstanding consideration in his mind was that this literary form, in its constant use of Midrashic and poetic descriptions of G-d, violated the doctrines of his negative theology which forbade all such anthropomorphic tendencies in Judaism. Consequently, he declares ("Guide of the Perplexed," I 59): " . . . unlike the fools who, in truth exaggerate their praises of G-d and lengthen and increase their words in prayer by composing parables by which they fancy to approach G-d . . . This is particularly the custom with the singers and homileticians

who compose poems which sometimes become positively heretical and which at other times contain plain nonsense and which despoil right thinking . . . " It must also not be forgotten that Maimonides, in harmony with this strain of thought, in several places goes so far as to say that "silence is the best prayer."

III

NATIONALISTIC SENTIMENTS

This aspect is most strongly stressed in the Cusari where we read: "Says the Chavar, 'actually, in the form of the piyut which does not violate the spirit of the (Hebrew) language, (i.e. which is non-metrical) when it is kept pure, there is sufficient freedom for literary expression. In our adoption of the meter, the same thing has happened to us which has happened to our fathers of whom it is said, 'They mixed among the Gentiles and learned their ways.'" (Ps. 106:35)

This is as clear a nationalistic sentiment as we may expect is from so fervent a Zionist as R. Yehuda Halevi. Nor was he the only author who felt and expressed these sentiments as emphatically. Dunash seems to have shared these attitudes, although he was instrumental in teaching the Arabic meters and adopting them to the Hebrew language. If we understand him correctly, his case was as contradictory as that of Halevi: Both men condemned Arabic meter - nay, meter in general; - and both used it almost exclusively in their poetry. Not completely separable from this nationalistic negation of Arabic meter are Maimonides' arguments, although they rest upon ethical and not nationalistic categories.

The negative attitude of the Rambam concerning Paytanuth is not so evident when we consider that, in his views concerning poetry he states that by its constant use of midrashic and poetic description of the law, it violated the doctrines of his negative theology which forbade all anthropomorphic tendencies in Judaism. Rambam, "Guide for Perplexed," p.159: "Unlike the fools who in truth exaggerate the praises of the Lord and lengthen and increase their words in prayer by which they fancy to reach him . . . this is particularly the custom of singers and homileticians who compose poems which are positively heretical and othertimes plain nonsense and which despoil right thinking." Note: It seems that H. G. Farmer's interpretation (of which there is more later on) of Rambam's objection to listening to secular music is derived from here. It turns more against the folly connected with it than against the music per se and might be transferred to the Rambam's opinions about poetry, both religious and secular. Nevertheless, it would be quite presumptuous to say that because the Rambam only singled out music and poetry connected with folly, etc., as forbidden, he would approve music and poetry not connected with folly. The absence of objection does not necessarily mean approval.

IV

THE PROBLEM OF METRICAL MUSIC

On this highly specific aspect, we have again to refer to Halevi's *Gusari* when he distinguishes (II part 72 ff) between improvised (i.e. non metrical) and "set" or metrical music. For purely theological reasons he prefers the first mentioned practice, which in Arabic terminology he calls "Tartil"; the metrical type is known as "Anshadia." (see page 13 and 14 this thesis).

The basic idea that motivated Halevi's preference of Tartil seems to have been: genuine prayer should follow the spontaneous impulses of the heart of the Chazzan; for this end free-rhythmical improvisation is much better suited than a strictly metrical structure which might suggest reminiscences of dances or would force the non-metrical Hebrew text into a metrical structure. On the other hand, Saadia Gaon takes here a completely different stand: Saadia was the first Jewish writer on music and a believer in the doctrine of Ethos. Therefore, his attitudes and opinions were based on a thorough study of music. In the *Kitab Haamunat* 9:33, Saadia deals with music. There was no objection to music, metrical or otherwise, in Mesopotamia, which was Saadia's territory, otherwise his treatment on the influence of music on the soul of man would not have been possible. This attitude includes the superiority of the compound over the single

(The original is Hippocrates). Repetition of a single sound, single beat or rhythm, creates monotony which is injurious to the soul, but combinations of sounds on different pitches, beats diversely measured and similar rhythm produces agreeable effects. To illustrate the point, Saadia chooses eight rhythmical modes because in measured music, rhythm is more important than melody. Diversified rhythm can attract the understanding of the layman but the structure of the melodic modes can only be understood by the practitioners of music.

There are many writings on the rhythms of Arabic poetry, so that it is almost a certainty that Saadia's theory on rhythm is based on the writings of Al Kindi, who wrote seven or eight books on the theory of music. Saadia's work is probably based on *Risalat Fi Aj Za Khabariyat Al Musiqi*. In Saadia's description of the eight rhythmical modes, he is describing the identical modes that Al Kindi describes. There are contradictions between Al Kindi's writings on rhythm and Saadia's. Saadia describes his eight rhythmic modes as "Alhen" (i.e. melodies) and constituent elements as *Naghmat* (i.e. notes). Al Kindi describes them as *Iquat* (i.e. rhythms) but the trend of Saadia's description using terms as "*Maquadir*" (i.e. measures) and *Zaman* (i.e. tune) which can only have a mesural connotation indicates that he is talking about rhythm. He also uses the term *Naghmat* in his commentary on *Sefer Y'sirah* where he deals with the alphabet as meaning vowel-movements. It is also possible

תַּעֲמִידִי מִנַּחֵם: הֵעָא רַב סְאָדִיָּה (בִּי"ע) וְעָלָו כֹּמֶה עִירִיס
 וְכֹמֶה חֲרָסִיס וְעָלָו לְעִקְעָו. זִמְעָקָה
 הַעֲרָה

Translation: Saadia has many songs and verses and yet these were not measured out in Arabic meter and there is no evidence to prove that he wrote metrical poems. So say the Talmide M'nachem.

Dunash says, according to Brody:

מִי רִי סְאָדִיָּה וְעָלָו מִכָּע בְּנֵי מִלְרַח עָלָו הִיתָה
 עִהֶם יִדְעָה זְחִי' לִרְ הַחֲזָה וְעִקְעָו הַפִּיּוֹת

Translation: Saadia and his contemporaries had no systematic knowledge of composing verse and rhythmical poetry.

Brody says that it was probably Dunash who introduced Arabic meter to Hebrew song with no predecessor. He also believes that the first Hebrew poetry with Arabic meter was in c. 940 because:

עָלָו יִסֹּךְ תִּהְיֶה רִי סְאָדִיָּה עִהֶם אֵת עִיר
 הַמִּעִקְעָוִים שֶׁהָיָה עָלָו לִרְ

Translation: It originated on the basis of Saadia's praising the metrical poem shown him by Dunash.

V

SECULAR AND SACRED MUSIC

When we turn now from the question of meter and metrical music to the main issue: What place did music hold in the Jewish civilization between the 9th and 13th century? To what extent was it a legitimate art or science? In which way did the representative writers and thinkers of that age express their attitude towards it?

In order to find a rationale for the frequently unclear, occasionally contradictory and yet consistently scholastic utterances of our authorities on music, we should once more consider the various aspects under which they regarded music. Such a survey yields the following headings:

- (1) Classification of music among the sciences.
- (2) Halachic opinions.
- (3) Ethos Doctrine.
- (4) Philosophic-esthetic value.
- (5) General function of music as science and as an art.

(1) As for the place of music in the realm of arts and sciences, we find a sharp distinction between the sages of the Spanish-Arabic, indeed, the Islamic world and those of west and central Europe.

Werner-Sonna:

"While Jewish scholars within the domains of Arabic culture participated in all phases of that culture, even in the secular and the artistic, the rest of European Jewry had to limit itself

to theological and exegetic studies based exclusively on rabbinic doctrines. Those rabbis knew of musical art only the traditional elements of synagogal chant and were interested in the proper rendition of music purely from rabbinic point of view. It even seems that the boundaryline between the two different attitudes correspond to the geographic frontier between the Spanish and Parisian areas. R. Joseph Ibn Caspi, a learned writer of Provence, which was then the exact line of demarcation between Spain and France, says:

עמנצח זמאירות אשר אלו האות ריית שאירות. ועמנצח
הסמיות שירות ריית מעכבת השיר הנהואל'ן זכאי הני'און
העשיות עהציר הנפס המעכבת המכ'ונה זמאי קצר
מוסיקא אנדע נאגדה החכמה הזה⁵

Accordingly, we limit this study to the Jewish sources within the Arabic sphere among whose intellectuals the scholastic works on musical theory were almost common property. Judea-Arabic literature placed music among the sciences at a fairly early time. Already the Karaite Nissin ben Noah in the 9th, David Almokammez in the 10th, and Bachya Ibn Pakuda during the 11th century, mentioned music as a part of scientific study. Much more is to be said about Joseph Ibn Achnin, a disciple of Rambam, who differing from his almost anti-musical master, gave in his "Tabb-ul-nufus" (recreation of souls) a precise description of the curriculum of musical studies prevalent in his day . . . Suffice it for the present to cite a remark interesting for its independence of judgment. In Ibn Achnin, Music finds a place after the study of Writing, Torah,

5. To the Choir Master with a stringed accompaniment which are hymns or if you will, dithyrambus. And to the choir master these are musical

Mishna, Grammar, Poetry, Talmud, Philosophy of Religion, Logic, Mathematics, Optics, Astronomy. And he continues: The practice of this science (music) precedes the theory. The former must come chronologically first because its healing power cannot show itself except by its actual performance. Thus, theoretical speculation is in place only after practical accomplishment, etc."

A singular position concerning the place of music is taken by Yehuda Halevi in his *Cusari*. He deals with music as part of astronomy and the calendar. (Part II, 64-65). He also links it with metrics and poetry (Part II, 70-73), later with natural science (Part IV, 24-25), and finally with the speculative disciplines (Part V, 12). Apparently, his ideas of musical science are based on Al Farabi and Ibn Sina, with whom music similarly occupies a double position, subsumed partly under grammar and partly under the speculative and natural sciences. Hence, we need not wonder that this ideology appears in remote Occidental scholars like Vincent of St. Beauvais or Roger Bacon. Both of whom are well conversant with Alfarabi and Avicenna."

In Italy, Serahya ben Isaac, a contemporary of Manuello of Rome, interprets Proverbs IX:1 as follows: "The seven sciences are the four mathematical ones, viz. arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy and the three philosophical ones: viz. physics, meta-physics and politics. Manuello, in his exegesis of Proverbs, seizes the opportunity of bitter complaint about the decay of musical art and science. His words (to Proverbs 26:16) are: "Truly a miracle that we still possess

words, i. e. concerning the song used with musical instruments made to arouse the intelligent individual, called in ancient times "tunes" but this tradition has been lost.

the 24 books of scripture! It is very probable that physics, meta-physics, and the other sciences of which Plato and Aristotle are today said to be the masters, belonged originally to Solomon. Indeed we see, that music, an excellent science and art, was at home originally in our religion, performed by men like Asaph, David, and Samuel. But today nobody among us knows anything about it. It has been left to the exclusive position of the Christians."

(2) Concerning the Halachic evaluation of music, the two opposite poles, indeed the extreme positions, were held by R. Saadia Gaon and Rambam, respectively. Saadia, a thinker of truly universal scope, viewed the entire realm of music under the ancient Ethos Doctrine.

Aristoxenos, a disciple of Aristotle, described three styles of music which he termed:

- 1) Systaltic
- 2) Diastaltic
- 3) Mesychastic

The first is described as paralysing human energy and includes love-songs and funeral lamentations; the second is strong and virile, spurs to action and thus becomes the "heroic" style employed in tragedy; the last is inbetween. It indicates and at the same time stimulates balance of mind and feeling. In this way to music is ascribed the powers of changing human emotions.

According to Farmer, Saadia Gaon leads us to believe that the doctrine of Ethos found acceptance in therapeutics among the Jews; it is expressly stated by Ibn Achnin (d. 1226) in his *Tabb al-nufus*. It had its authority in I Samuel (VI:23). We know from the various sources that music was used to cure mental diseases and that musical instruments were used to "convey to the soul . . . the harmonious sounds which are created by the heavenly spheres in the natural motions." The doctrine of the Harmony of the Spheres, as accepted by the Arabs was based on Pythagorean teaching, although much may have come from the ancient Semites via the Sabaeans. (cf Plutarch, comm. on Plato's Republic, X, 261).

As for Rambam, he fundamentally opposed all Belles Lettres; in music he saw only merely a force of arousing religious emotions.

The following section deals exclusively with Maimonides' opinions on music and the scholars who influenced these opinions. This we can see from his response on Synagogue and secular music and his various interpretations of Talmudic texts.

The Rambam said that music may be studied by some for the purpose of attaining high wisdom but the laws of the Torah are for the majority. Secular music prohibitions are based on Hosea 9:1, Isaiah 5:12, Amos 6:5, and B'rachot 24:A.

Hosea 9:1

"Rejoice not, oh Israel, unto emulation like the peoples."

Talmudic reference Gittin 7:A, -

"Some people sent a question to Mar Ukva, 'How do we know that music is forbidden?' Mar Ukva answers: (from Hosea) 'The question is why didn't Mar Ukva answer from Isaiah 24? 'They will not drink wine in song.' Answer: The prohibition in Isaiah 24 is not strong enough to cover all types of music including oral music. (Sefer Z'manim on fasts, Chapter 5, pp. 14.) Rambam's comments: "At the Temple's destruction and after it was decreed that there shall be no playing of instruments and all sorts of melodies and all that causes a sound of song to be heard is forbidden, that is, to take joy in them and to hear them because of the Temple's destruction, and even songs of the mouth over wine are forbidden."

The reference in tractate M'gillah dealing with chanting of Torah and Mishnah is not, to secular music and is therefore omitted.

Isaiah 5:12

"And the harp and psaltry, the tabret and the pipe and wine are in their feasts but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither have they considered the operation of His hands. (13) Therefore, my people are gone into captivity, etc."

Talmudic comment: Tractate Shabbat 119.

"Jerusalem was destroyed for no other reason than because of their disregard of the saying of the Sh'ma morning and evening and their drinking, feasting and singing. The singing per se

was not the sin except it was indulged in the point where commandments were disregarded. Sotah 48:

From the time the Sanhedrin was abolished, song has gone from the festivals. Rambam comments: Sefer Z'manim on fasts Chapter 5, pp. 14, See P. VIII.

Rav: Every ear that hears song should be ripped out.

Rove: If there is music in the house, there is destruction.

Rambam: (Quoting from Echo) When the Sanhedrin ceased to exist, the music stopped.

Meiri explains this as follows: Originally when the Jewish court was functioning, music was allowed because there was an authority to prevent its abuse. But now that is gone, the people would indulge in indecent songs with no one to check them if they were permitted.

Psochim 10:8:

One may not conclude the Passover meal with the Af'fomen (music, according to the interpretation in the Y'rushalmi 9:6) because it might introduce a note of excessive gaiety and would mar the solemnity of the festival.

B'rachot 24:A

ה'ר"ח ה'תק"ב ד'ק

A woman's voice is sexual incitement.

Rashi: Since the verse from Shir HaShirim praises the woman by saying that her voice is pleasant, it means that it is an object of desire.

Rambam: Sefer Kodosh Isurei Biye Chapter 21

ואפילו שמע קול הערוה א/א ע'ראות ע'ארה א/א

Even to hear her voice or to see her hair is forbidden.

Music excites lust no matter what the language and does not become a holy nation, even music recommended by Gaonim as purely religious (psalms, hymns and songs of exultation). Secular music should not be tolerated especially when sung in taverns and/or sung by females. This was the basis of the rejection to listening to secular music rather than the difference in intrinsic character between secular and religious music.

Rambam as a disciple of Arabic tradition of medicine admits that music as a therapeutic measure is acceptable and even recommended. (This will be elaborated upon in his response). It is noteworthy to mention that concerning instrumental music Rambam was much angered at the ninth century Sabsens who played before their deities with instruments. Rambam endorsed religious music and this strenghtens the opinion of Farmer, that the Rambam's concern with secular music was based on where it was performed, who the performers were, rather than with the music itself. He also felt the same way about poetry. This is Platonis in attitude rather than Aristotelian. The ethical evaluations were considered over the aesthetic classifications.

It is plain to see that the Rambam's attitude toward

secular music was influenced by Tanaitic and Amoraitic ideas. Even the Gaonim who permitted music at a wedding (because it was a religious function) forbade it at any other time. In his Mishne Torah, the Rambam stresses the historical origin of the law which seeks to keep alive the memory of a great national tragedy of the people. Realizing the various unholy effect music, in his opinion, had on most people, especially when sung by women and/or in taverns, he forbade music not only in Arabia, but also in Hebrew if its contents were such as to lead to excitement and debauchery. It is appropriate to interject a comment by Rabbi Isaac Alfasi who said, "The Cantor may not chant airs borrowed from the Moslems at the service." To back this up he quotes Jeremiah 8: "She hath sung her melodies (i.e. to the foreigners) against me; therefore have I hated her."

With the advent of Islam there was little difference between the opinion of the Jewish Amoraim and the Muslim scholars. However, universal objections to the various edicts caused modifications to be made. At weddings many Jews employed Muslim and even Christian musicians. But in Spain, Jews were encouraged to practice music and to study it as a science.

Rambam on Synagogue Music

We consider here the responsum concerning voluntary piyutim at the service before and following Sh'ma or at

songs of praise in honor of bridegroom at weddings. Quote: "It is quite wrong to permit any interruption in the paragraphs preceding or following the Sh'ma, but if there is some necessity (i.e. by reason of some local post-talmudic custom to have piyutim) then let them be said before the paragraphs preceding the Sh'ma. Nevertheless, the Cantor may not break up the benediction formula or add to it." (A more subjective opinion to illustrate the Rambam's modifications as mentioned in the opening remarks will be mentioned later.)

We see that, under certain conditions, the Rambam permitted certain melodies and metrical poetry in the service, which leads us to believe that his antagonism to music and meter per se may have been exaggerated.

Rambam on Secular Music

Translation: Question: "Is it lawful to listen to the singing of ballads (muwashshat) of the Arabs and to the reed pipe (Zamr)?"

Response: "It is well known that the reed pipe and the rhythms (Iqua' At) are forbidden. Even if there had not been said about them any sayings or according to the pronouncements the ear that listens to the reed pipe shall be cut off!" (Aba Arika B. Sota 48A) and the Talmud has explained that there is no difference between listening to the reed pipe or hearing string instruments or to the modulation (talhin) of melodies (alhan) apart from the prayer (Gittin). "It is proper to break in the soul and unlawful to comfort it."

"And they (the Rabbis) support themselves on the prohibition of the Prophet. He said: "rejoice not Israel as other peoples" (Hoshea 9:1) and we have explained the cause of that thoroughly; because, as for this sensuous faculty it behooves us to tame it and repress it and tighten its rein not that it should be excited and resuscitated (its dead made to live). And one should not judge by (look at) an individual who is exceptional and rarely to be found, in whom that (music) occasions delicacy of mind and quickness of impressionability necessary for a noumenon (ma'quill) or submission to religious matters. Legal wisdom only writes in accordance with the majority and the prevailing because the wise have spoken concerning what ordinarily happens! (Shabbat 68A) and the prophets have explained that to us and have spoken prohibiting the use of instrumental music by way of hearing them devotionally and it is their saying that chant to the sound of a viol (nevel) and invent to themselves instruments of music like David. And we have explained in a commentary on Avoth that there is no difference between Hebrew and Arabic words and that only such are prohibited or permitted in accordance with the meaning intended by those words. And in reality it is the hearing of folly that is prohibited even if uttered accompanied (by stringed instruments). And, if medelized upon them there would be three prohibitions:

1. The prohibition of listening to folly (of the mouth)

2. Of listening to singing (shinā) I mean playing with the mouth;

3. Of listening to stringed instruments.

And, if it were in a wine shop (where the listening occurred) there would be a fourth prohibition as in the saying of "Him most high." And, the harp (Kiner) and the viol (nevel) and the Tabret (toph) and the pipe (chalil) and wine are in their feasts (Isaiah 5:12). And, if the singer be a woman, then there is a fifth prohibition, according to their (the Rabbis) saying: "a voice in a woman is shame." How much greater (the prohibition) if she be singing! (B'rachot 24A) and the truth is made plain by proof, and this is that which is aimed at in us, is that we should be a holy nation and that there should not be to us either work or word except in perfection or what leads us to perfection, not in the stirring up of the sensuous faculties to the neglect of all that is good (or whenever lax) not in letting them run loose in diversion and play. And, we have explained with sufficiency to this purpose Dalālat (al-hā-irīn) in the last part of it with words that will carry conviction to the worthy and that which is blessed Gaonim have mentioned in the setting of the melody (Talhin) to songs and praises as the blessed author of Halakoth said (Isaiah Al-Fasi) as for improper subjects being in them, the Lord forbid! "This was not in Israel, either from Gaon or illiterate persons. And the wonder is at your saying in the presence of pious so

long as they attend wine bouts." And, we have explained enough regarding that also in the Dalālat (Al-hairīn). This is what seems right to us regarding listening to instruments of music. And peace. (Thus) wrote Moses." 6

Rambam was influenced by Ishāq al Pāsī who had objected to rhythmical song; nevertheless he did permit it where local custom demanded it. This was probably the reason that Rambam writes "legal wisdom only writes in with the majority and the prevailing opinion." As for the piyut, this had become part of the social and religious life of the Jews. Being impressed by his mentors such as Plato, Aristotle and Al Farabi, who had all written on music in its practical, theoretical or moral sense, it was necessary for Rambam to modify his view. He was helped by the writings on music of Ibn Gabriel in his ethics who said, "it was not the notes of the songs that were forbidden but the indecent things that might accompany these notes." His so-called modified view is evident in his Sh'moneh Perakim, where he speaks of moderation as the right path for the dictates of nature. As a moral physician Rambam says that deviation from moderation can cause the soul to become sick and as a moral physician he recommends the cultivation of the senses to quicken the soul. Hearing: by listening to stringed and reed pipe music (this is a rather complex contradiction to his responsum that should be considered within the framework of the Rambam's professional life as physician. Seeing: by

6. Translation by H. G. Farmer, aided on one or two points by Prof. D. S. Margoliouth.

gazing at beautiful pictures. Smelling: by strolling through beautiful gardens. Feeling: by wearing fine raiment. Tasting: by eating highly seasoned delicacies. He cites the Rabbis to support his contention that such things are not to be considered immoral nor unnecessary. Note: The Biblical quotation:

שמעו נא דבר יהוה אלנו *שמעו נא דבר יהוה אלנו* could also support this point of view.

Music, administering to the needs of the soul, was also a point of view taken by Plato. Rambam's "laws of moderation" is in agreement with that of liberal Muslims, among them Al Ghazali, who forbade the listening to music in the following cases:

- 1) if the singer or player is a woman;
- 2) if the instrument was intrinsically forbidden;
- 3) if the content of what is sung or if the deeds or actions in the place where the singing or playing occurred are already forbidden;
- 4) if the music incites any particular individual to commit forbidden acts, that particular music is forbidden;
- 5) if one listens to music for its own sake and not for recreation.

It is between the intrinsic and the instrumental that the Rambam wishes to make a distinction. It is the hearing of folly that the Rambam objected to. He set up five grades of folly concerning music:

- 1) hearing,

- 2) and 3) if singing or instrumental music accompanies the folly, the prohibition is greater,
- 4) if it occurs where there is wine the objection is greater still,
- 5) if the singer or player be a woman the accumulated disapproval is the greatest.

Note: However, the objectivity or subjectivity of the Rambam's approach to the law of listening to music is much in question when we consider the following: In all probability, Rambam was well acquainted with the arguments of the *Ihyā' Ulūm Al-dīn* of Al Ghazali in which he says that a number of veils divide man from comprehending the Lord. As Rambam says, certain partitions divide man and the Lord, and the greatest of the prophets had the fewest partitions. Al Ghazali says that these veils could be lifted when man reached the supreme stage of ecstasy of the soul, and this was attained by listening to music. Of this, Rambam makes no mention!

The Rambam, in order to combat the previously mentioned wide disregard of Rabbinic law, switched his arguments from the theoretical to the ethical. The previous arguments of *Avelut Y'rushalayim* had to give way to the arguments that music carries with it a sensuous thrill. Note: Boaz Cohen makes no mention of the fact, as Farmer does, that music per se would be permissible. According to Cohen, Rambam puts a fence around the law by saying that as in the ancient orient music was

furnished largely by women, and the songs were too often proved to kindle the passions, all music was forbidden, (except religious). Farmer gives Rambam credit for being discerning by saying that according to Rambam only music that contains folly and music performed by women and/or with instruments that kindled passions were forbidden. As Cohen states, the law prohibiting music was never fully observed because it ran counter to human nature.

As one easily realizes, the differences between Saadia Gaon and the Rambam were indeed fundamental, the latter remained rather narrow minded in his interpretation of Biblical and rabbinic sources concerning music, while Saadia considered music quite unbiasedly and all but ignored the Talmudic warnings and injunctions. A similar stand was taken many centuries later by R. Yehuda Arie da Modena in Venice.

We have outlined above the concept of the Ethos Doctrine in music. It is interesting to observe how the Jewish interpretation of that originally Pythagorean thought deviated from that of their Arabic contemporaries.

The Arabic writers either considered the questions of music in its psycho-physiological, even in its materialistic aspects, or view it from the lofty tower of their metaphysical or mystical speculations. The materialistic concept represented the common outlook. (i.e. emotional excitement rather than eudaemonic pacification). "The philosophers discarded the

sentiment of the masses for much of the Greek ideology even if with some change of emphasis. Arabic thinkers raised no issue about harmful and unpleasant emotions. On the contrary, good melodies evoke such emotions as satisfaction, ire, clemency, cruelty, fear, sadness, regret, and other passions. Although there is some esthetic speculations in Arabic theory, Hebrew theory, although differing slightly, is not concerned with esthetics. In Judaism Kavanah is the highest principle. This applies to medieval scholasticism as well as to the literature of the Cabalists and Chasidim." (Werner-Sonne). Lachmann, in his "Music de Orients" states: "Music is in constant connection with everything intoxicating." (i.e. wine, love, ecstasy.) In Werner-Sonne, "Philosophy and Theory of Music in Judeo-Arabic Literature," it is stated that, according to the thought of the Arabic thinkers, the four strings of the lute evoke different ethos. (i.e. one string evokes the element fire, the humour of yellow bile, the quality of heat and the season of summer, etc.)

From the foregoing the materialistic, yet on the other hand, scientifically rational array of thinking which the Arabs liked and cultivated, is quite obvious. The Jewish writers never extend their reasoning to the virtual identification of the four humours with the origin, significance, and value of emotions.

4: Closely connected with the ethos doctrine is the

philosophical evaluation of music. The representative Jewish statements were made by Ibn Achnin and Falquera. (To paraphrase): Those who desire the spirit of prophecy employ musical instruments, playing them when they desire the vision. The instruments bring about keenness of mind and judgment and invigorate the mental faculties for the reception of spiritual wisdom.

To paraphrase Falquera: "Know, my son, that one of the reasons why the wise men cultivated the science of music was their use of it in their temples of worship when they brought their offerings. They also employed melodies for their prayers and for the praise of the Creator. Some of these tunes affected the heart to such an extent that whoever heard them concentrated his mind, repented, and turned away from his sins . . . they (the wise men) assert also that as soon as the soul hears music congenial to its own nature, it yearns for its Creator longing to reach Him. It subsequently condemns the miseries . . . of the temporal world and meditates upon the world supernal."

When it comes to the "Doctrine of Virtue," the inter-relationship between philosophy and music becomes even more pronounced. A realm almost mystical opens up before us when we consider the Neo-Platonic philosophy of the movements of the soul as affected by music.

5: Most of the views observed before found their way, either openly or in latently polemic fashion into Halevi's *Gusari*. We mentioned above his nationalistic sentiments

against Arabic elements in music and poetry. Yet he is aware of the universally moral effects of meter and metrical music, be it Hebrew or Arabic. What separates him most from his Arabic confines was his unwillingness to apply the Aristotelian concept of Mimesis (imitation) to music. He shows much more interest in the immediate effect of the spoken or sung word than in its written form - in other words, in literature and music, he assumes the position of a phenomenologist. In this respect he stands alone among the thinkers of the time.

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