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Lecture 1: The Sefardi World—Geonim to the “Golden Age,” 500-1200

TEXTS

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1: THE PACT OF UMAR – late 7th to early 8th century

1 Abd al-Raḥman ibn Ghanam related the following: When Umar ibn al-Khattab—may
2 Allah be pleased with him—made peace with the Christian inhabitants of Syria, we wrote him the
3 following:

4 In the name of All, the Merciful, the Beneficent—This letter is addressed to Allah’s servant
5 Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, by the Christians of such-and-such city. When you
6 advanced against us, we asked you for a guarantee of protection for our persons, our offspring, our
7 property, and the people of our sect, and we have taken upon ourselves the following obligations
8 toward you, namely:

9 We shall not build in our cities or in their vicinity any new monasteries, churches,
10 hermitages, or monks’ cells. We shall not restore, by night or by day, any of them that have fallen
11 into ruin or which are located in the Muslims’ quarters.

12 We shall keep our gates wide open for passersby and travelers. We shall provide three days'
13 food and lodging to any Muslims who pass our way.

14 We shall not shelter any spy in our churches or in our homes, nor shall we hide him from
15 Muslims.

16 We shall not teach our children the Koran.

17 We shall not hold public religious ceremonies. We shall not seek to proselytize anyone. We
18 shall not prevent any of our kin from embracing Islam if they so desire.

19 We shall show deference to the Muslims and shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit
20 down.

21 We shall not attempt to resemble the Muslims in any way with regard to dress, as for
22 example, with a cap, the turban, sandals, or parting the hair (in the Arab fashion). We shall not
23 speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their naming system.

24 We shall not wear swords or bear weapons of any kind, or ever carry them with us.

25 We shall not engrave our signets in Arabic.

26 We shall not sell wines.

27 We shall clip the forelocks of our head.

28 We shall always adorn ourselves in the traditional fashion. We shall bind a belt around our
29 waists.

30 We shall not display our crosses or our books anywhere in the Muslims' thoroughfares or
31 in their marketplaces. We shall only beat out clappers in our churches very quietly. We shall not

32 raise our voices when reciting the service in our churches, nor when in the presence of Muslims.
33 Neither shall we raise our voices in our funeral processions.

34 We shall not display lights in any of the Muslim thoroughfares or in their marketplaces.

35 We shall not come near them with our funeral processions.

36 We shall not take any of the slaves that have been allotted to the Muslims.

37 We shall not build our homes higher than theirs.

38 (When I brought the letter to Umar—may Allah be pleased with him—he added the clause
39 “We shall not strike any Muslim.”)

40 We accept these conditions for ourselves and for the members of our sect, in return for
41 which we are to be given a guarantee of security. Should we violate in any way these conditions
42 which we have accepted and for which we stand security, then there shall be no covenant of
43 protection for us, and we shall be liable to the penalties for rebelliousness and sedition.

44 Then Umar—may Allah be pleased with him—wrote: “Sign what they have requested, but
45 add two clauses that will also be binding upon them; namely, they shall not buy anyone who has
46 been taken prisoner by the Muslims, and that anyone who deliberately strikes a Muslim will forfeit
47 the protection of this pact.

Source: Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), pp. 157-158.

2: SE’ADYAH GAON, *Sefer Emunot ve-De’ot*, Introduction - 10th century

1 Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom the truth is known with absolute
2 certainty, who confirms to men the certainty of the truths which their souls experience—finding as
3 they do through their souls their sense perceptions to be trustworthy; and knowing as they do

4 through their souls their rational knowledge to be correct; thereby causing their errors to vanish,
5 their doubts to be removed, their proofs to be clarified, and their arguments to be well-grounded.
6 Glory unto Him who is exalted above all attributes and praise.

7 After this brief opening in praise and eulogy of our Lord, I will begin this book, which it is
8 my intention to write, with an exposition of the reason why men, in their search for Truth,
9 become involved in errors, and how these errors can be removed so that the object of their
10 investigations may be fully attained; moreover, why some of these errors have such a powerful hold
11 on some people that they affirm them as the truth, deluding themselves that they know
12 something. May God help me to dispel errors from my mind and thereby reach the stage of
13 obedience towards Him, even as His Faithful Servant prayed that He might grant him perfection,
14 saying ‘Open Thou Mine eyes, that I may behold wonderous things out of Thy Law’ (Ps. 119:18).
15 My intention is to place the subject matter through the book within the grasp of the reader and
16 not beyond it; to speak a language which is easy and not difficult; to adduce only the principal
17 proofs and arguments , and not their ramifications...

18 I will first explain the reason why men are involved in doubts. I say then that all
19 “knowledge of reason” is based on knowledge derived from sense perception. Now the
20 information afforded by the senses is liable to doubts in one of two ways: either because the person
21 who is inquiring has an inadequate idea of the object of the investigation, or, alternatively, because
22 he is perfunctory in his observation and does not take sufficient pains with it. Take the case of a
23 person who is looking for someone called Reuben ben Jacob. He may be in doubt whether he has
24 found him for one of two reasons: either because his knowledge of Rueben is inadequate, since he
25 has never met him before and therefore does not know him, or else because seeing some other
26 person he may wrongly assume him to be Rueben, taking the line of least resistance and

27 neglecting to make the proper inquiries. He has no claim to be forgiven since he takes things too
28 easily and conducts his search carelessly. The result will be that his doubts will never be cleared up.

Ed. and trans: A. Altmann, in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, rev. ed. (London and New Milford, Conn.:
Toby Press, 2006), pp. 141-14

3: ABRAHAM IBN DAUD, *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, Book 7 – mid-12th century

1 It was brought by the Lord that the income of the academies which used to come from Spain, the
2 land of the Maghrib, Ifriqiya, Egypt, and the Holy Land was discontinued. The following were the
3 circumstances that brought this about.

4 The commander of a fleet, whose name was Ibn Rumaḥis, left Cordova, having been sent
5 by the Muslim king of Spain, ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Nasir. This commander of a mighty fleet set out
6 to capture the ships of the Christians and the towns that were close to the coast. They sailed as far
7 as the coast of Palestine and swung about to the Greek sea and the islands thertein. [Here] they
8 encountered a ship carrying four great scholars, who were travelling from the city of Bari to a city
9 called Sefastin, and who were on their way to a Kallah convention. Ibn Rumaḥis captured the ship
10 and took the sages prisoner. One of them was **R. Hushiel, the father of Rabbenu Hananel**;
11 another was **R. Moses**, the son of Hanokh, who was taken prisoner with his wife and his son, **R.**
12 **Hanokh** (who at the time was a young lad); the third was **R. Shamariah b. Rabbi Elḥanan**. As for
13 the fourth, I do not know his name. The commander wanted to violate R. Moses’ wife, inasmuch
14 as she was exceedingly beautiful. Thereupon, she cried out in Hebrew to her husband, R. Moses,
15 and asked him whether or not those who drown in the sea will be quickened at the time of the
16 resurrection of the dead. He replied unto her: “The Lord said: I will bring them back from Bashan;
17 I will bring them back from the depths of the sea” [Ps. 68:23]. Having heard his reply, she cast
18 herself into the sea and drowned.

19 These sages did not tell a soul about themselves or their wisdom. The commander sold R.
20 Shemariah in Alexandria of Egypt; [R. Shemariah] proceeded to **Fostat** where he became head [of
21 the academy]. Then he sold R. Hushiel on the cost of Ifriqiya. From there the latter proceeded to
22 the city of **Qayrawan** [*also spelled: Qairawan, Kairouan*], which at that time was the mightiest of all
23 Muslim cities in the land of the Maghrib, where he became the head [of the academy] and where
24 he begot his son Rabbenu Hananel.

25 Then the commander arrived at **Cordova** where he sold R. Moses along with R. Hanokh.
26 He was redeemed by the people of Cordova, who were under the impression that he was a man of
27 no education. Now there was in Cordova a synagogue that was called the College Synagogue, where
28 a judge by the name of R. Nathan the Pious, who was a man of distinction, used to preside.
29 However, the people of Spain were not thoroughly versed in the words of our rabbis, of blessed
30 memory. Nevertheless, with the little knowledge they did possess, they conducted a school and
31 interpreted [the traditions] more or less [accurately]. Once R. Nathan explained [the law
32 requiring] “immersion [of the finger] for each sprinkling,” which is found in the tractate Yoma,
33 but he was unable to explain it correctly. Thereupon, R. Moses, who was seated in the corner like
34 an attendant, arose before R. Nathan and said to him: “Rabbi, this would result in an excess of
35 immersions!” When he and the students heard his words, they marveled to each other and asked
36 him to explain the law to them. This he did quite properly. Then each of them propounded to him
37 all the difficulties which they had, and he replied to them out of the abundance of his wisdom.

38 Outside the college there were litigants, who were not permitted to enter until the students
39 had completed their lesson. On that day, R. Nathan the Judge walked out, and the litigants
40 followed him. However, he said to them: “I am no longer the judge. This man, who is garbed in
41 rags and is a stranger, is my master, and I shall be his disciple from this day on. You ought to
42 appoint him judge of the community of Cordova.” And that is exactly what they did.

43 The community then assigned him a large stipend and honored him with costly garments
44 and a carriage. [At that point] the commander wished to retract his sale. However, the King would
45 not permit him to do so, for he was delighted by the fact that the Jews of his domain no longer
46 had need of the people of Babylonia.

47 The report [of all this] spread throughout the land of Spain and the Maghrib, and students
48 came to study under him. Moreover, all questions which had formerly been addressed to the
49 academies were now directed to him. This affair occurred in the days of Rav Sherira, in about 4750
50 [989-90].

Source: G. D. Cohen, ed., *Sefer ha-Qabbalah: The Book of Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish
Publication Society, 1967) pp. 63-66.

Compare: Gitin 57b: “An incident involving four hundred boys and girls who were taken as
captives for prostitution. They sensed on their own what they were expected to do, and they said:
If we drown in the sea, will we come to life in the World-to-Come? The oldest among them
expounded the verse: *The Lord said, I will bring back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the
depths of the sea* (Psalms 68:23). ‘I will bring back from Bashan,’ from between the teeth [*bein shen*]
of the lion, [and] ‘I will bring them back from the depths of the sea’ [is referring to] those who
drown in the sea [for the sake of Heaven].”

4, POEM 1: DUNASH BEN LABRAT, *Ve-omer al tishan* – 10th century

1 There came a voice: “Awake!”
2 Drink wine at morning’s break.
3 ‘Mid rose and camphor make
4 A feast of all your hours.
5 ‘Mid pomegranate trees
6 And low anemones,
7 Where vines extend their leaves
8 And the palm tree skyward towers,
9 Where lilting singers hum
10 To the throbbing of the drum,
11 Where gentle viols thrum
12 To the splash of fountains’ showers.
13 On every lofty tree
14 The fruit hangs gracefully.
15 And all the birds in glee
16 Sing among the bowers.
17 The cooling of the dive
18 Sounds like a song of love,
19 Her mate calls from above—
20 Those trilling, fluting fowls.
21 We’ll drink on garden beds
22 With roses round our heads.
23 To banish woes and dreads
24 We’ll frolic and carouse.
25 Dainty food we’ll eat.
26 We’ll drink our liquor neat,
27 Like giants at their meat,
28 With appetite aroused.
29 When morning’s first rays shine
30 I’ll slaughter of the kine
31 Some fatlings; we shall dine
32 On rams and calves and cows.
33 Scented with rich perfumes,
34 Amid thick incense plumes,
35 Let us await our dooms,
36 Spending in joy our hours.”
37 I chided him: “Be still!
38 How can you drink your fill
39 When lost is Zion hill
40 To the uncircumcised.
41 You’ve spoken like a fool!
42 Sloth you’ve made your rule.
43 In God’s last judgment you’ll
44 For folly be chastised.
45 The Torah, God’s delight,
46 Is little in your sight,
47 While wrecked is Zion’s height,
48 By foxes vandalized.
49 How can we be carefree
50 Or raise our cups in glee,
51 When by all men are we
52 Rejected and despised?”

Source: Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), pp. 40-45.

4, POEM 2: YEHUDAH HA-LEVI, *Me'az ma'on ba-abavab* (poem) – 11th century

1 From time's beginning, You were love's abode /
2 My love encamped wherever it was You tented.
3 The taunts of foes for Your name's sake are sweet, /
4 So let them torture one whom You tormented.
5 I love my foes, for they learned wrath from You, /
6 For they pursue a body You have slain.
7 The day You hated me I loathed myself, /
8 For I will honor none whom You disdain.
9 Until your anger pass, and You restore /
10 This people whom You rescued once before.

Source: Raymond P. Scheindlin, *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 76-83.

Compare: Ps. 69 (selections):

5 More numerous than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without reason;
 Many are those who would destroy me, my treacherous enemies.
 Must I restore what I have not stolen? ...
8 It is for Your sake that I have been reviled, that shame covers my face;
9 I am a stranger to my brothers, and alien to my kin.
10 My zeal for Your house has been my undoing;
 The reproaches of those who revile You have fallen upon me.
11 When I wept and fasted, I was reviled for it. ...
18 Do not hide Your face from Your servant, for I am in distress; answer me quickly.
19 Come near and redeem me; free me from my enemies.
20 You know my reproach, my shame, my disgrace; You are aware of all my foes.
21 Reproach breaks my heart, I am in despair;
 I hope for consolation, but there is none; for comforters, but find none. ...

27 For they persecute those You have struck;

They talk about the pain of those You have felled.

28 Add that to their guilt; let them have no share of Your beneficence.

4, POEM 3: IBN EZRA, *Bli Mazal* (poem) – 12th century

1 [A] The heavenly sphere and the constellations / strayed from their path when I was born.

2 If my business were in candles— / the sun would not set until I died!

3 [B] However I struggle, I cannot succeed, / for my stars have ruined me:

4 If I were a dealer in shrouds, no one would die as long as I lived!

Source: T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1981), pp. 353.

5: RAMBAM, Introduction to *Mishneh Torah* (selection) – 12th century

1 In our days, severe vicissitudes prevail, and all feel the pressure of hard times. The wisdom
2 of our wise men have disappeared; the understanding of our prudent men is hidden. Hence, the
3 commentaries of the Geonim and their compilations of laws and responses, which they took care to
4 make clear, have in our times become hard to understand so that only a few individuals properly
5 comprehend them. Needless to add that such is the case in regard to the Talmud itself—the *Bavli*
6 as well as the *Yerushalmi*—the *Sifra*, the *Sifrei*, and the *Tosefta*, all of which require, for their
7 comprehension, a broad mind, a wise soul, and considerable study, and then one can learn from
8 them the correct practice as to what is forbidden or permitted, and the other rules of the Torah.

9 On these grounds, I, Moshe the son of Maimon the Sefardi (Spanish), bestirred myself,
10 and, relying on the help of God, blessed be He, intently studied all these words, with the view of
11 putting together the results obtained from them, in regard to what is forbidden or permitted, clean
12 or unclean, and the other rules of the Torah—all in plain language and condensed style, so that
13 thus the entire Oral Law might become systematically known to all, without citing difficulties and
14 solutions or differences of view, one person saying so, and the other something else—but

15 consisting of statements, clear and convincing, that in accordance with the conclusions drawn from
16 all these compilations and commentaries that have appeared from the time of Moses to the present,
17 so that all the rules shall be accessible to young and old, whether these appertain to the
18 (Pentateuchal) precepts or to the institutions established by the sages and prophets, so that no
19 other work should be needed for ascertaining any of the laws of Israel, but that this work might
20 serve as a compendium of the entire Oral Law, including the ordinances, customs, and decrees
21 instituted from the days of our teacher Moses till the compilation of the Talmud, as expounded for
22 us by the Geonim in all the works composed by them since the completion of the Talmud. Hence,
23 I have entitled this work *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Law), for the reason that a person who
24 first reads the Written Law and then this compilation, will know from it the whole of the Oral
25 Law, without occasion to consult any other book between them.

Source: Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972).pp. 39-40.

RAMBAM, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, letter of dedication – late 12th century

1 My honored pupil Rabbi Yosef, may the Rock guard you, son of Yehudah, may his repose be in
2 Paradise. When you came to me, having conceived the intention of journeying from the country
3 farthest away in order to read texts under my guidance, I had a high opinion of you because of your
4 strong desire for inquiry and because of what I observed in your poems of your powerful longing
5 for speculative matters. This was the case since your letters and compositions in rhymed prose
6 came to me from Alexandria, before your grasp was put to the test. I said however: perhaps his
7 longing is stronger than his grasp. When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with
8 the science of astronomy and prior to that texts dealing with mathematics, which is necessary as an
9 introduction to astronomy, my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the
10 quickness of your grasp. I saw that your longing for mathematics was great, and hence I let you
11 train yourself in that science, knowing where you would end. When thereupon you read under my

12 guidance texts dealing with the art of logic, my hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are
13 one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to you so that you would consider
14 in them that which perfect men ought to consider. Thereupon I began to let you see certain flashes
15 and to give you certain indications. Then I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and
16 asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the
17 intentions of the Mutakallimum [theologians] in this respect, and to let you know whether their
18 methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belonged. As I also saw, you have already
19 acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were perplexed, as
20 stupefaction had come over you; your noble soul demanded of you to “find out acceptable words”
21 (Eccles. 12:10). Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach
22 matters in an orderly manner. My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your
23 mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident.
24 Whenever during your association with me a (Biblical) verse or some text of the sages was
25 mentioned in which there was a pointer to some strange notion, I did not refrain from explaining
26 it to you. Then when God decreed our separation and you betook yourself elsewhere, these
27 meetings aroused in me a resolution that had slackened. Your absence moved me to compose this
28 treatise, which I have composed for you and for those like you, however few they are. I have set it
29 down in dispersed chapters [or: chapter headings]. All of them that are written down will reach
30 you where you are, one after the other. Be in good health.

Source: I. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 234-235.

