

LINEAGE IN XVTH C. HISPANO-JEWISH THOUGHT

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Ben Sason, while analysing Arama's view on the nature of Judaism says: "This is a conception which places no importance on the concept of 'purity of blood' for it is prepared to accept anyone who comes with a pure heart and is willing to fulfill the commandments and the Law of the Torah"(1). This is supposed to refute Castro's assertion that in Spain in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries, the purity of blood had become a thought pattern of the noble and ecclesiastical society as a result of the preoccupations with which the converts had, as it were, injected it" (2). According to Castro, the earliest text of a proof of purity of blood in Spain is a responsum of R.S.b.A. (3); and 'the people who really felt the scruple of purity of blood were the Spanish Jews' (4). "The purity of blood -maintains Castro- was the answer of a society animated by anti-Jewish fury to the 'racial hermeticism of the Jew'..." This controversial background has clouded the more important issue of whether there existed a concept of 'purity of blood' among the Jews in XVth century Spain and what precise form it took.

'Impure blood' in the Talmud is a concept which has nothing to do with genealogy, it concerns rather the blood of menstruation or corpses' blood. There are however elements which could later be transformed into an ideology placing value on an individuals' genealogy. Until the destruction of the Temple, a person's origin was of practical importance for religious and institutional reasons. The different classes of 'Yhus', lineage, are listed in the Mishna Horaiot (5).

After the destruction of the Temple, the concept declined considerably. To the mediaeval Jew however, the Talmud, as a canonical work, offered two conflicting views on the

value of genealogy. As has been pointed out, mediaeval Jewry practised selectivity in its acceptance of the Talmudic tradition. It could choose between, on the one hand, the view which saw Yhus as a positive value, expressed in epigrams such as: "God only rests his presence on families with Yhus" or, on the other, the one which was expressed through the ascription of legendary non-Jewish ascendance to some important Talmudic figures.

As Katz has pointed out (6), this Talmudic concept of Yhus is a purely negative one, it rests on the fact that a certain family does not descend from certain individuals. It is this frame of reference that halakhic decisions, such as that recorded in the above mentioned responsum of ibn Adret, are appealing to. We may add that besides being a negative concept it is a religious and halakhic one. It is the kind of Yhus that is ascertained by a Bet-Din presided by a Rabbi or Dayan. The thought of the XVth century Spanish Jew was not, however, limited to the Talmudic view on lineage. The Aristotelian view that 'there are certain advantages, the lack of which sullies supreme felicity, such as good birth' (7) was equally part of the heritage of Hispano-Jewish thinkers. Still another trend, typically Spanish, consisted in the alleged Jerosolymite origin of the Hispano-Jewish population. It is to this idea that Arragel is referring in the preface to his Bible translation, and it is this that would form the basis for the Exiles' exalted view of their origin (8).

It seems that the period following the 1391 massacres witnessed a change of emphasis in the Jews' attitude to Yhus. There was a view of Yhus which was different in focus from the Talmudic one.

After 1391 we see the predominance of a lay-social concept of Yhus and one which is expressed in different media. It is not the sort of Yhus that is ascertained by a Rabbi's decision but it is one that defines a man's place in society. It appears most notably in letters written at that time by scribes of Aragonese communities. In these letters of recommendation we find often, side by side with the name of the person, the phrase: "of a decent family" or "of a family of believers" (9). Brody explains this frequent occurrence: "the number of oppressed was great and they could not help everyone so they chose to help only those who had escaped the massacres without converting and in whose families there were no converts". It seems that the conversion wave of the years following 1391 gave rise to a special preoccupation with one's origin. This preoccupation was not concerned with the Yhus which consists of not being a descendent of a bastard or other classes of people mentioned in the Mishna. It is unlikely that one will find as many 'certificates of lineage' in previous periods of Hispano-Jewish history. Among

the letters written by Da Piera there is one for example, written because "when the persons who have escaped the sword... wander and go away... it would not be believed by mere hearing that these people have not converted, unless it is from scribes or from written testimonies which testify their being just, signed by well known people who 'are known at the gates'" (11).

Da Piera, therefore, writes a letter (with an apparently formulaic intent) "for X, who is from the sons of good residents of this land, from those who are known to be faithful, decent and untainted (Kasher)". X is a 'yakar' who is defined by the fact of his belonging to a certain family and likewise by the fact that he has not converted and that he has not mixed with 'the sons of strangers or others'. It is Da Piera who as a community official writes the recommendation, not a Dayan or a Rabbi. Letters 6 and 7 have the same character of testimonials of a person's descent.

The same can be said for letters 39 and 19 of the collection of letters published by Beinart (12). Letter 39, written in 1412 (the date of the conversions and Tortosa), is concerned with certifying that Meir b. R. Todros b. R. Hasdai is a Jew and he is not of those who converted during the persecutions. Meir was "very afraid lest they should think or suspect him to be one of the converts... therefore he begged us to give evidence of his untaintedness and this is the certificate of purity of this young man..."

It seems that lineage was so well established as a means of assessing Jewish social rank that it was even noticed, understood and accepted by the non-Jewish community. Fernán Pérez de Guzmán when saying 'Don Pablo, Bishop of Burgos (i.e. the ex-Rabbi Solomon Halevi)... was of great lineage of that nation (13)' (i.e. the Jews) could hardly be talking about lineage in the halakhic sense; and neither would Pablo of Burgos in a book on the 'Origin and Nobility' of his lineage (14). And this is stated explicitly by Mosén Diego de Valera who, when answering the question of whether a convert retrains the nobility of his lineage, says that not only does he retain it but he increases it: "For the wise know that there are nobles among the Jews and Moors just as among the Christian, though the ignorant deny it..." (15).

Alami in 1415 protest against reliance on lineage, but not all writers on the subject were of the same opinion. Shem Tov b. Joseph, a Spanish preacher of the 80's, himself proud to be a descendant of a line of scholars, following his father's example, seems to be elaborating an ideology of lineage in his sermons. "It is clear that for a man to act nobly he has to fulfill three conditions: to be of pure blood, to be associated with noble people and not to be poor" (16).

Shem Tov is listing the 'external goods' necessary for perfection. In another passage he develops a remark of Aristotle into a primitive social theory which is essentially elitist and is expressed in terms of ideas current in Spain during the eighties of the fifteenth century. "If a person is of pure blood and has a noble lineage he will give birth to a son like himself, and he who is ugly and stained (of blood?) will give birth to a son who is similar to him, for gold will give birth to gold and silver will give birth to silver and copper to copper, and if you find some rare instances that from lesser people sprang out greater ones, nevertheless, in most cases what I have said is correct, and as you know, a science is not built on exceptions" (17). It would seem safe to assume that while the concept of lineage and the importance of the family had been known amongst Jews as amongst their Christian or Muslim neighbours, there is a distinctive intensity and emphasis following the particular circumstances of the XVth century. The concept was not universally accepted, but the mere fact that it needed contesting shows how current an idea it was. It is in this light that one should read Abraham Saba's comment on the Talmudic dictum: The reason why Adam was born alone is for the sake of peace among people, so that a man should not say to his neighbour 'my father is greater than yours' in other words this was done in order to show man's perfection, for by birth we are all equal and we have all come from one man and everyone has a good potential for intellectual and social pursuits" (18). The evidence adduced above may serve as a basis for further explorations on the value of lineage in Hispano-Jewish society of the Late Middle Ages. A similar type of material was used by Katz (19) for arriving at his conclusions on lineage within his model of Central European Ashkenazi social values. More precision may be reached by comparisons with the social mentality of Northern European Jewry in the High and Late Middle Ages studied respectively by Grosman (20) and Katz. The legal view of the halakhist on particular issues are by no means the only articulated ideologies on lineage of Spanish Jews. Their value on these matters unless stated or proved otherwise is prescriptive. Recent studies have tended to emphasize the extent to which legal and exegetic considerations rather than direct responses to historical situations are the determinants of halakhic discussions and decisions. Nevertheless, and with these qualifications in mind, they do help to complete the picture. Thus e. g. Pasma-neck's (21) study traces the process whereby the halakhic view on the bastard becomes more lenient and the scope of mamzerut (bastardy) is confined. Hoenig's (22) research on filial succession in the rabbinate argues that medieval halakhic sources were against an automatic transmission by filial heritage. Similar value might be attached to

the stance of thinkers of exclusive orientations such as the Kabbalists. The Zohar's attitudes to the proselyte studied by Wijnhoven (23) are ambivalent but for him the dominant theme is inequality. Needless to say these studies deal with only limited indices of mentality and are no substitute for the research on the institutional realities e. g. the relevance of lineage to communal leadership local and supralocal. A list of communal leaders or officers during a period of time is surely a more solid approach to the problem (24). Another questions which may perhaps be raised with profit is that of onomastic usage as an index to 'Sippenbewusstsein' (25). Certain features are well known: that in the Shem Tov family the grand father, author of the Emunot, was called Shem Tov Ibn Shem Tov, his son, author of the Kevod Elohim, was called Joseph ibn Shem Tov and his son, commentator of the Guide, was Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Shem Tov will surprise no one. But is the fact that so many individuals with the last name Da Piera are called Solomon merely a coincidence? and the Vidals and Samuels amongst the Cavallerias? Not that in general onomastic rules are unknown but that their actual usage and repercussions for our subject have not been at the center of the discussion. And if there was indeed an 'aristocracy' ruling the Jewish communities of Spain as has been assumed quite freely by a number of writers was it a 'noblesse' or a 'nobility' in which primogeniture was crucial?

In his work on medieval categories of thought, Gurjewitsch maintained that:

Diese (gesellschaftlichen) Verbindungen waren im Feudalismus vorwiegend zwischenmenschliche, noch nicht verdinglichte. Die Mitglieder der Gesellschaft traten in unmittelbare Verbindungen zueinander: Diese Beziehungen gründeten sich auf die Gemeinsamkeit der Herkunft oder auf Eheverbindungen... "Reichtum", sagt der Held einer französischen Epopöe, "das sind keine schönen Felle, kein Geld, keine Mauern von Schlössern und keine Pferde; Reichtum sind Sippschaft und Freunde..."

Hispano-Jewish attitudes may be a minor note to the general lineage consciousness of Christendom and the Islamic world, but if they are worth studying they are worth studying more thoroughly.

N O T E S

1. 'The generation of Spanish exiles on its fate', Zion, 26, 1960, 36/7, n.8.
2. The structure of Spanish history, Princeton, N. J., 1954, 527.
3. Ibid.
4. Loc. cit. 525.
5. Osar Israel, sv Yhus; Ensiklopedia Israelit sv Yuhasin; Dinur, Israel Ba-Golah, 2, 5, Jerusalem 1971, 160 and n. 39.
B. Netanyahu, 'Américo Castro and his View on the Origins of the Purity of Blood', PAAJR, XLVI-XLVII, 1979-1980, 397-458.
6. 'Marriage and sexual life among the Jews at the close of the Middle Ages', Zion, 10, 1945, 21-54, 29-32.
7. Nicomachean Ethics, Loeb ed.43.
The Hebrew nachleben of this idea may deserve separate treatment. For its XVth c. diffusion one might refer for example to The letters of Marsilio Ficino, vol. 1, London 1975, 32 ff, letter 2: "...men live well if they are endowed with as many good things as possible. Now these good things are said to be riches, health, beauty, strength, nobility of birth..."
8. H. H. Ben Sason, loc. cit., n.2. Cfr. also Zimmels, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, London 1958, 281 ff on Hispano-Jewish families with traditions of high rank because of descent from scholars, etc. Cfr. also Hight, The Classical tradition, Oxford 1959, 576 and n.19 for the custom of Roman clans to trace their origin to Trojan ancestry and 54 for the fashion of tracing genealogical connections between medieval families and nations and peoples of antiquity. On this last point see J. M. Maravall Casesnoves, El concepto de España en la Edad Media, Madrid 1954, 224.
9. Brody, R. Solomon Da Pieras Leben und Werken, Berlin 1893, 18, 22, 24,25.
10. Loc. cit. 36/7; n. 16. There is no mention of Rabbis in these letters.
11. Loc. cit. 22. Cfr. also H. Beinart Sefunot 5, Studies in Memory of I. Sonne, Jerusalem 1961, 83 and 126. On Fernando de Antequera's relatively close attention to the converts see F. Vendrell, Sefarad, VIII, 397; X, 349 and XII, 8.
12. Beinart, loc. cit. 103-126.
13. A. Castro, La realidad histórica de España, México 1954, 512 n. 154, has drawn attention to this passage of the Generaciones y Semblanzas.

14. Ibid. 499.
15. A. Castro, España en su historia, 570.
16. Shem Tov (b. Joseph) ibn Shem Tov, Derashot, Salonika 1525 (facs. Jerusalem 1973) 45 b col. b.
17. Ibid. 14a col. b.
18. Abraham Saba, Seror Ha-Mor, Venice 1522, 3a col. b.
19. Masoret W-Masber (Tradition and Crisis), Jerusalem 1963, ch. 19 and 169.
20. A. Grosman, 'Lineage and its place in early Askenazi society' (Hebrew) Studies in the History of Jewish society in the Middle Ages and the modern period presented to J. Katz, Jerusalem 1980, 9-23.
21. S. Pasmaneck, HUCA, 37, 1966, 121-45.
22. S. B. Hoenig, 'Filial succession in the rabbinate', Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies, vol. 1, Philadelphia 1972, 14-22.
23. J.H.A. Wijnhoven, 'The Zohar and the proselyte', Texts and Responses, Studies...N. Glatzer (ed. M. A. Fishbane and P.R. Flohr), Leiden 1975, 120-141.
24. Cfr. appx to ch. 2 of E.Gutwirth, Social Tensions Within XVth C. Hispano-Jewish Communities, Ph. D. Thesis University of London 1978.
25. K.F. Werner, 'Liens de parenté et noms de personne' in ed. G. Duby and J. Le Goff, Famille et parenté dans l'occident médiéval, Rome 1977, 13-18, 25-34.
26. Aaron J. Gurjewitsch, Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen (tr. Gabriele Losack), München 1982, 289.