REFLECTIONS ON THE SEPHARDIC COMMUNITY OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE COMMENTARIES OF *ME-AM LO'EZ* ON *SHEMOT*

JARED H. SAKS

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

February 28, 2005

Advisor: Dr. Martin A. Cohen

THE KLAU LIBRARY
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE
Jewish Institute of Religion
Brookdale Center
One West Fourth Street
New York, NY 10012

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

FINAL THESIS APPROVAL FORM

AUTHOR: Jared H. Saks

TITLE: Reflections on the Sephardic Community of the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century as Illustrated in the Commentaries of *Me-am Lo'ez* on *Shemot*

[signature] 25 Feb 05
SIGNATURE OF ADVISOR(S) **Date**

[signature] 2/28/03
SIGNATURE OF REGISTRAR **Date**

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE OBTAINED BEFORE YOUR THESIS WILL BE CONSIDERED ACCEPTED.

PLEASE TYPE OR PRINT ALL INFORMATION ON THIS FORM.

2005

Thesis Summary

This work, *Reflections on the Sephardic Community of the Ottoman Empire as Illustrated in the Commentaries of the* Me-am Lo'ez *on* Shemot, contains of six chapters. The first chapter, an introduction, introduces the purpose, goals, and method of research. The next three chapters provide background information for *Me-am Lo'ez*, including a brief history of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century, a biography of Jacob Culi, and a study of the sources that Jacob Culi used in order to write *Me-am Lo'ez*.

This main chapter, an in-depth analysis of the text of *Me-am Lo'ez*, covers Jacob Culi's introductory chapter to the Ten Commandments, specifically, the Revelation at Sinai. It is divided into rubrics according to the prominent themes in this section of *Me-am Lo'ez*. For each rubric, I have sought to analyze the text in three ways: according to the texts that Culi utilized, the texts that he omitted, and his own editorial comments. This analysis provides a greater understanding of Sephardic Judaism in the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century, highlighting the community's needs and Culi's concerns for them. It describes how Jacob Culi sought to make Judaism attractive to the Ottoman Jews who had drifted away from Judaism.

This thesis serves as a study of Ottoman Jewry in the eighteenth century, as well as a model for making Jewish tradition and practice attractive to a Jewish population that has turned away from Judaism, a highly valuable asset for Reform Judaism today. It employs the classic rabbinic texts cited throughout *Me-am Lo'ez*, entries from Encyclopedia Judaica related to the classic rabbinic texts and to Ottoman Jewry, secondary sources on the Ottoman Empire and its Jewish population, the previous theses on *Me-am Lo'ez* under the guidance of Dr. Martin A. Cohen, and, of course, the text of Jacob Culi's *Me-am Lo'ez*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Spanish language and history have been at the center of my studies since high school. While studying at Florida State University, I had the opportunity to study abroad in San Jose, Costa Rica. My involvement with Congregación Bnei Israel in San Jose served as my introduction to Judaism in Latin America. Though Latin American Judaism today is largely Ashkenazic, comprised of Jews of Eastern European descent, Ladino music plays a role in their worship, due to its correlation to Spanish. It was Ladino music at Congregación Bnei Israel that served as my introduction to Sephardic Judaism.

Tremendous gratitude is owed to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Martin A. Cohen. Even before enrollment at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, I anticipated studying with Dr. Cohen. I yearned to learn more about Sephardic Judaism. When the time arrived for me to begin the thesis writing process, I approached Dr. Martin A. Cohen, explaining my Spanish language studies, hoping to research Sephardic tradition. Jacob Culi's *Me-am Lo'ez* serves as an excellent study of the Ottoman Jewish community, as well as a valuable resource today. *Me-am Lo'ez* paints a picture of Ottoman Jewry, explaining the conditions under which they lived and the tradition from which they had withdrawn. Culi demonstrates how to make Jewish tradition attractive to non-practicing Jews, a skill incredibly useful in Reform Judaism today. He validates study and scholarship in the colloquial language, something which with liberal Judaism has struggled since its inception. *Me-am Lo'ez* is the ultimate Ladino work. It demonstrates the benefit of making Torah and tradition accessible to the people. I express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Martin A. Cohen, my mentor and teacher, and my

continuing model of scholarship and compassion, without whose help and guidance this thesis would not have come to fruition.

I am also indebted to a number of other people. First, I must thank the library staff at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. Dr. Philip Miller and Tina Weiss have been invaluable resources throughout my writing process. Without their assistance, accessibility, and consideration, this process would have been impossible. Next, I owe immeasurable gratitude to my classmates. You have been an incredible source of comfort and support, humor and enjoyment. I will miss all of you dearly.

The study of history is tremendously valuable. Knowing our past helps us understand the present and the future. I am forever indebted to those who have influenced my past, who have been my past. First, I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents. I never had the privilege of knowing my maternal grandparents, Gertrude and Jerry Schick; yet, they have remained a continuing source of inspiration throughout my life, especially as I have learned about the wonderful qualities of theirs that I possess. My paternal grandparents, Cecilia and Samuel "Zak" Saks, were my first teachers and my greatest admirers. My Grandma continues to teach me to treasure my roots and I remember my Grandpa with the fondest of memories.

Next, I dedicate this work to my parents, Andrea and Bill Saks, and my brother, Adam. As a child, my parents brought me to Shabbat services, teaching me the importance of tradition. As I grew older, I brought them. It has given me tremendous pleasure to see them intrigued anew as they participate in my growth and learning as I find my place in the rabbinate. My brother has always been my best friend, the one to

whom I always know I can turn. He challenges me and asks me to challenge him. He motivates me and serves as an example of scholarship and love. Without my family's support, the completion of this thesis would not have been possible.

Finally, I must thank the love of my life, my continuing support and inspiration, the one who has been there through all the ups and down, my soul mate, Marc. Only with his ongoing love and compassion have I made it through the past five years. I look forward to a lifetime of love and learning with Marc, to sharing the rest of our days together.

Note on Text, Translation, and Transliteration

This thesis is based upon Aryeh Kaplan's translation of Jacob Culi's original Ladino *Me-am Lo'ez* on Exodus (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1979). Biblical translations are from the text prepared by the Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia: 1999). The transliteration of Hebrew phrases follows the system chosen by the editors of the Encyclopedia Judaica.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Scholars writing about the progress of Sephardic history consistently identify Jacob Culi's *Me-am Lo'ez* as one of the greatest classics of Ladino literature. Though *Me-am Lo'ez* studies each verse of the Bible, Culi intended it to do more than interpret the text, unlike nearly every other commentary. Jacob ben Meir Culi sought to attract the Jews of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century back to Judaism from which they had drifted. He hoped to inspire the Ottoman Jews with the teachings of classic rabbinic texts and tradition which he conveyed to them in their own colloquial language of Ladino.

Culi began publishing his work in 1730; however, unfortunately, in 1732 he died, leaving the completion of his work to other scholars. These scholars, including, most notably, Isaac ben Moses Magrisso, followed Culi's style so closely that scholars consider *Me-am Lo'ez* to be a unified work.

In Jacob Culi's discussion of the moment of revelation at Sinai, amidst *Me-am Lo'ez* on the Book of Exodus, he outlines the relationship that God has with Israel, emphasizing a mutual, ongoing commitment. He teaches the Ottoman Jews that God has not abandoned them. God awaits their return to tradition and practice. He outlines the miracles that occurred at Sinai, demonstrating the wondrous ways in which God works. He teaches the qualities that God expects, including humility and purity, the importance of Israel and its relationship with the other nations of the world. *Me-am Lo'ez* teaches the Ottoman Jews that just as the revelation was dependent upon everyone's involvement and presence, the Jewish community can only exist if all of its members are active.

Nonetheless, each individual matters to God, inasmuch as God spoke to each of the Israelites individually during the revelation of Torah.

Jacob Culi employs numerous sources from various traditions in order to illustrate his ideas. He establishes himself as a vital part of the Rabbinic chain of tradition, rooting himself in both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions. The breadth of his sources illustrates his scholarship while simultaneously giving authority to his masterpiece, *Me-am Lo'ez.*

This thesis will examine the sources Culi uses as well as those that he chooses to omit. It will also analyze his editorial comments. Through this evaluation, one can gain a greater understanding of the Ottoman Jewish community of the eighteenth century. Additionally, this work will teach the value of reaching out to those who have abandoned Judaism and attracting their return to Jewish custom and tradition, for such a predicament also faces Judaism of this day and age.

Chapter 2: Jewry in the Ottoman Empire

The Beginning of Jewry in the Ottoman Empire

The Jewish community of the Ottoman Empire dates back to 1326. The first Jewish community under Ottoman rule lived in the Jewish quarter of the city of Bursa, which the Ottoman Empire had captured from the Byzantines. Sultan Uthman (1288-1326) began the Ottoman-Turkish Empire in the Middle East. He and his descendants led the empire. The Ottoman-Turks covered Asia Minor, incorporating the Jewish communities of the Byzantine Empire as their conquest continued. The Jews began to live under better conditions than they had under Byzantine rule. The Ottoman sultan at that time, Orhan Gazi, permitted the Jews to build a synagogue, *Etz Ha Hayim*; engage in business; and purchase houses and land. As subjects of the empire, the Jews were obligated to pay a poll tax, collected by the communal board of elders, which assured accurate payment by swearing an oath while holding a Torah scroll. The Jews of Bursa were longtime inhabitants known as Romaniot.[1]

The continuation of the Ottoman conquest incorporated many Jewish communities, attracting Jews to the empire well into the fifteenth century. Sultan Murad II (1421-51) captured Salonika and Ioannina. Romaniot Jews, as well as immigrant Jews from Germany and Italy, inhabited these cities. The Romaniot Jews are the "original Jewish population of the territories of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, and Baltans, and Asia Minor, and their descendants in all matters relating to their customs, language, and tradition."[2] Murad II made the Jews "wear long garments like other non-Muslims;

---

[1] Yaacov Geller and Haim Z'ew Hirschberg, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Ottoman Empire." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 16, p. 1529-1530.

[2] Simon Marcus, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Romaniot," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 14, p. 231.

their headwear was yellow in order to distinguish them from other non-Muslims, while the Turks wore green headwear and were called 'green ones' by the Jews."[3] Upon capturing the Peloponnesus, Murad II appointed a Jew as his personal physician, the first of many to have a prominent role in the courts of the sultans.[4]

In 1451, Sultan Muhammad II (1451-81) captured Constantinople. Following its capture, Muhammad II demanded that the city's inhabitants who had fled had to return, especially the Jews. His proclamation to the Jews promised them favor. As a result, Jews from all over the empire moved to Constantinople. Whenever Muhammad II captured a town, he moved its Jewish population to Constantinople, improving the economic and religious conditions under which they had been living. The Jews developed business and crafts for the sultan.[5]

As the Ottoman Empire expanded, it attracted an increasing number of refugees. Refugees from Germany and France inhabited Adrianople, perhaps to the credit of Adrianople's rabbi, Isaac Sarfati. Sarfati had sent a letter to these Jewish communities lauding the sultanate and its liberal attitude towards the Jews. Sultan Bayazid II (1481-1512) pitied the Spanish and Portuguese refugees, settling them in Constatinople. Bayazid II felt that the Spanish king, Ferdinand, was foolish for impoverishing Spain and enriching the Ottoman Empire through the expulsion of the Jews. The Spanish Jews dwelling in major cities such as Constantinople, Salonika, and Adrianople founded communities named after their respective cities of origin, while those living in smaller towns tended to found a single Spanish community. Later, the Portuguese refugees arriving five years after the Spanish ones, in 1497, came with wealth and prosperity,

[3] Geller, p. 1531.
[4] Geller, p. 1531.

unlike their Spanish counterparts. The Spanish Jews had arrived nearly empty-handed. These Portuguese refugees founded synagogues separate from the Spanish Jews.[6]

Generally, the quality of life improved for the Jewish subjects of the Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Turks defeated the Mamluks in Egypt in 1517, the lives of the Jews there improved greatly. And the Ottoman Empire had the Jews already living within its borders to thank for its victory over the Mamluks. The Jews had manufactured and taught them about advanced firearms.[7] At this point, the Jews began to play a greater role in the Ottoman Empire. "The sultan's Egyptian rulers maintained Jewish chief bankers and money changers; they were appointed masters of the mint, as Egypt minted its own coins."[8] And, following the decision of Murad II, sultans continued to appoint Jewish physicians to high positions in the government.

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire over three continents brought tremendous opportunities for its Jewish inhabitants. The empire offered the Jews all they needed to engage in commerce, trade, industrial enterprises and the development of firearms. Jews had knowledge of the German, Italian, Spanish and French languages, thus providing the empire with an immense asset in its relations with Europe. The Jews knew enough to interact with Europeans in commerce, diplomacy and fiscal matters; yet, they did not pose the threat to the empire that they might join the Christian powers. Jews also undertook the manufacture of textiles, a skill they had learned in Spain. Until that time, the Ottomans had to import fabric.[9]

---

[5] Geller pp.1531-2.
[6] Geller, pp. 1532-3.
[7] Geller, p. 1534.
[8] Geller, p. 1535.
[9] Geller, p. 1545.

As Jewish involvement in the diplomatic affairs of the empire increased, the relationship between the Ottomans and Europe improved. Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66) introduced capitulation agreements between the Ottoman Empire and the European Christian countries. These capitulation agreements established mutual respect, rights and privileges for the visiting subjects of each country. Jews benefited from these agreements; when they were outside the Ottoman Empire, they retained "rights and protection from attacks on property and life."[10]

The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Late in the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire slowly began to decay. This decay affected all of the empire's inhabitants. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the sultans had a ruling class comprised of both Turks and "Muslims with elements of the conquered non-Muslim peoples."[11] Among this ruling class, a balance existed that allowed the sultans to keep control and reap benefit from all. For the Jews, this meant that if one group threatened them, the other side could serve as their advocate. In the middle of the sixteenth century, however, the *dev□irme*, the Muslims who had converted from Christianity, began to dominate the ruling class. The *dev□irme* expelled the Turkish aristocracy, eliminating the balance that had previously existed in the ruling class.[12]

Without competition, the *dev□irme* overpowered the sultans and the army for their own benefit. They selected government leaders based upon bribes, rather than skill or honesty, leading to a division among the leaders. Through their influence, the quality

---

[10] Geller, p. 1535.

[11] Stanford J. Shaw. The Jews of the Ottoman Empire, New York: New York University Press, 1991, p. 109.

of the sultanship declined, since the princes capable of realizing their own goals resisted the influence of the *dev□irme*. Without Turkish aristocracy and strong sultans to stop them, the *dev□irme* began to impose harsh taxes on the people.[13]

Anarchy abounded in the central government. This led to regular revolts and the overthrow of high officials. Without a strong central government, this corruption spread to the provinces and the smaller districts. Oppression was widespread, as high officials went unsupervised and often made decisions that benefited themselves financially, rather than responding to the needs of the empire and of the people.[14]

Such harsh conditions naturally generated revolts among the citizens, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The Turkish aristocracy, ousted from the central government, led many of these revolts, bringing the disenfranchised into their fold. The revolts limited the central government's influence on the provinces and outlying districts. Simply put, anarchy abounded.[15] As a result of these conditions, revenues from the provinces ceased to arrive at the central treasury. The treasury was forced to re-mint gold and silver coins now blended with other metals. This reduced their value, causing inflation in the empire.[16]

In addition to the financial troubles, the empire began to suffer from a food shortage. Due to corruption, farmers lacked the benefit of their own land and so they often left farming. The lands still under cultivation fell victim to raids and robbery. In the hopes of finding more food, many moved to the big cities, to no avail. This led to overcrowding in the cities, and this, in turn, encouraged the spread of disease. As if that

---

[12] Shaw, pp. 109-10.
[13] Shaw, p. 110.
[14] Shaw, p. 110.
[15] Shaw, p. 111.

were not enough, fires were frequent, including the wiping out of the entire Jewish quarter of Constantinople in 1606.[17]

Through the abuse of the capitulation agreements, once a great asset to the empire, the growing European states began to impose colonialism and imperialism on the outlying Ottoman provinces. Instead of mutually benefiting the people, the Europeans used the capitulation agreements were used to exploit the empire.[18] As anarchy spread, weakening the central government, "those who benefited from the capitulations became major exploiters of the Ottoman economy and people."[19]

The Ottoman subjects had no protection from their own government while the European merchants within the empire had their own consuls protecting them. They had protection from the rising taxes, and sometimes even exemption from paying them. The European merchants prospered while the Ottoman subjects suffered. This forced the Ottoman subjects out of business when there were European merchants competing with them.[20] On a limited basis, two sultans, Abdul Hamid I (1774-89) and Selim III (1789-1807), succeeded in stopping the decline of the empire; however, they were incapable of reversing it. When their opponents ousted them, the decline only continued.

The Effect of the Decline on Ottoman Jewry

While the decline of the Ottoman Empire created difficult conditions for all of its subjects, it was perhaps the Jews who suffered more than most. As the influence of the *dev□irme* brought more and more Christian influence from Europe, anti-Semitism

---

[16] Shaw, p. 112.
[17] Shaw, pp. 112-3.
[18] Shaw, p. 115.
[19] Shaw, p. 116.
[20] Shaw, pp. 116-7.

became more prevalent. It became increasingly difficult for Jews to engage in international trade. Groups under the influence of the *dev□irme* refused to do business with them. Power diminished among the sultans and the ruling class, while Europe's power continued to increase. Additionally, the general state of decline meant that the Jewish occupations, namely, trade, industry and commerce, suffered greatly.[21]

Even those Jews who held prominent positions in the Ottoman courts suffered because the *dev□irme* sought to replace them. Though many Jewish physicians maintained their roles in the courts, they faced competition from Greek and Armenian Christian physicians in the empire. Jews became the targets of misrule, excessive taxation, and robbery by the *dev□irme* and by the Janissary infantries under the *dev□irme*'s direction. As previously mentioned, the manipulated capitulation agreements restricted Jewish merchants, especially in their import and export of goods, through tax exemptions that were only available to Christian merchants. The Janissary corps often subjected Jews to forced labor in addition to collecting excessive taxes from them.[22] "Attacks on Jews directly paralleled the decline of central Ottoman control and the rise of provincial and local rebels against the sultan."[23]

Either on their way to a battle or on their return from a battle between the Ottomans and other territories, the Janissary corps frequently attacked Jewish communities. The community of Salonika was particularly subject to such attacks and in 1721, the Janissary corps stationed in Salonika revolted when its pay was late, mercilessly spreading its attack into the Jewish quarter.[24]

---

[21] Shaw, p. 119.
[22] Shaw, p. 120.
[23] Shaw, p. 121.
[24] Shaw, pp. 122-3.

As Jewish refugees in the Iberian Peninsula learned of the condition of life in the Ottoman Empire, they stopped immigrating to the empire. Instead, they settled in Western Europe, establishing the same kind of businesses that their predecessors had established, which had helped to make the Ottoman Empire strong. The Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in flight from the persecution of Eastern Europe, like the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648 and 1649, were most frequently poorer than their Sephardic counterparts. Rather than establishing their own communities and enterprises, they depended upon the existing Jewish communities for survival, placing and even greater burden on the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Jewish communities began to suffer a tremendous debt.[25]

With the decline of the empire, the economic burden increased for the Jewish community, particularly due to its care for the poor, ransoming those kidnapped by bandits, and paying the poll tax. The poll tax was a flat fee, not tied to earnings. Therefore, as Jews earned less money, it became a greater percentage of their total earnings. Since the religious leaders of the Jewish communities would not permit the sale of religious articles for the payment of taxes, wealthier members of the community often needed to pay emergency taxes. Rabbis, physicians, and synagogue servants, often exempt from taxes, refused to pay, even when the exemptions ceased, deeming the exemptions as God-given rights. They barred protesters from entering the synagogues and often threatened them with excommunication. The Jewish communities increasingly moved toward bankruptcy.[26]

---

[25] Shaw, pp. 123-4.
[26] Shaw, pp.. 124-5.

By 1740, the poll tax had absorbed most of the communities' funds, leaving nothing for schools, orphanages and hospitals. Eventually, the wealthy Jews did what they could to fulfill their religious obligations of caring for the poor. Unfortunately, the hardship for the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire exceeded financial matters. More and more, the authorities imposed upon them for any number of reasons. Along with other groups, Jews were subject to the enforcement of clothing and building regulations.[27]

In 1726, the government restricted the building of Jewish homes to a six meter height limit, as opposed to Muslim homes, which could stand eight meters high.[28] In 1728, Sultan Ahmed III (1703-1730) decreed that all Jews who lived near the mosque of the sultan's mother had to sell their homes and possessions to Muslims, in order, as it were, not to contaminate the street.[29] In 1730, Ahmed III prohibited Jews from wearing turbans, restricting them to old-style conical hats. Mahmud I restricted the import and sale of wine by Jews, affecting their role in foreign embassies. In 1758, Sultan Mustafa III (1757-1774) prohibited Jews from wearing clothing that resembled that of the Muslims, limiting choice in clothing color and head coverings, as well as prohibiting Jews from wearing fur.[30] He renewed an inactive decree from 1702, forbidding Jews from wearing shoes and hats in any color other than black.[31]

As European states began to capture Ottoman territories, their first efforts were often the expulsion or murder of the Jewish subjects living in these territories. The Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire followed their lead and began to persecute the

---

[27] Shaw, pp. 125-6.
[28] Shaw, p. 126.
[29] Geller, p. 1538.
[30] Shaw, p. 126.

Jews who were still living within the empire. In response to their suffering, the Jews of the Ottoman Empire reacted in a number of ways. However, the most prominent seemed to turn inward, uniting with their brethren.[32] "Economic decline and political anarchy stifled much of the intellectual curiosity of the past and ended contacts between most Ottoman Jews and those outside the empire."[33]

For the most part, the Jewish communities united in the face of persecution. The generations born in the empire of the sultans did not feel as connected to their ancestral lands as their parents had. They accepted the central leadership of the Jewish community, as well as Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*. They spoke Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language of the Iberian Peninsula's exiles. They renamed the various communities and followed the centralized Federal Council and its rabbis. Some reacted more harshly to the misrule and anarchy, perhaps in reaction to an increase in Christian blood-libel attacks. They often left the outlying provinces, moving to Constantinople.[34]

Though the enlightenment and rationalism were flourishing throughout Europe, Ottoman Judaism did not experience these advancements. Ottoman Jews, rather than emancipating themselves, withdrew from participation in society. "Ignorance and superstition replaced knowledge and thought."[35] By the eighteenth century, Hebrew was solely the language of religion, while Ladino was that of culture and communication.[36] The cultural tradition of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire suffered greatly during the eighteenth century. In fact, the majority of Jews could not read Hebrew literature. In

---

[31] Geller, p. 1538.
[32] Shaw, p. 127.
[33] Shaw, p. 131.
[34] Shaw, pp. 127-9.
[35] Shaw, p. 131.
[36] Shaw, p. 144.

order to reach the Jewish community, writers began to publish books in Ladino.[37] Eventually, Jacob ben Meir Culi began an intellectual revival through his work, *Me-am Lo'ez*.[38]

[37] Geller. p. 1550.
[38] Shaw, p. 144.

Chapter 3: Jacob ben Meir Culi and *Me-am Lo'ez*

Jacob ben Meir Culi

Jacob ben Meir Culi, born around 1685 in either Jerusalem or Safed, in *Eretz Yisrael*, was on his mother's side, the grandson of Rabbi Moses ibn Habib. His paternal grandfather, a Cretan of Spanish origin, was also a rabbi. In order to publish the works of his maternal grandfather, Moses ibn Habib, Jacob Culi traveled to Constantinople, where he studied under the chief rabbi, Judah Rosanes. Rosanes appointed Culi as a *dayyan*, a judge of the Jewish court, and made him a teacher of the community. Following the death of Rosanes in 1727, Culi published the late rabbi's works, as well. Culi did so, including notes and an introduction of his own. As a result, Culi became a founding father of Ladino literature.[1]

In 1730, Jacob Culi began writing his work, *Me-am Lo'ez*. He completed all of Genesis and a portion of Exodus. His stated goal was "to provide the Ladino-speaking layman with translations of appropriate traditional texts."[2] Ultimately, he produced a complex encyclopedic exegesis of the Bible in the Ladino language. *Me-am Lo'ez* covered all aspects of Jewish life and utilized a vast number of rabbinic sources. Though he did not complete the work himself, its publication continued after his death in 1732.[3] The subsequent authors, most notably Isaac ben Moses Magriso, using the manuscripts left behind, as well as their own work, followed Culi's style so closely that it is as though *Me-am Lo'ez* is a unified text.[4] Following Culi's work, the demand increased for the

---

[1] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Jacob Culi," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 5. pp. 1154-5.

[2] Ibid., p. 1155.

[3] Ibid., p. 1155.

[4] Henri Guttel, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Me-Am Lo'ez," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 11, p. 1159.

production of Hebrew texts translated into Ladino.[5] Jews of Sephardic origin often saw reading it as a religious obligation.[6]

Me-am Lo'ez: Its Form and Purpose

Jacob Culi drew his work's name from the first verse of Psalm 114, בית יעקב מעם לעז בצאת ישראל ממצרים, "When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language." Originally, he had intended to call his work *Beit Yaakov*; however, Culi later opted for *Me-am Loez*, perhaps as an allusion to Hebrew being a foreign tongue among the Jewish people of the Ottoman Empire.[7]

Me-am Lo'ez, the distinguished work of Ladino literature, is an ethico-homiletical commentary that covers topics as far and wide as life in general, history, ethics, philosophy, and biblical commentary. It clarifies the intent behind the laws with minute detail. Culi organized it by the weekly portion, moving verse by verse. Anecdotes, legends, historical narrative, and folklore link the biblical commentaries to one another. Most importantly, perhaps, Culi presented the material in a simple, colloquial style of Ladino.[8]

Following the fallout of the Shabbatai Zevi heresy, Culi sought to reabsorb the masses into Judaism. The people's ignorance of Hebrew prevented them from reading traditional literature, eventually leading them away from practice altogether. Culi had hoped to make all types of rabbinic literature accessible and appealing, including Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar, by translating them into Ladino. *Me-am Lo'ez*,

---

[5] "Jacob Culi," p. 1155.

[6] Henri Guttel, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Me-Am Lo'ez," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 11, p. 1159.

[7] Guttel, p. 1159.

[8] Guttel, p. 1158-9.

"written in an unpretentious, popular style in an attractive form,"[9] assisted Culi in achieving his goal. Culi wanted to make all aspects of Jewish life within the grasp of the people.

Jacob Culi's Own Introduction

In his own introduction to *Me-am Lo'ez*, Jacob Culi outlines his own purpose for composing his work. In this section, I will attempt to summarize Culi's stated goals of his work, *Me-am Lo'ez*. Jacob Culi explains that he intends to discuss Judaism's basic principles in order to help the people avoid sin, which they can only do by studying God's laws. He indicates that it is first and foremost an anthology of the Midrash and of other prominent Jewish works. The simple purpose of *Me-am Lo'ez*, according to Culi, is to outline each Jew's obligations.[10]

Culi insists that nothing in *Me-am Lo'ez* is his own work. "Do not think," he writes, "that I have written anything of my own in this book."[11] Studying *Me-am Lo'ez* reaps certain benefits for its reader, including most importantly an awareness of the commandments and an understanding of the miracles that God has done for the Jewish people. It also provides the means by which a Jew may fulfill his obligation to study the weekly Torah portion. The original prescription indicated a reading of the original Hebrew text twice and a reading of the Aramaic translation once. Culi offers *Me-am Lo'ez* as a worthwhile substitute for Jews unable to read Aramaic. Aramaic had become

---

[9] Ibid. p. 1159.

[10] Jacob Culi, MeAm Lo'ez, "Author's Introduction," New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation 19xx, Volume 1, p. 15.

[11] Culi, p. 16.

a foreign tongue. And those Jews for whom even Hebrew is a foreign tongue, Culi indicates that simply reading his work will suffice.[12]

Culi writes that "when a person studies the Torah so as to know which laws he must keep, it is considered as if he had observed the entire Torah."[13] So, through *Me-am Lo'ez*, Culi not only provides a history of the prophets and an introduction to the sacred texts with which the reader might be unfamiliar, but he also provides the reader with knowledge of Torah and its laws so that if a businessman, for example, desires to conduct business in a way that adheres to the Torah, he will be able to do so.[14] "The main goal was to enlighten the community so that they would know how to keep the Torah's commandments."[15]

Jacob Culi teaches his reader that the study of *Me-am Lo'ez* is equivalent to the study of Scripture, Talmud, Midrash, and the Codes because all of these are contained with his work;[16] however, keeping the commandments and doing good deeds is even more highly rewarded than Torah study alone.[17] Jacob Culi expresses that his intention in writing *Me-am Lo'ez* in Ladino it to make it accessible to everyone, providing all Jews with the opportunity to read it daily.[18] So, in order to do God's will, Culi insists that everyone should rush to read *Me-am Lo'ez*, now that a book exists that can teach God's laws in a language that the people understand.[19]

Culi's stated purpose is to teach Jews the laws and commandments of God. Accordingly, he outlines four ideas, that if remembered, will help each Jew to avoid sin.

---

[12] Ibid., pp. 16-7.
[13] Ibid., p. 19.
[14] Ibid., p. 18.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 31.
[17] Ibid., p. 22.
[18] Ibid., p. 31.

These include acknowledging the wonder of God's creation, understanding the concept of Torah, loving one's neighbor as oneself, and being mindful of one's mortality. Culi writes that awareness of the wonder of God's creation teaches that everything in the world interests God. Individuals concern God, producing distinct reward and punishment for each deed.[20]

Next, in explaining the concept of Torah, Culi seeks to give justification for his own work and its validity, making himself a link in *shalshelet ha-kabbalah*, the chain of tradition. First, he gives a history of Torah. He explains that the concept of Torah includes not only the Written Torah, but also the Oral Torah. God taught Moses the explanation of the Written Torah, providing the necessary tools for understanding it. One is unable to understand the commandments written in the Torah without the use of the Oral Torah. God never intended the memorization of Written Torah. Nor did God desire inscription of the Oral Torah. So, in order to transmit the knowledge, Moses taught his disciple Joshua. Joshua, in turn, taught the elders who taught the prophets. And the prophets taught the men of the Great Assembly. Since Torah is so complicated, each Jew is obligated to follow the sages' teachings.[21]

Jacob Culi then begins to illustrate evidence for changing the usual transmission of knowledge. He teaches that the Great Assembly permitted people to print the Torah with vowels and later, Judah ha-Nasi permitted inscription of the Mishnah, even though it is the Oral Torah. Eventually Rav Ashi permitted the writing of the commentary to the Mishnah, creating the Babylonian Talmud. Each of these changes, Culi shows, occurred because the rabbinic authorities of each time feared that ignorance would destroy

---

[19] Ibid., p. 30.
[20] Ibid., p. 1.

Judaism. Jews could not access the necessary texts. In order to prevent Judaism from disappearing, allowances were made to preserve the tradition.[22]

In his discussion of the Talmud, Culi goes one step further and reminds the reader that the sages wrote the majority of the Talmud in Aramaic, the vernacular language of their day. Rav Ashi permitted this in order to make the Talmud more comprehendible to the Jewish populace. As time passed, though, even the Mishnah and the Gemarah became inaccessible to the people, through ignorance of both Hebrew and Aramaic and because of the complex language of the texts.[23] In time, scholars composed codes of Jewish law and biblical exegesis, including the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*, and Rashi's commentary to the Bible and Talmud. "In every period in past generations, there were leaders who recognized a lack of Torah knowledge. Each one sought a way to uphold the Torah so that it would not be forgotten."[24]

At this point, Jacob Culi draws a parallel between himself and the scholars who preceded him. Each one made an effort to preserve the Jewish faith by ensuring that it was accessible to the people. Culi acknowledges that in his day, few were capable of reading the Bible in its original Hebrew. Many did not even know Hebrew. As a result, the people were beginning to forget the practices and beliefs of Judaism. Due to the lack of knowledge of Hebrew, even great codes of Jewish law like the *Shulhan Arukh* were unapproachable by the average Jew. Culi admits that Ladino translations of some of these texts existed in his day; however, these translations often existed in dialects that the entire Ladino-speaking population did not understand. Others, like Rabbi Moshe

---

[21] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[22] Ibid., pp. 3-5.
[23] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[24] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Almosnino's *Regimiento de la Vida*, utilized a lofty language that was over the heads of the people. Culi feared that possibly many, if not most Jews, would forget the Torah.[25] Thus, Culi establishes his authority to present the people with a Ladino anthology of Jewish texts, as notable scholars who preceded him recognized a similar urgency in their time to ensure the future of the Jewish faith.

Jacob Culi's third idea that, if remembered, helps a person avoid sin originates in Leviticus 19:17, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He teaches that this verse is the basis for all Torah, for "when a person gives others the benefit of the doubt, then he is given the benefit of the doubt by God."[26] By fulfilling this commandment, an individual keeps the whole Torah, avoiding sin.

The last idea that Jacob Culi presents is awareness of one's mortality. The fact that all human beings are mortal and will eventually die deserves constant meditation, he writes. In order to prevent the Angel of Death from causing a person to renounce God on his deathbed, each individual should make an annual declaration professing God's power and righteousness, God's unity and justice, and the belief in resurrection. This act helps a person to remember his connection with God, which will, like the ideas that come before this, help to prevent transgression.[27]

Finally, it is important to address one more issue in Culi's own introduction to *Me-am Lo'ez*. This is the issue of funding. Who paid for it? In his introduction Jacob Culi thanks his benefactor, Yehudah Mizrachi, who paid all of his debts and pledged to pay any future costs in order to see to the printing of *Me-am Lo'ez*. Culi outlines where, after paying for supplies and receiving his own compensation, the rest of the profits from

[25] Ibid., pp. 10-1.
[26] Ibid., p. 12.

the publication of *Me-am Lo'ez* will go. He explains that he will divide these profits into six equal portions. The first three will go to support the sages in *Eretz Yisrael*, particularly in the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, and Safed. The fourth portion will support the sages in Constantinople. Culi dedicates the fifth portion to taking care of the sick in the cities in *Eretz Yisrael* previously mentioned. And the final portion Culi earmarks for the Jewish community of Constantinople. Ultimately, Culi expresses that buying *Me-am Lo'ez* is, as it were, good for the Jews.[28]

---

[27] Ibid., pp. 14-5.
[28] Ibid., pp. 22-3.

Chapter 4: Jacob Culi's Sources

In his introduction to *Me-am Lo'ez*, Jacob Culi linked himself to the Rabbinic chain of tradition. Throughout his work, Culi utilized a vast number of classical sources. In the introductory chapter to the Ten Commandments, he uses over seventy-five sources. These texts include passages from the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, classical midrashim, and commentators of Bible, Talmud, and midrash. Culi's own editorial comments bind these classical texts together, creating the body of his work, *Me-am Lo'ez*.

Biblical Commentary

The Biblical commentators cited throughout *Me-am Lo'ez* span six centuries. They derive from both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions. This comprehensive collection of commentators clearly seeks to incorportate Culi's work into the chain of tradition. The earliest commentator cited in *Me-am Lo'ez* is Rashi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, born in Troyes, France in 1140. Rashi's commentary covers nearly ever book of the Bible. An adherence to the literal meaning of the text characterizes Rashi's commentary. Just as most French biblical commentary of his day incorporated a great deal of classical midrashic interpretation, so did Rashi's; however, he coupled that midrashic interpretation with literal interpretation of the text.[1] No commentary on the Bible would be complete without reference to Rashi. It was therefore very important for Jacob Culi to include Rashi's commentary in *Me-am Lo'ez*.

Me-am Lo'ez employs numerous Biblical commentators, each of whom approached the text with his own intention. Their diversity serves *Me-am Lo'ez* in a

number of ways, which I will explore more deeply below. Ibn Ezra, who began his commentary in Rome in 1140, like Rashi, sought to establish the literal meaning of the text. He also interpreted the legislative parts of the Bible.[2] Nahmanides (1194-1270), of Gerona, Catalonia, sought the deeper meaning of the text, more than he scrutinized individual words and phrases. His commentary covered both the narrative and legislative parts of the Bible, using aggadic and halakhic interpretations, analyzing them alongside his own opinions.[3] Unlike his predecessors, Gersonides (1288-1344), from France, condemned allegorical interpretations of the text. His commentary on the Pentateuch attempted to reconstitute Jewish law rationally, with the rational philosophy of Aristotle serving as a great influence.[4]

The earliest notable Sephardic commentator appearing in *Me-am Lo'ez* is Bahya ben Asher, who lived in Sagarossa, Aragon, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He interpreted the text in four ways: literally, through the lens of homiletics, rationally, and according to the Kabbalah. He used a wide range of literature in his commentary.[5] In addition to the comprehensive commentaries of others, *Me-am Lo'ez* also used specific works. Imrey Noam, the Pentateuchal commentary of Ya'acov Illescas, deals particularly with difficult passages in the works of Ibn Ezra and Rashi.[6] Akedath Yitzhak, the work of the Spanish commentator Isaac Arama (1420-1494) includes philosophical homilies

---

[1] Avraham Grossman, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Rashi," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd.. 1971.

[2] Tovia Preschel, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Abraham ibn Ezra," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[3] Tovia Preschel, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Nahmanides," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[4] Bernard R. Goldstein, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Levi ben Gershom," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[5] Efraim Gottlieb, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[6] Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, pp. 722-723.

and allegorical commentaries on the Pentateuch. Each passage, divided in two parts, utilizes a philosophical idea in order to solve difficulties in the scriptural commentary.[7]

Me-am Lo'ez cites one Sephardic commentator more extensively than most others. Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel (1437-1508) was a Portuguese statesman, philosopher, and biblical commentator. He served as treasurer to King Afonso V in Portugal and, following expulsion by the Inquisition, he lived in Naples, Italy, where his commentary flourished. He began his commentary with the books of the Prophets, quoting extensively from midrash and often criticizing his sources, especially when he determined that they opposed the literal meaning of the text. Both Isaac Arama and Gersonides influenced Abrabanel greatly. The conditions of his time in Italy, surviving in exile, influenced his opposition towards philosophical allegory. He feared that under the conditions of exile, it would be detrimental to undermine the faith of the unquestioning Jew. There were three innovations in Abrabanel's exegesis. First, he compared the society of Biblical times to that of his own place and time. Second, he involved Christian commentary, either refuting their christological interpretations of the text, or incorporating their ideas when he viewed them as valid. Finally, Abrabanel wrote introductions to the books of the prophets that catalogued their contents, divisions, authors, and even compared the method and style of various prophets.[8] His sense of history and awareness of his own place and time surely influenced the endeavors of *Me-am Lo'ez*.

---

[7] Sara O. Heller-Wilensky, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Isaac ben Moses Arama." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[8] Avraham Grossman, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Me-am Lo'ez incorporates two commentaries from the sixteenth century. First, Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (c. 1470-c. 1550) lived in Bologna, Italy, where he re-established a Hebrew printing house and wrote a commentary to the Pentateuch, among other books. Like his earliest predecessors, Sforno sought the literal meaning of the text, avoiding mystical interpretations. He, unlike his predecessors, commented on entire passages, rather than progressing verse by verse.[9] Finally, Eliezer ben Eliyah Ashkenazi's commentary, Maaseh HaShem, utilizes a rational independent approach in Biblical commentary, indicating that the opinions of those who came before should not be a hindrance to learning. He lived from 1513-1586, originally in Egypt and ultimately in Cracow; however, Ashkenazi lived in Cyprus, Venice, Prague, and Posen during his life.[10]

Each of these commentators serves *Me-am Lo'ez* in a number of ways. First, their use of those who preceded them give authority to *Me-am Lo'ez* as a link in the chain of tradition. Second, each responds to the needs of his day, addressing the central concerns of his time, in the same way that Jacob Culi sought to employ *Me-am Lo'ez* to affect change in his time. Culi's use of classical sources, though, extends far beyond Biblical commentators.

Talmudic Sources and Commentary

The Talmudic sources in *Me-am Lo'ez* come from both the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. The Palestinian Talmud is an elaboration of the Mishnah by the amoraim during the third and fourth centuries. Its compilation occurred in Palestine

---

[9] Avraham Grossman, Encylopedia Judaica, "Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[10] Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, p. 726.

about a century before the Babylonian Talmud, in 500. The academies of Caesarea, Tiberias, and Sepphoris, in the Land of Israel, influenced its compilation. It is important to note that its Mishnah does not match the Babylonian Talmud precisely.[11] The Babylonian Talmud is also an interpretation and elaboration of the Mishnah. Its scholars studied at the academies of Babylon. As Culi stated in his introduction to *Me-am Lo'ez*, persecution in the time of Rav Ashi (335-427) persuaded the sages to permit its commitment to writing. Ultimately, it has more authority than its Palestinian counterpart.[12]

In addition to passages from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, *Me-am Lo'ez* also incorporates commentary to the Talmud. The works of the Maharsha, Shmuel Eliezer ben Yehuda Halevi Edels (1555-1631) and the Tosafot contribute to the text of *Me-am Lo'ez*. The Tosafot are a collection of commentary on the Talmud. The Talmudic tractates establish their organization; however, they comment as much on Rashi and other commentators as they comment on the text of the Talmud.[13] The Maharsha, who lived in Cracow, was the foremost commentator to the Talmud after Rashi and the Tosafists. He explained the difficulties in both the legal and homilies of the text.[14]

Midrashic Sources and Commentary

Scholars widely regard *Me-am Lo'ez* as a compilation of midrashim. The comprehensive use of midrashim throughout *Me-am Lo'ez* helps to establish this characterization. In the introductory chapter to the Ten Commandments, *Me-am Lo'ez*

---

[11] Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Talmud, Jerusalem," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[12] Eliezer Berkovits, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Babylonian Talmud," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

uses a great number of midrashic collections. Among these are the three notable collections of midrashim: Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Midrash Rabbah, and the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael.

Before exploring these three midrashic collections in depth, it is important simply to identify the other midrashim utilized in *Me-am Lo'ez*. Sifrei de-Vei Rav, or Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai, is a halakhic midrash on Exodus. Its exegetical midrash expound the text chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Sections and paragraphs, rather than the weekly portions, divide its text, which is pure rabbinic Hebrew with some Greek and Latin words. Its redaction took place in the beginning of the fifth century, in Palestine.[15] Tanhuma, aggadic midrashim that include the standard printed Tanhuma, contain homiletic midrashim that begin with a halakhic question. Its edition occurred no earlier than the year 800.[16] Yalkut Shimoni, a midrashic anthology compiled by Simeon of Frankfurt, is perhaps the most comprehensive compilation of midrashim. It covers entire Bible, using more than fifty other works. Scholars attribitute its authorship to Simeon ha-Darshan, who lived in the thirteenth century.[17] Finally, the Zohar contains kabbalistic midrash on the Torah. Apparently obscure verses begin its passages, which the text then links to the weekly portion's subject. It contains both Aramaic and medieval Hebrew in

---

[13] Israel Moses Ta-Shma, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Tosafot," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House. Ltd., 1971

[14] Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, p. 726.

[15] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[16] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Tanhuma Yelammedenu," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[17] Jacob Elbaum, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Yalkut Shimoni," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

the aggadic style. Scholars estimate that its compilation occurred around 1268, under the guidance of Castilian kabbalist Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon.[18]

Now, it is important to cover some of the contributing midrashim in more depth. Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer gets its name from its opening line, "It is related of Eliezer b. Hyrcanus." Unlike other midrashim, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, an eighth century work, is an aggadic narrative, rather than a chronicle of each verse of the Bible. Its narrative begins with Creation. The text addresses the Biblical story from that point until Miriam's leprosy. Beginning with its legends surrounding Abraham, the text of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer connects the themes of the Amidah and the Biblical narrative; however, it does not cover all of the benedictions. The Hebrew Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer is geonic and the text includes a number of Greek words. Its sources include tannaitic literature and the Palestinian Talmud, among other texts. The text addresses and catalogues its own time, including the customary practice in the Land of Israel, Arabic legends, and elaborate descriptions of the Omayyad dynasty. Its awareness of its own time certainly parallels *Me-am Lo'ez*.[19]

Me'am Lo'ez extensively cites Midrash Rabbah, drawing from six of its books: Genesis Rabbah, Exodus Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah, Deuteronomy Rabbah, and Song of Songs Rabbah, each of which has its own history. Genesis Rabbah is an aggadic midrash on the book of Genesis. It is the product of the Palestinian amoraim. An exegetical midrash, it comments on the text chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Its divisions fall along the lines of the weekly portions as well as the triennial

---

[18] Gershom Scholem, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Zohar," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd.. 1971.

[19] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Torah reading cycle. Additionally, it utilizes the paragraph markings of the Masoretic text. An anonymous proem begins each of its sections. The texts and Hebrew style that it shares with the Palestinian Talmud indicate a shared mutual source, rather than one influencing the other. Its redaction took place around 425 and it is the earliest collection of aggadic midrash.[20]

Exodus Rabbah consists of two separate works, Exodus Rabbah I and Exodus Rabbah II. Exodus Rabbah I, an aggadic midrash on Exodus 1-10, progresses chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Its divisions, like Genesis Rabbah, follow the weekly Torah portions and the triennial cycle. The proems that begin its sections are all anonymous, save one. Its redaction took place much later than Genesis Rabbah, in the tenth century. The Hebrew of the Mishnah and of the Middle Ages influenced the Hebrew of Exodus Rabbah I. Both the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud, as well as the texts of other Midrash Rabbah contribute to its narrative. Exodus Rabbah II, covering Exodus 12-40, is a homiletical midrash of the *yelammedenu-tanhuma* style, where a question of halakhic substance begins each passage. Its divisions only follow the triennial cycle of Torah readings. Unlike Exodus Rabbah I, Exodus Rabbah II concludes each section with an epilogue. The two works became one around the eleventh or twelfth century.[21]

The Palestinian locale, where Leviticus Rabbah originated in the fifth century, influences its stories and homilies. Leviticus Rabbah, rather than progressing verse by verse, contains a specific theme for each of the Torah portions. It does not always cover every aspect of the portion. The homilies and stories of Leviticus Rabbah link its

---

[20] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Genesis Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[21] Melvyn, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Exodus Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

author's own words, making it a unified work. Each of its sections contains a proem, a main body, and a conclusion that often included messianic hope.[22]

Like Exodus Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah began as two separate works. Numbers Rabbah I a homiletic work, covered Numbers 1-8 and moved chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Each passage details a particular theme, following the paragraph divisions of the Masoretic text and the weekly Torah portions. Its Hebrew most closely resembles that of the Mishnah and the early medieval period. Numbers Rabbah II is a homiletic midrash, as well, in the *yelammedenu-tanhuma* style. Its divisions follow the triennial cycle. Its composition occurred during the ninth century. Numbers Rabbah I and II became one work around the thirteenth century.[23]

Much like Numbers Rabbah, Deuteronomy Rabbah is a homiletic midrash in the *yelammedenu-tanhuma* style. The weekly portions and the triennial cycle serve as its dividers. Its homilies contain both halakhah and aggadah in rabbinic Hebrew as well as Galilean Aramaic and Greek. It final redaction occurred around the year 800.[24]

The final Midrash Rabbah in *Me-am Lo'ez* is Song of Songs Rabbah. The Palestinian amoraim produced this aggadic, exegetical midrash. Two sections divide Song of Songs Rabbah. The first covers Song of Songs 1:1-2:7. The second covers the rest of Song of Songs. It contains five proems characteristic of amoraic midrashim,

---

[22] Editorial Staff, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Leviticus Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House. Ltd., 1971.

[23] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Numbers Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[24] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Deuteronomy Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

which start with an apparently unrelated verse and then connect that verse with a verse from the biblical text. It is a work of mid-sixth century Palestine.[25]

Lastly, the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael is an exegetical midrash for the book of Exodus. The Mekhilta does not cover all of Exodus, only covering Exodus 12:1-23:19, 31:12-17, 35:1-3. Rather than following the weekly Torah portions, the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael has nine sections, divided into paragraphs. As a halakhic midrash, its passages do not begin with proems. Its text consists of rabbinic Hebrew with some Greek and Latin words. Scholars estimate its origin to Palestine no earlier than the end of the fourth century.[26]

Jacob Culi's Editorial Comments

Finally, it is important to address Jacob Culi's editorial comments throughout *Me-am Lo'ez*. While Culi states in his introduction that none of the material in *Me-am Lo'ez* is his own, this cannot be the case. In fact, it is Culi's own editorial comments that bind the rest of the work together. He links the texts he has chosen to one another, establishing the message of the text that he seeks to present. Later, I will dedicate portion of this work to evaluating and analyzing the editorial comments of Jacob Culi and the impact they have on the text of *Me-am Lo'ez*.

---

[25] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Song of Songs Rabbah," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

[26] Moshe David Herr, Encyclopedia Judaica, "Mekhilta of R. Ishmael," Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Chapter 5: A Foreign Tongue: The Message of *Me-am Lo'ez*

Throughout *Me-am Lo'ez*, Jacob Culi expresses his ideas and goals through three means: the texts he uses, the texts he omits, and his own editorial comments. The vehicle he uses to expresses his goals and ideas is the process of teaching Torah through exegesis. Culi conveys his message through a number of rubrics, specific themes illustrated in the text. In each rubric, Culi selects certain texts while omitting others. He then weaves the texts together with his own editorial comments. I seek now to examine the rubrics present in *Me-am Lo'ez*, Book Six: The Ten Commandments, Chapter 3, the introductory chapter to the Ten Commandments, in order to convey the ideas and goals of Jacob Culi and of *Me-am Lo'ez*.

Commitment to God

Through *Me-am Lo'ez*, Jacob Culi hoped to restore the Jewish people's commitment to God and the proper practice of their faith. His description of Israel receiving Torah at Mount Sinai and the texts he uses portray a special relationship that God has with the Jewish people, one, he hopes, with which the Ottoman Jews can identify. According to many classic sources, the relationship between God and Israel resembles the enduring commitment between a husband and wife. Culi supports this view through his use of a passage from Tractate Gittin of the Babylonian Talmud. In this midrash, Rabbi Yehudah illustrates an account of a woman and her seven sons whom Caesar called before him, ordering them to bow down and worship an idol. Each son cites tradition in his reason for not bowing down. The seventh son cites Deuteronomy

26:17-18, stating that Israel has sworn not to exchange God for another god. As well, he says that God has sworn to us that God will not exchange us for another nation.[1]

Me-am Lo'ez also employs a passage from Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer to illustrate this theme. According to that passage, the Israelites slept late the day God prepared to give them the Torah. Moses went to the camp and woke the Israelites to tell them God was ready to give them the Torah. In this midrash, Moses says to the Israelites, "The bridegroom wishes to lead the bried and to enter the bridal chamber." According to the text, God departed to greet them in the same way that a bridegroom goes to meet his bride.[2] Through the use of these two texts, Culi teaches the mutual commitment that exists between God and the Jewish people. Israel has made a commitment to God; God has made a commitment to Israel.

Culi further demonstrates God's commitment to the Jewish people when he discusses the importance of remembering the revelation at Sinai. He utilizes a passage from the Babylonian Talmud in order to explain why the Ten Commandments begin with the word *Anokhi* (אנכי). According to Rabbi Jochanan, the word *Anokhi* is an acronym: אנא נפשי כתיבת יהבית, meaning, "I, Myself, wrote and gave the Torah."[3] This notion expresses the personal connection that God has with the Torah, God's greatest gift to Israel.

It is important to note that though the concept that God's relationship with Israel resembles marriage, the structure of that relationship differs from one source to the next. Jacob Culi establishes a specific relationship between God and Israel, one of ongoing, mutual commitment. Accordingly, he omits a particular midrash from his discussion of

---

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b.

Israel's commitment to God. In Exodus Rabbah, Rabbi Tobiah b. Isaac analyzes the first commandment, "I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2), comparing Israel to a princess whom robbers have captured. A king rescues her and then seeks to marry her. When she requests a dowry, the king answers that his rescuing her is dowry enough.[4] In this model, God has already demonstrated a commitment to Israel; however, Israel has yet to reciprocate that commitment. In order to return the Ottoman Jews to their relationship with God, it is important for Culi to demonstrate that the commitment is ongoing and mutual, that God still has something to offer Israel.

In this model of mutual commitment, Israel bears the burden. Though he departs, for a moment, from the model of husband and wife, Culi demonstrates, through the relationship of a father and his children, that God remains an active participant in the relationship, while it is Israel who has departed. His editorial comments urge Israel to return to God when he writes, "God always speaks to us, since a Father does not refrain from speaking to His children. However, since we have defiled ourselves through our evil passions, we no longer have this merit. We are therefore like children who have been cast out by their father."[5] Though it may appear that God has forsaken Israel, Culi shows that God continues to speak to Israel, awaiting Israel's return.

---

[2] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 41, p. 157.
[3] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 105a.
[4] Exodus Rabbah, Yitro 29:3.
[5] Jacob Culi, Me-am Lo'ez, Book Six: The Ten Commandments, Brooklyn: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1979, p. 136.

Observance of the Commandments

The way for Israel to return to God is through observance of the commandments; however, as Culi has stated in his introduction, the Ottoman Jews cannot follow the commandments if they lack knowledge of them. It is Jacob Culi's hope that, through *Me-am Lo'ez*, the people will gain access to the commandments. While he recognizes the notion that being a good person is good in and of itself, he emphasizes, through a number of sources, the sense that the reward is greater for one God commands than one whom God does not command. According to Rabbi Hanina, if someone performs a commandment without having been commanded, he will receive a reward; however, the person who has been commanded will receive an even greater reward. Having been commanded and performing a precept is greater than simply performing that precept.[6] For Culi, it is important that the Ottoman Jews learn the commandments and perform them, since their being commanded magnifies their reward and punishment. For Culi, it is not enough simply to learn about the commandments. One must take the next step and put that knowledge into action.

Me-am Lo'ez reminds the Ottoman Jews that their ancestors, standing at Sinai, agreed to keep all the commandments. In fact, every person present answered God with one voice, accepting God's commandments, saying, "All that God says we will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24:7). Culi presents the first half of this midrash in *Me-am Lo'ez*. The midrash emphasizes that the people miraculously answered God with one voice; however, when they reached the wilderness, the Israelites violated the commandments.[7]

---

[6] Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 38a; Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 87a; Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a.

[7] Exodus Rabbah 42:1.

Culi hopes to inspire the Ottoman Jews to reaffirm their commitment to observance of the commandments.

Culi presents his own interpretation of the Israelites' initial response, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). He explains that this statement has two potential interpretations. "It can be interpreted very positively. According to this, the Israelites were saying, 'There is no question that we will keep everything that you have already told us in God's name. But we will also keep everything that God has told *you* even if you have not yet told it to us.'"[8] The Israelites blindly accepted everything God commanded. Culi continues, "their words can also be interpreted negatively. According to this, the Israelites did not have great faith in Moses and they were almost taunting him with their words. They therefore said, 'All that *God* has spoken we will do. We are not questioning the face [sic][9] that we must obey all that *God* tells us to do. But how do we know that what you are telling us is God's word?'"[10] When the Israelites overheard God telling Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after" (Exodus 19:9), they understood that Moses may have misunderstood their words to mean that they did not trust Moses. *Me-am Lo 'ez* continues:

> The Israelites realized that if they had the audacity even to hint at such a thing, it would be considered a great fault on their part. How could they even begin to suspect that Moses would pretend to speak in God's name after they had seen all the great wonders and miracles that God had done through him?
>
> Therefore, when they responded a second time, they were careful to clarify their words, and they said, "All that God has spoken we will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24:7). In effect, they were saying to Moses, "This should remove any possibility that we doubt your prophecy. We

[8] Culi, p. 110.
[9] The author believes the text of *Me-am Lo 'ez* should read "fact."
[10] Culi, p. 110.

> obviously know how great you are. We believed in you implicitly from the time of the splitting of the Red Sea. (This is alluded to in the verse, 'They believed in God and in His servant Moses' (Exodus 14:31).)
>
> "It is true that we said, 'All that God has spoken, we will do.' This seems to indicate that we wish to hear God's own word. But do not interpret this negatively, and think that we do not believe in you, and that if we do not hear it from God we will not obey it."[11]

Culi continues, explaining that the Israelites simply wanted to hear God directly. They wanted protection from any false messiah whose followers might insist that it was Moses who gave the Torah, not God. They wanted proof that God gave the Torah, shielding them from the claim of any false messiah or prophet.[12]

In order to assert the importance of the Torah, *Me-am Lo'ez* substantiates the notion that the Ten Commandments contained every commandment in the Torah. According to Numbers Rabbah, the words *filled with incense* (Numbers 7:20) imply that the Ten Commandments contain all six hundred and thirteen. There are six hundred and twenty letters in the Ten Commandments. These letters represent the six hundred and thirteen commandments and the seven days of creation, indicating that God created the world for the sake of Torah.[13] This demonstrates the gravity of the Torah and the value in following its commandments.

In Culi's discussion regarding the order of the commandments, he demonstrates how each commandment builds on the one before it, culminating in the commandment not to covet the belongings of one's neighbor. Here, Culi utilizes Bahya's commentary on Exodus 20:14. Bahya teaches that coveting is such a serious transgression because it could lead to transgression of other commandments, including murder, robbery, and

---

[11] Ibid., p. 111.
[12] Ibid., pp. 111-112.
[13] Numbers Rabbah 13:16.

testifying falsely.[14] Bahya outlines a kabbalistic approach concerning the order of the commandments; however, Jacob Culi does not use this part of Bahya's commentary.

In his discussion of commanded-ness, Jacob Culi incorporates his own ideas about knowledge and action. "If a person studies Torah all day, but does not keep the commandments, his study is of little value. The main reason for studying the Torah is to know how to keep the commandments, so that one will ultimately keep them properly. Thus, while observance without study is beneficial, study without observance is virtually worthless."[15] For Culi, study is only the first step; study is not enough on its own. Observance must follow study. He was aware that his audience could not spend much time in study.

Because of the value Culi places on observance coupled with study, it was important for Culi, then, to omit a particular midrash from the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. According to the midrash in Tractate Bahodesh, regarding Exodus 19:5, if a person hears one commandment, he will obtain the opportunity to hear many more commandments. If however, he forgets even one commandment, he will likely forget many more commandments.[16] For Culi, it is of the utmost importance that one progresses beyond simply learning or hearing a commandment. The goal of study is action.

---

[14] Bahya on Exodus 20:14.

[15] Culi, p. 109.

[16] Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bahodesh, Chapter 2, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933, p. 203.

Avoidance of Idolatry, Sin, and the Evil Urge

Knowledge and observation of the commandments help a person avoid sin. *Me-am Lo'ez* utilizes a number of midrashim in order to teach the value of avoiding sin. *Me'am Lo'ez* cites examples from Numbers Rabbah and the Zohar teach that "if a person violates any of the negative commandments, it is considered as if he had committed idolatry."[17] A midrash in Numbers Rabbah describes the encounter between Adam and God in the garden of Eden. God has commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam, however, violates this negative commandment, eating the fruit. This violation leads Adam to sin even further. When God desires repentance, Adam refuses. Instead, he blasphemes God, behaving like an idolater. His violation of the commandment permits the Evil Urge to overcome him, leading him to sin and idolatry.[18] Culi's message includes an aspiration to help people avoid sin. Simply learning about the commandments is not enough. One must then observe the commandments, overcome his Evil Urge, and avoid transgression; otherwise, he will be like an idolater.

According to a midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah that Culi includes, the Evil Urge only affects a person if he does not desire its removal. The Israelites called to God, asking God to place knowledge of Torah permanently in their hearts. Though God could only promise that in the days to come, God removed the Evil Urge from within the Israelites when they heard the second commandment. They, unfortunately, were then unable to hear the commandments directly from God. The midrash teaches that, at this

[17] Culi, p. 161.
[18] Numbers Rabbah 13:3.

moment, the Evil Urge returned to their hearts, since they had not been ready to hear God directly.[19]

Me-am Lo'ez directs the Ottoman Jews to avoid the idolatry of those around them, as well. Jacob Culi acknowledges that Jewish law permits the use of land that others have used for idolatry. According to both the Babylonian Talmud and Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* anything that man's hands have touched, even if people have used it for idolatry, may provide benefit for Jews. Accordingly, any of the other mountains could have, by Jewish law, been the location for revelation.[20] Culi indicates that even though Jewish law would permit revelation to take place on these other mountains, "it would have been impossible for God to allow his Divine Presence to rest and give the Torah on a place on a mountain upon which idols had been worshiped. According to the law, although it is permitted for an ordinary person to make use of a mountain upon which idols had been worshiped, it is still forbidden to use its stones to make an altar for God. Moreover, God could not give the Torah on a mountain where there had been idolatrous worship, since if He had, the pagans could have said that all the power of the Torah comes from their deity."[21]

Me-am Lo'ez advises the Ottoman Jews regarding the punishment they will incur for not following God's commandments. Recounting the trembling of the mountains, Culi cites Exodus Rabbah, indicating that the mountains' trembling will not compare to what those who do not follow the commandments will incur on the Day of Judgment. The midrash states that God witnessed idolaters destroying the Temple, becoming

---

[19] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2. 4.

[20] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 45a; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, "The Laws of the Worship of Stars and their Statutes," Chapter 8:1.

[21] Culi, p. 117.

enraged, permitting the destruction of the Temple and letting the Babylonians enslave Israel because the people had violated the commandments.[22]

One of the midrashim that Jacob Culi uses in *Me-am Lo'ez* tells of an argument between Moses and the angels as God prepared to give the Torah to Israel. The angels contested God's giving Torah to Israel, indicating that such a lofty gift should remain in heaven, with the angels. God instructed Moses to answer the angels directly. Moses challenged the angels concerning each of the commandments. First, Moses asked them if they were enslaved in Egypt, if God had rescued them. Then, he asks if they live among other nations who worship idols, which they do not. He asks if they do any work that requires rest on the Sabbath. He tells them they do not have fathers and mothers to honor. Concerning the commandments against murder, adultery, and theft, Moses reminds the angels that they do not have an Evil Urge. At this point, the angels forfeit the argument, admitting that Torah belongs to humanity. Acknowledging that without an Evil Urge, they could not commit any sins, each angel presented Moses with gifts.[23]

Culi expands the conversation of idolatry, incorporating his own editorial comments into the discussion of avoiding sin and idolatry. First, he feels that in order to avoid sin effectively, one must constantly engage in Jewish practice. Time spent on other tasks and activities is a waste of time, according to Culi. He includes a letter from Aristotle to Alexander the Great in *Me-am Lo'ez*, from the work Shalshelet HaKabbalah, in which Aristotle allegedly writes that he has wasted his life on philosophy. Culi includes this letter and comments, "This letter was written by the greatest philosopher of all. Whoever reads it will realize that all philosophical studies are nothing but a waste of

---

[22] Exodus Rabbah 29:9.
[23] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b-89a.

time."[24] Culi makes another important editorial comment regarding sin. He follows the belief that each individual is responsible for his actions and for avoiding sin; however, he includes a discussion of group responsibility. In his day, it was important for Culi to bring the Ottoman Jews together, creating a bond among them. So, in addition to emphasizing each person's individual responsibility to avoid sin, he also discusses group responsibility in this passage:

> When they accepted Torah, the Israelites also became responsible for each other. Each one has a responsibility to see that others keep the Torah. Each one must correct others and teach them. One should not feel that he does not have responsibility for what others do. If he feels this way, he can see others sin and feel that it is no concern of his. Others may violate the Sabbath, swear falsely or vainly by God's name, refrain from worship and the like, and he feels that it has nothing to do with him. However, the truth is that every Jew is responsible for every other Jew. Therefore, each one has the responsibility to correct others. If one has the ability to do so and does not, he is also punished for the sin.[25]

Here, Culi expands the notion of responsibility for one another. In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, the midrash teaches that if one person sins, all of Israel suffers;[26] however, Culi extends this responsibility to sin and indicates that if one Jew permits another to sin, the first will be punished as well as the sinner, simply for allowing the sin to occur. For Culi, the punishment occurs because one has permitted another to sin, not only because the sin has simply taken place. Culi emphasizes that one must always avoid sin and idolatry. It was important, then, that *Me-am Lo'ez* omit the notion that the Torah contains laws for which a person receives reward for his obedience, but does not receive punishment for disregard of the commandment.[27]

---

[24] Culi, p. 155.
[25] Ibid., pp. 175-176.
[26] Lauterbach, p. 206.
[27] Ibid., pp. 227-228.

Israel and the Other Nations

Me-am Lo'ez urged the Ottoman Jews to return to Judaism. Nonetheless, they were living among other nations, having assimilated themselves to life in the Ottoman Empire, albeit living in communities separate from the larger community. While trying to attract the Jews back to Judaism and observance of the commandments, Jacob Culi also sought to teach the Ottoman Jews about the relationship that the other nations have with God and Israel, while not offending the delicate balance between their Jewish and Ottoman identities.

Culi discusses that God offered the Torah to the other nations of the world. It was they, not God, who declined the relationship. He cites extensively from the midrashim that cover the dialogue between God and each of the other nations. According to the account of the Zohar, God offered the Torah to Samael, the genius of Esauites and to Rahab, the genius of the Ishmaelites. Each declined the Torah for his own reason. Samael said that without the power to murder, his existence would be for naught, so he could not accept the Torah. Rahab refused the Torah because his existence depended upon adultery. Each gave up his birthright, since God had to offer the Torah to the firstborn. Additionally, both suggested that God offer the Torah to Israel.[28] Culi expands God's offer beyond the Esauites and the Ishmaelites. "The Torah only mentions Seir and Paran, which are Esua and Ishmael. This is because their geniuses were the greatest of all the angels of destruction. But in reality, the geniuses of all the nations gave gifts to Israel."[29]

---

[28] Zohar, Balak. 192b.
[29] Culi, p. 99.

The midrash in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer teaches that after God offered the Torah to the Esauites and the Ishmaelites, God offered it to every nation of the world. When they asked what the Torah contained, they learned that they could not worship other gods. At that point, they rejected the Torah.[30] In the account of this midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, the nations made this statement after initially trembling with fear. They had heard God's voice resounding throughout the world. Initially, they feared that God prepared to destroy the world. When they learned that God, instead, was giving Torah to Israel, they said, "May the Lord grand strength to His people; may the Lord bestow on His people well-being" (Psalms 29:11).[31] Additionally, the Mekhilta teaches that God deliberately chose to give the Torah in a public place, rather than in a secret, obscure place, preventing the other nations from accusing God of not making Torah available to them.[32]

Following the nations' rejection of the Torah, God's voice harmed them. It was beneficial, however, for the Israelites.[33] According to a number of midrashim, God's voice divided into two distinct parts. For the Israelites, it was life-giving. For the other nations, though, it was deadly, because they had refused to accept the Torah.[34]

Perhaps Culi desired to placate anyone from these other nations who may have read his work. In his discussion of God offering the Torah to the other nations, Culi alludes to the possibility that the other nations are not responsible for not being capable of receiving Torah. He writes, "Obviously, they did not have any prophets with whom God could speak. We know that there were no prophets among the Esauites and

---

[30] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 41, pp. 154-155.
[31] Babiyonian Talmud, Zevachim 116a.
[32] Lauterbach, , pp. 198-199.
[33] Tanhuma Shemot, Exodus 7:8.

Ishmaelites. It is also impossible to say that God spoke to every individual among them. The only nation to whom God revealed Himself *en masse* was Israel."[35] Culi's effort not to offend the other nations become even clearer through examination of a midrash he omits from *Me-am Lo'ez*.

The very beginning of Tractate Bahodesh of the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael includes an account of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. On his way to Emmaus in Judea, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai observed a girl collecting grain from the manure of a horse. He asked his disciples who this girl was. They told him that she was a Jewish girl. Then, he asks to whom the horse belongs. They tell him it belongs to an Arabian horseman. He explains to his disciples that because the girl refused to submit to God, God has forced her to submit "to the most inferior of the nations, the Arabs."[36] Refusal to serve God, even when things are going well, he teaches, will cause a person to serve his enemy under the worst of conditions. It is clear why Culi would omit this midrash during his discussion of the relationship between Israel and the other nations. He could have seriously offended the Muslim rule under which he and the Ottoman Jews were living. Nonetheless, Culi still affirms the superiority of Israel, indicating that "even if the other nations accepted the Torah, they would not be saved from the power of death. Since they originally did not want the Torah, their later acceptance would be for an ulterior motive, to gain immortality."[37]

---

[34] Leviticus Rabbah 1:11, Exodus Rabbah 5:9.
[35] Culi, p. 96.
[36] Lauterbach, , p. 194.

Klal Yisrael

Jacob Culi's goal of drawing Jews back to Judaism included unity and equality among all Jews. Culi teaches that the equality necessary for Judaism to continue no longer existed among the Ottoman Jews. He indicates that at Sinai, the Israelites could not receive the Torah unless all were present at Sinai. According to the Mekhilta, the phrase "in the sight of all the people" (Exodus 19:11) indicates that if even one of the Israelites had been missing, they could not have received Torah.[38] *Me-am Lo'ez* teaches that though six hundred thousand men were present at Sinai, in fact, over three million people including the women and children, they did not remain a cohesive unit after revelation. Shortly after accepting Torah with one voice, Israel began to break apart, transgressing the commandments they had just accepted.[39] Nonetheless, Culi emphasizes the equality among all of Israel, and their superiority for having received Torah. To demonstrate this, Culi uses a passage from the Babylonian Talmud in which Abaye teaches that all of the people of Israel are princes. When God descended to give Torah to the Israelites, angels accompanied God, presenting the Israelites with a spiritual crown and a belt. These garments demonstrated the Israelites' immunity from subjugation to any government. They derive their nobility from Torah.[40]

The aforementioned midrash from Mekhilta continues; however, Culi omits the interpretation of Rabbi Yose the Galilean. Rabbi Yose teaches that there is no indication that everyone had to be present for revelation to occur. He cites Numbers 10:36, "And when it rested, he said: 'Return, O Lord, unto the ten thousands of the families of Israel,"

---

[37] Culi, p. 107.
[38] Lauterbach, , p. 212.
[39] Exodus Rabbah 42:1
[40] Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 113b.

showing that had there been only twenty-two thousand Israelites present, they still would have received Torah. In support of the idea that at Sinai, the Israelites were one people, Culi excludes another midrash concerning the revelation at Sinai.

According to another midrash in Exodus Rabbah, God told Moses to instruct the women separately, before teaching the men. The midrash explains that the women needed instruction first because they are more prompt in receiving the commandments, they could instruct the children, and because Eve transgressed the commandment because God commanded Adam first.[41] This message would have been counterproductive to Culi's message that all Jews had to stand together. In fact, unlike other Torah commentaries, an expectation existed that women and children, along with the men, would study *Me-am Lo'ez*. Culi discusses the miracle of equality at Sinai:

> All of the heard the voice proclaiming the Ten Commandments at once, without any difference between them. There was absolutely no difference of opinion among them as to what was seen and heard. All of the agreed upon what God had said. This is actually very surprising. Usually, if a dozen people hear a speaker, it is virtually impossible that they agree on what he said. One has one opinion, while the other has heard his words completely differently. We see this happening every day. Furthermore, there are usually many people who do not understand the speaker at all. Others are too far away to hear clearly. When there are many people present, those in the back have difficulty hearing. All this is normally expected. At the giving of the Torah, however, there was a huge assembly of elders, scholars, men, women, and children. Still there was no difference in what each one saw and heard. All were perfectly equal.[42]

Ultimately, equality and unity are central themes in *Me-am Lo'ez*, because, as Culi sees it, the survival of Judaism demands that the people remain unified. In fact, Culi believes that "if the Israelites had been at peace with each other at the Exodus, the Torah

[41] Exodus Rabbah 28:2.
[42] Culi, p. 133.

would have been given to them immediately."[43] In his discussion of why God gave Torah during the month of Sivan, Jacob Culi addresses the brotherhood of Israel. He explains that Sivan has the astrological sign of Gemini, the twins. He writes:

> There is also another symbolism in the Torah being given under the sign of the Twins. Israel must maintain unity among themselves as if they were all one another's twins. The Israelites must behave toward each other as if they had all emerged from the same womb.
>
> This is alluded to in the verse, "They moved from Rephidim and came to the desert of Sinai" (Exodus 19:2). The word *Rephidim* (רפידים) has the same letters as the word *peridim* (פרידים), meaning separation...
>
> But now the Israelites "moved from Rephidim"—they *moved* away frfom this bad trait and all became unified, loving each other as if they had a single heart. They then came to "the desert of Sinai." The lesson of unity had been learned from Sinai itself.[44]

Still, Jacob Culi recognizes the need for individuality and the role each individual played at Sinai.

Individuality

Making tradition accessible to everyone began with helping the Ottoman Jews to believe that they were capable of understanding Torah. Culi expanded the notion that each verse of Torah has four interpretations: its simple, literal meaning (פשט); an interpretation according to allusion (רמז); its homily (דרש); and its mystical interpretation (סוד). He teaches that each verse has, rather than four meanings, six hundred thousand meanings in each of these categories, one for each of the soul roots of the Israelites. "In the ultimate future, each Israelite will read the Torah and understand it according to the interpretation through which his soul was created. There are some souls that are very great, since they include many interpretations. Greatest of all was the soul of Moses,

[43] Ibid., p. 87.
[44] Culi, p. 88.

which included all six hundred thousand. It is for this reason that we say that Moses was as great as all Israel combined... From this we see how much is contained in each word of the Torah."[45]

Me-am Lo'ez asserts that God gave the commandments to each individual, rather than to Israel as a whole. According to one midrash, which Culi includes in *Me-am Lo'ez*, God's addressed each person according to his own strength. Pregnant women heard a very soft voice, preventing them from miscarriage. Others heard a stronger, more powerful voice, because they could endure it. The midrash compares God's voice to the manna that the Israelites ate in the wilderness. If the manna had change its nature to suit so many people, then all the more so, God's voice changed to suit each listener.[46] Jacob Culi uses this midrash to demonstrate each Jew's personal connection with the commandments.

Additionally, Culi teaches that not only did each Israelite hear God's voice according to his own strength, but God approached each Israelite individually, offering each one the commandments. According to another midrash, God offered each Israelite every one of the commandments, describing its rewards and penalties. When each Israelite accepted it, God kissed him. However, the midrash then offers a different account of the exchange. Culi follows the latter version, in which each commandment approached the Israelites and the words themselves asked the Israelites to accept them. When each Israelite agreed, the commandments themselves kissed him.[47]

Each person's individual propensity for Torah study originated at Sinai, through God's revelation of the Torah. Culi teaches, through Exodus Rabbah, that God's voice

[45] Culi, p. 104.
[46] Exodus Rabbah 5:9.

continued to influence Judaism. Every prophet and Torah scholar has received his inspiration and wisdom through the revelation at Sinai. Every Torah scholar acquired the ability to understand the details of Torah as a result of the revelation of Torah. God's voice divided into seven parts. In turn, these seven parts divided into the seventy languages, and every subsequent prophet received his prophecy from that moment.[48]

In this explanation, *Me-am Lo'ez* seeks to demonstrate God's personal role in each Israelite's experience. God associated the divine name with each Israelite, "which is a clear indication that there was no longer an Evil Urge in their hearts."[49] However, there are midrashim that indicate God played a less personal role for each Israelite, sending angels to them as emissaries. *Me-am Lo'ez* excludes the midrash that teaches that twenty-two thousand angels descended with God's presence. It continues that God's presence filled the world through the angels' roles in the world. This is evident in their names, such as Gabri*el* and Micha*el*. The many faces, the midrash teaches, were not the faces of many gods, but rather the faces of the angels acting in accordance with God's spirit.[50] For Culi, it was important to show that God played a personal role for each of the Israelites, that the Ottoman Jews, too, could have a personal connection with God without the need for an intermediary, such as an angel. In fact, Culi teaches, through a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, that someone who keeps the commandments is equal in importance to the whole world. God's role in an individual's life can be so

[47] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2, 2.
[48] Exodus Rabbah 28:6.
[49] Culi, p. 148.
[50] Exodus Rabbah 29:2.

personal because God created the world for the sake of that person who keeps the commandments.[51]

Pride and Humility

One of the central themes throughout *Me-am Lo'ez* is the struggle between pride and humility. Culi connects this theme to the revelation at Sinai through a midrashic account regarding why God chose to reveal Torah on Mount Sinai. In a midrash in Genesis Rabbah, Rabbi Yose the Galilean and Rabbi Akiba discuss the verse, "Why so hostile, O jagged mountains, toward the mountain God desired as His dwelling" (Psalms 68:17)? Rabbi Yose the Galilean explained that when God chose to reveal Torah on Sinai, the other mountains began to argue with one another, declaring, "Let God reveal the Torah on me." Each mountain came to Sinai from its location. God answered them, implying an alternative meaning for גִּבְנֻנִּים – hunchback,[52] indicating that their pride blemished them.[53] In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Ashi interprets this midrash. He teaches that a conceited person is a blemished person, unacceptable before God.[54] Jacob Culi expands this idea, teaching that when the Israelites recognized God's lesson, "they all gained a great measure of humility, and no longer sought honor or recognition. As a result, all strife among them evaporated, and they became as one."[55]

Jacob Culi develops this discussion further. He writes:

> There was an important reason that God made a miracle uprooting Tabor and Carmel and bringing them to Sinai. God wanted everyone to see how they were sent back to their place because of their pride. If pride

[51] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhoth 6b.
[52] cf. Leviticus 21:20.
[53] Genesis Rabbah 99:1.
[54] Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a.
[55] Culi, p. 89.

> and Torah are mutual enemies, it is not fitting that the Torah be given on high mountains that have pride.
>
> The Torah was therefore given on Mount Sinai to teach that if someone wants to learn the Torah, the first condition to be fulfilled is that he have humility. Then, when he does not understand something, he will not be ashamed to ask someone else to explain it. When he speaks, he will not try always to be right. Also, he will not try to get people to consider him a scholar and others as ignoramuses.[56]

Addressing an ignorant community, it was important for Culi to teach them not to be ashamed of their ignorance. This would encourage the Ottoman Jews to seek knowledge and respect their own limitations in Torah knowledge.

There is an argument in the Talmud whose resolution Jacob Culi utilizes in *Me-am Lo'ez*. Rav Huna and Rav Hisda argued concerning the meaning of "I dwell on high, in holiness; yet [I am] with the contrite and the lowly in spirit" (Isaiah 57:15). They debated whether God brings the humble to a higher place or if God descends to be among the humble. Ultimately, acknowledging that God descended to Sinai, the lowliest of the mountains, they conclude that God's presence descends to the humble and meets them where they reside.[57] *Me-am Lo'ez* employs this midrash in order to affirm the exemplary character of humility.

Once Jacob Culi has established the selection of Mount Sinai because of its humility, he then teaches how one should try to live with such humility. First, he emphasizes the benefit of humility. Then, he teaches the punishment for pride. In order to demonstrate the advantage of humility, *Me-am Lo'ez* cites Numbers Rabbah. At first, the midrash describes characters whose pride hurt them, including Adam, Pharaoh, and Amalek. Then, the text illustrates through people such as Abraham, who said he was but

---

[56] Ibid., p. 115.
[57] Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 5a.

dust and ashes,[58] and Judah, who humbled himself before Joseph for Benjamin's sake, that a person who has humility will receive honor and status.[59] Culi teaches that if a person is humble, honor and status will be his reward.

Next, Culi outlines the punishment for pride, citing two passages from the Babylonian Talmud. Each of these passages teaches that outward signs exist that demonstrate a person's misconduct. Regarding pride, this outward sign is poverty. One passage simply indicates that pride produces poverty;[60] however, Jacob Culi includes the interpretation of the other passage in *Me-am Lo'ez*. This account indicates a specific type of poverty, namely, poverty in Torah knowledge, something without which, as Culi teaches, one cannot live.[61]

Nonetheless, pride motivates people; Culi desired this motivation in spiritual matters. Culi, perhaps, recognized this, diverting from the traditional midrash. He wrote:

> One might ask a logical question. If God did not want to give the Torah on a high mountain, He should have given it on a flat plain in the desert. Why did He give it on Mount Sinai, which, no matter how low, was still a mountain?
>
> This teaches us that with regard to spiritual matters a person must have pride. This is an important principle of Judaism. Humility is only appropriate with regard to the material.
>
> For example, if a person is truly humble, he will remain silent and not become angry when another embarrasses him. If he considers himself to be nothing more than dust and ashes, he will not be upset when someone says something insulting to him. All strife is the result of people's feelings of self-importance.
>
> With regard to things affecting his soul, on the other hand, humility is not always beneficial. Indeed, there are times that it can be harmful. A person may say, "Since I am nothing more than dust and ashes, of what avail is my Torah study and prayer? How can I speak to God, who is the Master of the universe?" Through erroneous thoughts such as these, a person can abandon Judaism completely.

---

[58] Genesis 18:27.
[59] Numbers Rabbah 13:3.
[60] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33a.
[61] Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 49b.

> It is therefore necessary for a person to have pride in his soul, and be aware of its great status. He will then serve God in a lofty manner.
>
> It is for this reason that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, a lowly mountain, but nevertheless, a mountain. This teaches us that a person must have pride with regard to things involving his soul. In all other matters, however, a person must exhibit the greatest humility.[62]

Encouragement of humility was so important to Culi that he omitted a midrash concerning the conversation between God and Moses. According to Rabbi Judah, in the Mekhilta, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down,'" teaches that God said to Moses, that during their conversation, Moses should answer God. Then, God would agree with Moses so that the people would see that even God agrees with Moses, helping them to trust Moses forever.[63] Culi omitted this midrash because even Moses had to remain humble.

Purity

Along with the importance of humility, *Me-am Lo'ez* stresses the significance of purity. In his discussion of the miracles that occurred at Sinai, Culi includes a midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah, teaching that when Israel stood at Sinai, when they accepted the Torah, there were none among them who were lepers, lame, blind, dumb, deaf, or with any other impurity. Culi uses this midrash to indicate that God removed all of their impurities.[64] A midrash in the Mekhilta supports this notion, citing various texts to indicate the removal of impurities. "All the people answered as one" (Exodus 19:8) teaches that there were no mutes among the Israelites. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and listen" demonstrates that there were no deaf ones among the Israelites. Finally, "You have been shown to know" indicates that there were no fools among the

---

[62] Culi, pp. 116-117.
[63] Lauterbach. p. 226.

Israelites. Each of these examples emphasizes the removal of impurity before the revelation.[65] In fact, the Israelites' purity was so noteworthy that Culi highlights a midrash that describes the generation of the wilderness as a generation full of knowledge. The text expounds the name of Zerah's son in I Chronicles 2:6, Darda (דרדע), indicating that it implies דור דעה, a generation full of knowledge.[66] Culi uses this midrash to explain that "their physical nature also became purified, and they became so spiritual that they could be called the 'generation of intellect.' They thus reached a level where God could speak to them directly."[67]

In addition to individual impurities, Culi also expresses that God removed even the impurities that had incurred in the Garden of Eden, returning the people to their original state of purity.[68] Using a midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah, Culi demonstrates that God not only removed impurity from each person, but at that moment also removed the Evil Urge from within each one, preventing him from becoming impure again. This allowed each Israelite to receive Torah without any ulterior motives.[69] Jacob Culi also teaches that the people themselves made an effort to remove their own impurity. They did this by separating from the opposite sex. As Bahya comments, regarding Exodus 19:10, וקדשתם refers to refraining from having sexual relations with their wives.[70]

Me-am Lo'ez understands that the removal of impurity extends beyond the deeds and physical imperfections of the Israelites. Culi's editorial comments include a sense that purity takes time. The three-day waiting period between the Israelites' arrival at

---

[64] Song of Songs Rabbah 4:7, 1.
[65] Lauterbach, p. 267.
[66] Leviticus Rabbah 9:1.
[67] Culi, p. 105.
[68] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 22b; Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 146a.
[69] Song of Songs Rabbah, 4:4, 1.

Mount Sinai and their receiving Torah helped to remove the impurity from within them. Culi writes that being ready to receive Torah involves more than leaving Egypt:

> They would not be ready to receive the Torah until they were completely removed from Egypt and all that it represented to them. As long as they felt the weariness of their slavery in Egypt, they could not be considered completely free of Egypt. Therefore, Moses understood that there would have to be a waiting period between the Exodus and the giving of the Torah.
>
> Although the Israelites were likened to a royal prince who was ill, their sickness was not merely physical. Mere physical illness can be readily cured, especially since God is a free physician. But the sickness of the Israelites was a spiritual illness, because of the evil deeds that they had learned from the Egyptians all the years that they were there. The Israelites were born in Egypt and that is where they grew up.[71]

The Israelites needed not only to leave Egypt, but also to remove Egypt from within themselves. In addition to acquiring purity through the three-day waiting period, Culi teaches that the God's choosing the desert to give Torah demonstrated the importance of purity. He writes, "The desert was also a propitious place for the giving of the Torah. There is a certain purity and holiness in some places that does not exist in others. This is true even though God's glory fills all creation."[72] The desert's purity, according to *Me-am Lo'ez*, demonstrated the necessary purity for the Israelites.

According to the Biblical text, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow'" (Exodus 19:10). Here, *Me-am Lo'ez* addresses the men separating from the women, but does not address the midrash from the Mekhilta discussing ritually purifying the people for the revelation. In that midrash, Moses built an altar on the fifth day. He offered a burnt-offering and a peace-offering upon it. Then, he took the blood of the burnt-offering and the peace-offering, dividing

---

[70] Bahya on Exodus 19:10.
[71] Culi, p. 85.
[72] Ibid., pp. 172-174.

each in half. One half he dedicated to God, dashing it on the alter. Then, Moses read the book of the covenant. The midrash indicates he read the commandments that had already been given. When the people accepted these commandments, Moses dashed the remaining blood upon the Israelites.[73] This midrash implies that the revelation at Sinai did not include all of the commandments, since God may have given some earlier. This idea contradicts the notion throughout *Me-am Lo'ez* that all of Torah was given in the Ten Commandments. Instead, Culi uses this midrash as part of his discussion of the miracles that occurred at Sinai, comparing the separation of the blood to making a covenant with another individual. In this ritual, the people divide an animal in half, walking between the two parts. This demonstrates that the two people are as one. "Moses did exactly the same thing when he divided the blood of the sacrifices into two parts, half going on the altar, and the other half on Israel. Through this, Israel became a nation uniquely bound to God and loved by Him."[74] There were two miracles here. First, Moses divided the blood into perfectly equal parts. Also, at least a single drop of blood touched each Israelite.

Miracles at Sinai

The idea that the Ten Commandments contained all of the Torah is, by far, not the only miracle described during the revelation at Sinai. *Me-am Lo'ez* describes a number of natural phenomena that occurred surrounding the revelation of Torah at Sinai. Jacob Culi adapts Rashi's commentary on Genesis 1:1, regarding the word בראשית to indicate "that the entire universe, both physical and spiritual, was created only in the merit of the

[73] Lauterbach, pp. 210-211.
[74] Culi, p. 113.

Torah."[75] Rashi cites Proverbs 8:22 to teach that another name for Torah is רֵאשִׁית דַּרְכּוֹ, the beginning of His way.[76] Culi adapts in order to demonstrate the miracle of revelation, that God created the entire world for that moment.

Jacob Culi adapts two midrashim in order to demonstrate another miracle that occurred when God revealed the Torah to Israel. According to Bahya's commentary, when Israel battled Sichon at Arnon Brook, the sun stood still, allowing them to defeat their enemy.[77] Additionally, Rabbi Eliezer describes how the sun stood still for Joshua, teaching that there was sunlight for thirty-six hours. The sun traveled six hours, stood still for twelve, traveled for another six hours, and then stood still for another twelve hours before setting.[78] Culi includes the day that God revealed Torah to Israel as one of the five times in history during which the sun stood still, emphasizing the miraculous nature of that day.

Me-am Lo'ez describes two more natural phenomena that occurred during the revelation of Torah. First, when God spoke the words of the commandments, the entire earth trembled.[79] However, when Israel accepted the commandments, the entire earth was so afraid that it stood still.[80] Both of these miracles occurred because of one of the most miraculous aspects of the revelation: God's voice.

The first miracle of God's voice was the silence it caused. When God gave the Torah, the entire earth stood still and remained silent. Birds did not make a sound, nor did they fly. God's voice did not have an echo, which the people may have interpreted as

---

[75] Ibid., p. 126.
[76] Rashi on Genesis 1:1.
[77] Bahya on Numbers 21:24.
[78] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 25a.
[79] Lauterbach, p. 233.
[80] Tanhuma Shemini, Leviticus 3:10.

the words of another god. This silence taught that there are no other gods beside God.[81] This silence began even before God spoke the first words of the Ten Commandments. When those first words exited God's mouth, the next miracle occurred.

A number of midrashim teach that the phrase "All these words" (Exodus 20:1) demonstrates that when God spoke the Ten Commandments, God spoke all of them with one utterance. Even though this would be impossible for human beings to accomplish, the Israelites understood the words, anyway.[82] Rashi expands this notion, which Culi includes in *Me-am Lo'ez*, teaching that not only did God speak all of the Ten Commandments in one word, but that God spoke the words זכור (Exodus 20:8) and שמור (Deuteronomy 5:12) in one word, eliminating any apparent contradiction in the two accounts of the Ten Commandments.[83] Another miracle of God's voice was that as God engraved each word on the tablets, the word traveled from one end of the world to the other, enabling the whole world to hear the commandment.[84]

Other miraculous voices existed at the revelation of Torah. First, God commanded Moses to place a boundary at the base of Mount Sinai. If any of the Israelites had touched the mountain they would have died. According to Rashi, the boundary itself spoke the warning, telling the people not to ascend the mountain.[85] The last miraculous voice was that of Moses. As I will cover in a moment, God only spoke the first two commandments. It was Moses who conveyed the remaining commandments to the Israelites. Rashi explains that God gave Moses' voice strength, making it

---

[81] Exodus Rabbah 29:9.
[82] Lauterbach, p. 62; Numbers Rabbah 11:7; Rashi on Exodus 20:1.
[83] Rashi on Exodus 20:8 and Deuteronomy 5:12.
[84] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2, 2.
[85] Rashi on Exodus 19:12.

powerful, enabling all of Israel to hear the commandments.[86] Bahya explains that not only could the Israelites hear Moses' voice as clearly as they had heard God's voice, but they also heard it over the continuous blast of the shofar.[87]

According to *Me-am Lo'ez*, a great miracle that occurred at Sinai involved God's conveying the commandments to the people. According to Exodus Rabbah, Moses asked God if he should write down everything that God wished to convey to the people. God replied, saying that Moses should only write the Torah. God feared that if Moses wrote the Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah, then a nation in the future, after enslaving the people, would take it away from the Israelites. So, God wanted Moses only to create a written record of the Torah.[88] Before its inscription, God conveyed the Torah to the people orally; however, as Culi demonstrates through another midrash, God did not convey all of the commandments directly to the people. According to this midrash, Moses gave six hundred and thirteen commandments to Israel, since the numerical value of the word Torah is six hundred and thirteen. However, the numerical value of the word Torah is actually six hundred and eleven.[89] This difference indicates that Moses conveyed six hundred and eleven commandments to the Israelites. God delivered the first two commandments to the Israelites directly. This was overwhelming for the Israelites, so the remaining commandments came through Moses.[90]

There was another miraculous aspect in Moses' role at Sinai. Moses had to somehow remain with the people while simultaneously holding a conversation with God. According to one midrash, Moses' feet remained on Mount Sinai; however, his body and

---

[86] Rashi on Exodus 19:19.
[87] Bahya on Exodus 19:19.
[88] Exodus Rabbah 47:1.
[89] תורה = ת (400) + ו (6) + ר (200) + ה (5) = 611

head were above the clouds, permitting God to speak to him.[91] Following the declaration of each commandment, the experience caused the Israelites to move twelve miles backwards. In order for them to hear the next commandment, they had to return to Mount Sinai. God sent the ministering angels to assist the Israelites, bringing them back twelve miles to Mount Sinai after each commandment. All told, the Israelites traveled two hundred and forty miles that day, with the angels' assistance, as they heard each commandment.[92] Among Culi's editorial comments in his discussion of miracles, Culi includes a polemic against Christianity. He writes:

> If a false messiah ever arises and proclaims in God's name that any of the commandments is no longer in force, we will have a ready answer. We will be able to say, "If what you are saying is true, God should tell us Himself. Furthermore, the entire world should be silent, just as it was when the Torah was given. Since you claim that He only spoke to you, it is a sure sign that you are a false prophet, and your claim is your own invention. We do not believe in the Torah because we believe in Moses as a prophet. Rather, we believe in it because we saw the revelation at Sinai with our own eyes, and heard God's commandments with our own ears."[93]

Me-am Lo'ez omits one of the midrashim from Exodus Rabbah relating God's giving the Torah to Sinai. According to this midrash, when Moses received the Torah as a gift in heaven, the angels wished to attack him. In order to stop them, God miraculously made Moses resemble Abraham, asking the angels, "Would you attack someone in whose home you have eaten?" Then, God turned to Moses, telling him, "I only give you the Torah for Abraham's sake."[94] According to Culi, God intended to reveal Torah from the start. The revelation of Torah did not depend upon any single individual, but rather is the climax of God's creation. In fact, creation occurred for the

---

[90] Exodus Rabbah 33:7; Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2, 2.
[91] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 41.
[92] Lauterbach, , pp. 269-270.
[93] Culi, pp. 125-126.

sake of revelation. This midrash would have contradicted the notion that revelation was the ultimate goal of God's work.

Immortality

One of the greatest gifts of accepting Torah is immortality. According to *Me-am Lo'ez*, immortality and resurrection had been part of God's plan since before the moment at Sinai; however, one only receives this gift if one follows the commandments. A number of midrashim in *Me-am Lo'ez* describe the resurrection of the Israelites at Sinai. When the people heard God's voice, they were so frightened that their souls departed their bodies. They died. When God's word reached them, though, the word itself discovered that the people were dead. Torah itself returned to God, beseeched God, saying that God had sent Torah to the dead. Torah implored God to restore the souls of the Israelites.[95] In another account of this resurrection, God's voice frightened the people so, that after the second commandment, the Israelites begged Moses to liaise between themselves and God. They feared that hearing God's voice again would surely kill them.[96] All of these midrashim teach the power of Torah. *Me-am Lo'ez* demonstrates that belief in Torah and adherence to its laws bring resurrection and immortality.

Culi demonstrates that immortality has its roots at Sinai through inclusion of a passage from Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi teaches that every time God spoke, the souls of the Israelites departed their bodies. He asks how the Israelites could have heard the second commandments if their souls had departed after the first. He explains that after each time God spoke, God produced the

---

[94] Exodus Rabbah 28:1.
[95] Exodus Rabbah 29:4; Numbers Rabbah 10:1; Song of Songs Rabbah 5:16, 3.
[96] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 41.

dew with which resurrection will occur in the future, reviving the Israelites each time so that they could hear the next commandment.[97]

According to a midrash in Exodus Rabbah, God wanted the souls of the Israelites to leave their bodies. In this version, their souls fled each time they heard God's voice; however, this was part of God's plan. God knew that if the Israelites saw God's glory and heard God's voice, their souls would depart. The reason why God permitted this to occur was because God foresaw that one day the Israelites would worship idols. God did not want them to say, "If you had only shown us Your glory and let us hear Your voice, we would not have worshipped idols." Accordingly, God allowed their souls to leave and then restored their souls so that the Israelites would be unable to use not having seen God's glory as an excuse for practicing idolatry.[98] Culi did not want the Ottoman Jews to think that God would deliberately cause the Israelites' souls to leave their bodies, even though God did resurrect their souls in this account of the revelation.

As God prepared to give Israel the Torah, the angels contended the revelation, insisting that Torah belonged in heaven. Moses, however, demonstrated that because humanity has an Evil Urge to overcome, Torah belongs on earth. When Moses proved this point, each of the angels presented a gift to Moses. Even the Angel of Death had something to offer. The Angel of Death offered Moses incense, giving Moses the ability to stop a plague, giving the Israelites the gift of immortality.[99] Another midrash indicates that when the Israelites accepted the Torah, God's magnificence adorned them. Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai teaches that this adornment was a collection of weapons that contained

[97] Babylonian Talmud. Shabbat 88b.
[98] Exodus Rabbah 29:4.
[99] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a.

God's name. Possession of these weapons prevented the Angel of Death from acting against them. Unfortunately, once the Israelites sinned, they lost their immortality.[100]

God removed immortality when Israel sinned. When they accepted the Ten Commandments, God instructed the Angel of Death that he had no power over the Israelites, but according to two midrashim, their construction of the golden calf caused the removal of immortality. Had the Israelites kept the commandments, they would have retained their immortality, as well.[101] Nonetheless, those who stood at Sinai remained special. For having heard God's voice, they were like the ministering angels. When they died, insects and worms could not affect their bodies. Having heard God's voice, they earned happiness both in this world and in the world to come.[102] *Me-am Lo'ez* also teaches that Israel's collective immortality remains. Though individuals lost their immortality because of sin, Israel as a whole would endure, retaining a communal immortality.[103]

Jacob Culi further demonstrates God's power to resurrect in his own commentary regarding the shofar God used during the revelation. Culi writes that the ram used "was offered as a burn offering; it was completely burned, with nothing whatsoever left over. God recreated the horn, just as He will recreate the bodies of the people who will be brought back to life in the final Resurrection. Although the body decays completely in the grave, and reverts to its elemental dust, God reconstructs the body out of the dust and thus resurrects the individual. He did the same with the horn of the ram."[104] Culi teaches

---

[100] Exodus Rabbah 51:8.
[101] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 5a; Exodus Rabbah, 32:7.
[102] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 41.
[103] Zohar, Balak.
[104] Culi, p. 121.

that through return to Jewish tradition and practice, the Ottoman Jews will acquire God's greatest gift once again, the gift of immortality.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Before Jacob Culi's masterpiece *Me-am Lo'ez* existed, Jews played a valuable role in the Ottoman Empire. As the empire expanded, it incorporated Jewish communities. Additionally, Jews sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire when conditions worsened where they lived. A number of these immigrants fled persecution in and expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. The Jewish inhabitants' knowledge of languages and trade allowed their participation in commerce and diplomacy for the Ottoman Empire, as well as elevating them to high positions in the sultans' governments and courts. Ultimately, though, the government subjected the Jews to persecution through excessive taxes and restrictions.

In the eighteenth century, power shifted in the Ottoman Empire. A group called the *dev□irme*, Muslims who had converted from Christianity, took power. Through European influence, the *dev□irme* limited the Jewish people's rights. Though the Jews were affected more than most Ottoman citizens, the decline affected the entire empire. As conditions worsened, as food supplies diminished, Jews received a great amount of the reaction. The *dev□irme* along with others, removed the Jews from business, prominent positions in the government, and subjected them to excessive taxation.

Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jewish leaders became aware of the situation facing the Jewish community. They recognized that under the burdens of simply surviving, Jews had abandoned Jewish practice. Among these leaders, Jacob Culi led the struggle to return Jews to Jewish tradition and practice. He understood that the Jewish people's ignorance of tradition and even of any Hebrew prevented them from accessing the classical texts of the tradition. In 1730, Jacob Culi began writing his work,

Me-am Lo'ez, an encyclopedic commentary on the Bible. Though he died in 1732, having only completed his commentary from Genesis and through Exodus 27, other scholars continued his effort. They used his manuscripts and respected his intention and style, creating a unified work in spite of its numerous authors.

Jacob Culi wrote *Me-am Lo'ez* in Ladino, the colloquial Judeo-Spanish language of the Ottoman Jews. The Ladino language would permit the Ottoman Jews to access the texts, traditions, and practices of Judaism that had become foreign to them. *Me-am Lo'ez* covers the Rabbinic tradition extensively. It is both a homiletic work and a commentary to the Bible. It uses traditional sources that Culi weaves together with his own editorial comments. Jacob Culi places himself in the Rabbinic chain of tradition, demonstrating how *Me-am Lo'ez* compares to the Rabbinic works that precede it. He shows how other authors wrote in the colloquial language of the people, including the Gemara's Aramaic, demonstrating that using Ladino was not an innovation, but rather, part of Jewish tradition.

Jacob Culi utilizes as many texts as possible, showing his connection with those who precede him. He uses both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, Ashkenazic and Sephardic commentators, and texts spanning five centuries. Each of these connect *Me-am Lo'ez* with every variety of Jewish tradition. Jacob Culi extensively cites a number of midrashic works, most notably Midrash Rabbah, but also Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. Again, Culi covers numerous types of midrashim, including, but not limited to, halakhic and aggadic midrash, homiletic and exegetic, and even the kabbalistic midrash of the Zohar.

The breadth of texts establish *Me-am Lo'ez* as a valid Jewish text. This authority helps Jacob Culi to express his message. Jacob Culi expresses his ideas through three means: the texts that he uses, the ones that he omits, and his editorial comments that weave the work together. Culi's conveys his message through an number of rubrics, the specific themes found in *Me-am Lo'ez*. Each of these themes laud the value of observance of the commandments, hoping that through *Me-am Lo'ez*, the Ottoman Jews will return to Judaism, to Jewish practice and tradition.

Culi emphasizes the value of commitment to God. He presents midrashim that emphasize the mutual commitment that God has with the Jewish people, like that of a married couple. The commitment is not one in which God has fulfilled God's obligation, as some midrashim suggest, but rather, God continues to play an active role. Culi teaches that God simply awaits Israel's return.

Acceptance of commitment to God will lead the Jewish people to observe God's commandments. For the Ottoman Jews of the eighteenth century, ignorance prevents observance. Culi includes midrashim that teach that the reward is greater for those who observe the commandments. Learning, he insists, is not enough, one must move towards observance. Culi recognizes that the Ottoman Jews do not have time for study, so observance, not study, must be the ultimate goal of his work.

By following the commandments, Israel will avoid idolatry, sin, and temptation from the Evil Urge. Some midrashim teach that violation of the commandments equals idolatry. Culi not only emphasizes each individual's obligation to avoid sin, but also teaches that the community as a whole has responsibility for each individual. Culi omits

the notion that only reward exists for observance and that there is no punishment for disregard of the commandments.

Because of the Ottoman Jews' role in the Ottoman Empire, Culi walks a thin line in his discussion of Israel and the other nations. On one hand, he emphasizes Israel's superiority, as God's chosen people, but also includes midrashim that teach that God offered the Torah to every nation. It was the nations who rejected the Torah. He also includes his own comment that only Israel could receive the Torah because the other nations do not have prophets with whom God can communicate. *Me-am Lo'ez* is careful to omit a midrash that implies that disregard for the commandments leads the people to serve subservient nations. This might have offended the Ottoman people with whom the Jews were living.

Culi's discussion of Israel also teaches the importance of unity and equality within the Jewish community. *Me-am Lo'ez* employs midrashim that teach the importance of each individual's role in the community, that without everyone's involvement, the God could not have given the Torah at Sinai. Culi asserts the utter equality among the people, including equality among men and women. As he seeks to attract the Jews to return to Judaism, it is important for him to be inclusive.

In spite of his emphasis of community, Jacob Culi also teaches the importance of individuality. God spoke to each individual at Sinai according to his own strength, just as the manna in the wilderness was what each person needed it to be. *Me-am Lo'ez* insists upon God's personal role in the revelation, omitting a midrash that teaches that God sent angels as intermediaries between God and Israel.

Me-am Lo'ez also emphasizes an important virtue for Israel. Using Mount Sinai as an example, Jacob Culi teaches the value of humility. He includes midrashim that demonstrate that God chose Sinai on which to give the Torah because Sinai was the lowliest of the mountains. Nonetheless, Culi comments that God gave the Torah on a mountain, rather than on a flat plain, because spiritual pride is important, so a flat plain would not have sufficed. Culi resists elevating Moses to a higher level, demonstrating that even Moses was humble.

Observance of the commandments, return to practice, and adherence to the virtues emphasized by Jewish tradition all restore the purity of the Jewish people. At Sinai, all of Israel was pure, their impurities removed from them. Culi teaches that not only did they have to leave Egypt to receive the Torah, but what Egypt instilled within them had to be removed as well. Only then could the revelation take place.

The revelation of Torah was an experience surrounded by miracles. *Me-am Lo'ez* describes the vast number of miracles covered throughout the classical texts, included the trembling and silence of the earth and God's ability to speak all of the commandments in a single utterance. Culi includes a polemic against those who might think that a messiah has come, teaching that if the whole world stood silent at Sinai, the same would occur when the messiah comes. Thus, he discredits anyone who claims to be the messiah, saying that God spoke only to him. Culi also emphasizes that Torah is the climax of Creation, not dependent upon any individual, such as Abraham.

The final rubric presented in *Me-am Lo'ez* is immortality. Through return to tradition, the Jewish people acquire immortality. Just as God restored the people's souls to them at Sinai, when hearing God's voice caused them to die, God will one day restore

their souls again. They can only achieve immortality through observance of the commandments and return to Jewish tradition and practice.

Jacob Culi's *Me-am Lo'ez* is more than a commentary to the Bible. It is more than a compilation of midrashim. Through study of Culi's presentation of texts and concepts, the situation of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century becomes evident. The Ottoman Jews suffered the decline of the empire and of their own communities. Scandals like the Shabbatai Zevi heresy, persecution, and poverty pushed the Jews away from Judaism. By appealing to the Jews in their colloquial language, insisting that God had not abandoned them, Culi sought to attract the Jews to return to Jewish tradition and practice. He established himself as a vibrant part of Rabbinic tradition, giving himself the authority to attract the Jews. *Me-am Lo'ez* stands as a testimony for finding people where they are, for reaching out in order to draw in.

Bibliography

Barzilai, Morris W. The Reflection of Sephardic Society in the Ottoman Empire as Seen Through the Commentaries of the *Me'am Lo'ez* on the Haggadah, Rabbinic Thesis, 1989.

Berkovits, Eliezer. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Babylonian Talmud." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Cohen-Rosenberg, Judith Ellen. The Glorification of Esther Among Ottoman Jews in the Eighteenth Century as Reflected in the *Me'am Loez* on Esther, Rabbinic Thesis, 1986.

Culi, Jacob. MeAm Lo'ez. New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1979.

Donnell, Shelton J. Jacob Culi's *Me'am Lo'ez* (Genesis), Rabbinic Thesis, 1977.

Editorial Staff. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Jacob Culi." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, volume 5, pp. 1154-1155.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Leviticus Rabbah." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Elbaum, Jacob. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Yalkut Shimoni." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Farber, Sara Joan Glazer. Societal Reflections of the *Me'am Lo'ez* in the Book of Ruth, Rabbinic Thesis, 1984.

Geller, Yaacov and Haim Z'ew Hirschberg. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Ottoman Empire." Jerusalem: Keter Publishign House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 16, pp. 1529-1554.

Goldstein, Bernard R. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Levi ben Gershom." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Gottlieb, Efraim. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Grossman, Avraham. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Rashi. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Guttel, Henri. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Me-Am Lo'ez." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing Hosue, Ltd., 1971, Volume 11, pp. 1158-1160.

Heller-Wilensky, Sara O. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Isaac ben Moses Arama. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Herr, Moshe David. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Deuteronomy Rabbah." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Genesis Rabbah." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Mekhilta of R. Ishmael."Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Numbers Rabbah." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Song of Songs Rabbah."Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Tanhuma Yelammedenu." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Katz, Sandra. *Kohelet* in *Me'am Lo'ez*, Rabbinic Thesis, 1993.

Lauterbach, Jacob Z. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933.

Leibowitz, Nechama. Studies in Shemot, Jerusalem: Haomanim Press.

Marcus, Simon. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Romaniot." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, Volume 14, p. 231.

Melvyn. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Exodus Rabbah." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Preschel, Tovia. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Abraham ibn Ezra." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

_____. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Nahmanides." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Rabinowitz, Louis Isaac. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Talmud, Jerusalem." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Scholem, Gershom. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Zohar." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.

Shaw, Stanford J. The Jews of the Ottoman Empire. New York: New York University Press, 1991.

Talve, Susan A. Images of Women in the *Me'am Lo'ez*, Rabbinic Thesis, 1981.

Ta-Shma, Israel Moses. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Tosafot." Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971.