

On Wine, Wandering, and Wisdom: *Musar* and *Adab* in Medieval Sepharad*

De vino, viajes y sabiduría: musar y adab en la Sefarad medieval

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Abstract

This article focuses on three Hebrew narrative works written in medieval Sepharad: Yosef ibn Zabarah's *Sefer ša 'ašu 'im* [The book of delights], Yehudah al-Ḥarizi's *Sefer taḥkemoni* [The book of Taḥkemoni], and *Mišle he-'arab* [The sayings of the Arabs], by one Yiṣḥaq ha-Qaṭan. It takes their chapters on wine, traveling, and wisdom as a point of departure for examining the genre of *musar* or traditional ethical literature. It also reveals the multifaceted nature and function that this Hebrew genre acquired in the medieval period thanks to its contact with the Arabic tradition and in the context of the wide geographic diffusion of *adab* literature.

Keywords: musar; adab; Sepharad; Hebrew literature; wisdom literature

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en tres obras hebreas en prosa escritas en la Sefarad medieval: *Sefer ša 'ašu 'im* [Libro de los entretenimientos] de Yosef ibn Zabarah, *Sefer taḥkemoni* [El libro de Taḥkemoni] de Yehudah al-Ḥarizi y *Mišle he-'arab* [Los dichos de los árabes] de un tal Yiṣḥaq ha-Qaṭan. El artículo toma los capítulos sobre el vino, los viajes y la sabiduría como punto de partida para examinar el género de *musar* o literatura ética tradicional, poner de manifiesto la multiplicidad de funciones que tiene este género hebreo en época medieval y explicarlo gracias al contacto con la tradición árabe y en el contexto de la amplia difusión del género literario de *adab*.

Palabras clave: musar; adab; Sefarad; literatura hebrea; literatura sapiencial

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By the year 1172, the Maghreb and al-Andalus were controlled by the Almohads, a new Berber dynasty that had overthrown the Almoravids in 1147, when the self-proclaimed caliph ‘Abd al-Mu’min conquered the capital city of Marrakesh¹. The Almohads imposed radical social and religious reforms that had a negative impact on freethinkers and religious minorities, Christians and Jews alike. They seem to have rejected the *dhimma* contract, which stipulated that monotheistic religious minorities were allowed to practice their religion as long as this practice was discreet, they showed submission to Islamic regulations, and they paid a yearly tax known as *jizyah*². As a result of this intolerant policy, religious minorities had to choose between conversion to Islam or migration to avoid death. Many Jewish families faked conversion to survive, such as Maimonides’s³. Others left al-Andalus, immigrating either to other regions of the Islamic world outside Almohad authority or to the Christian lands of Iberia and Provence.

Historiography has it that Almohad regulations put an end to the so-called Golden Age of Jewish Culture in medieval Iberia, since many of the communities were dismantled, rabbinic academics and learning institutions abandoned, and Jewish morale and confidence crushed. However, the exodus of Jewish intellectuals to northern Iberia and Provence beginning in the second half of the twelfth century favored the development of two cultural processes that revitalized the Jewish intellectual landscape. First, there was the widespread phenomenon of translations from Arabic into Hebrew, which made many landmark books in different disciplines, such as medicine, philosophy, science, philology, or belles-lettres, suddenly available to Jewish communities beyond al-Andalus. And secondly, there was prolific literary creativity and experimentation in the Hebrew language. There is no doubt that the appearance of secular narrative works was triggered by the phenomenon of translations from Arabic, for it contributed to the increased versatility of Hebrew prose as an artistic medium⁴.

The study of Hebrew poetry from the Andalusí Golden Age has flourished since the nineteenth century, when German philologists from the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement tried to recover an idealized Sephardic past where, as they saw it, religious

1. For a comprehensive study of these two Berber empires, see Bennison (2016).

2. This is referred to as the Pact of ‘Umar, which regulated the relationships between Muslims and other ‘People of the Book’, mainly Christians and Jews. The pact granted the latter protection and relative religious freedom in exchange for the payment of a poll tax and the observance of certain public norms. However, the dispositions of the pact were inconsistently applied depending on time and location. For a more detailed analysis of the origin and implications of the pact, see Safran (2013: 10-17); and on the legal position of Jews in medieval Islam, see Cohen (1994: 52-74).

3. The controversy sparked by fake conversions prompted Maimonides to write his *Iggeret ha-šemad* [Epistle on apostasy], where he claimed that he did not consider public conversion to Islam in difficult times to be apostasy. According to Grossman (1998), it seems that the attitude towards Islam was more favorable than was that towards Christianity: Islam was seen as a truly monotheistic faith, while Christianity raised theological suspicions for its support of a Holy Trinity, statues of divine figures in churches, and public rituals such as processions. On Jews’ relations with and attitudes towards Christianity and Islam, see the comprehensive monograph by Cohen (1994).

4. The bibliography on the phenomenon of translations from Arabic into Hebrew in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is vast. However, a general overview on translations and the role of translators during those centuries can be found in Halkin and Sáenz-Badillos (2007); for more specific analyses, see Drory (2000a) and Pearce (2017).

adherence to Judaism and participation in the secular world of the majority group were compatible and fruitful⁵. Regardless of the historical accuracy of that image, less attention was paid to the birth and development of secular Hebrew prose in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iberia and Provence⁶.

In this article, I take the chapters on wine, traveling, and wisdom from three of these Hebrew prose works as a point of departure for examining the Hebrew genre of *musar*, or traditional ethical literature, as understood in medieval Iberia. Through a process of adaptation and reworking, the Arabic concept of *adab* as received and manipulated by Jewish authors in medieval Sepharad prompted the long-standing traditional Hebrew *musar* genre to advance with new forms of expression and evolve into independent secular narratives. I will analyze the ambiguity of the advice on drinking wine in moderation, traveling in order to forget one's problems and increase one's culture, and following the counsel of wise men through the lens of *musar* and *adab* with the aim of contributing to the debate over the nature and function of this genre in medieval Hebrew literature.

The first work is *Sefer ša'ašu'im* [The book of delights], written by Yosef ibn Zabarrah. This author, born in Barcelona around 1140, was an expert in medicine, Talmud, and languages, mainly Arabic and Greek⁷. The book, probably written in the second half of the twelfth century, begins with a lengthy panegyric for Šešet Benveniste, *naši'* of Barcelona⁸. A frame tale follows the poem and spans thirteen chapters: two new friends—the narrator Yosef and 'Enan ha-Nataš, a semi-devil figure—embark on a journey together, and in the course of that adventure, they debate different topics and exchange several stories about medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and women, many of which can be traced back to the Indian, Persian, and Arabic traditions⁹.

The second work is *Mišle he-'arab* [The sayings of the Arabs], written by one Yišḥaq ha-Qaṭan, probably at the beginning of the thirteenth century in Provence. It consists of fifty independent chapters and contains a compilation of maxims, short tales,

5. On the tropes of Andalusí and Sefardi exceptionalism, see the recent monograph by Brann (2021); and on the relationship between the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement and the Jewish medieval culture of Sepharad, see the classical study by Schorsch (1989) and more recent publications by Skolnik (2014) and Efron (2016).

6. Decter analyzes this period of transition from al-Andalus to Christian Iberia and claims that «Hebrew literature undergoes internal transformations, utilizing forms and themes that maintain a complex and evolving relationship with the Arabic and European literary models that intermingled in medieval Iberia» (2007: 8).

7. For more information on Yosef ibn Zabarrah, see Hadas (1960), Forteza-Rey (1983) and Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona (1988a: 200). There are three modern critical editions of his work: one prepared by Davidson (1925) and two by Dishon (1985; 2017). All the quotes from the work in this article are taken from Davidson's critical edition.

8. Praise poems were a very common way to begin the introductions of many prose works written in this period. On medieval Jewish panegyric production, see the monograph by Decter (2018).

9. Wacks (2007) claims that the mechanism of storytelling through a frame tale is a model shared among the literary traditions that coexisted in medieval Iberia: the Arabic, the Hebrew and the Castilian. The frame tale narrative formula will appear later in other European works, such as the Castilian *El Conde Lucanor* (1331-1335) by Don Juan Manuel, the Italian *Decameron* (1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio, the English *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) by Geoffrey Chaucer, or the French *Heptaméron* (1558) by Marguerite de Navarre, to name just a few.

and didactic poems that offer advice on moral conduct and proper behavior¹⁰. Like the previous work, *Mišle he-‘arab* combines plain prose, rhymed prose, clusters of biblical quotations, and Andalusī-styled poems¹¹.

The third work is the more widely known *Sefer taḥkemoni* [The book of Taḥkemoni], by Yehudah al-Ḥarizi, an author who lived between 1165 and 1225¹². He composed Arabic and Hebrew poetry and translated wisdom, medical, and philosophical works into Hebrew, such as Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*. He also translated al-Ḥarīrī’s admired Arabic *maqāmāt* into the Hebrew work *Maḥbarot Itti’el* [The *maqāmāt* of Itti’el]¹³. After that, he wrote *Sefer taḥkemoni*, a collection of fifty *maqāmāt* written in order to prove that the Hebrew language was as suitable as Arabic was for the composition of works in that distinguished genre of the Arabic literary tradition. Even though the fifty episodes of the book share a narrator, Heman ha-’Ezraḥi, and a protagonist, Heḥer ha-Qeni, they are mutually independent¹⁴.

1. On wine

Wine is treated in chapter 1 of *Sefer ša’ašu’im*, where the protagonist of the story, Yosef, the alter ego of the author, is awakened in the middle of the night by a ghostly figure called ‘Enan who incites him to eat and drink wine before embarking on a trip. In the course of the debate that develops, Yosef defends the drinking of water over wine, for he considers wine to be harmful, while ‘Enan defends the drinking of wine over water, for he considers wine to be beneficial¹⁵.

Two chapters of *Mišle he-‘arab* deal with the topic of wine. In chapter 28, titled *Do not desire eating too much and greedily; and do not be of those who guzzle wine or glut themselves on meat*, the author introduces an *exemplum* where wine is considered

10. It is worth mentioning the literary significance of the number fifty, since it is the conventional number of chapters in *maqāma* works, such as al-Ḥarīrī’s in the Arabic context or al-Ḥarizi’s in the Hebrew tradition. In addition, several wisdom works written in Spanish in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iberia are also divided into fifty chapters, i.e. *Castigos y documentos de Sancho IV* or the book of *exempla* in *El Conde Lucanor*.

11. For a Hebrew critical edition, a translation into Spanish and historical and linguistic analyses of the work, see Torollo (2021). All the quotes from the work in this article are taken from Torollo’s critical edition.

12. On Yehudah al-Ḥarizi, see Del Valle (1988), Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona (1988a: 133-135), Segal (2001) and Sadan (2002).

13. *Maḥberet* (pl. *maḥbarot*) is the Hebrew term for *maqāma* (pl. *maqāmāt*), short episodes—in rhymed prose with interspersed poems—that are independent but that share a protagonist and a narrator who recounts the episodes. Starting with al-Ḥamadḥānī (tenth-eleventh centuries) and al-Ḥarīrī (eleventh-twelfth centuries) in Arabic, the *maqāmāt* entered the Hebrew literary cannon thanks to al-Ḥarizi’s translations and subsequently his own work in the genre. For comprehensive studies on the *maqāma* as a literary genre, its writers, contexts and later adaptations, see Hämeeen-Anttila (2002) and Drory (2000b), and for an analysis of the adoption of the genre by Hebrew authors and its subsequent developments, see the recent monograph by Rand (2021).

14. There are two critical editions of this work: one prepared by Toporowsky (1952) and another by Yahalom and Katsumata (2010). All the quotes from the work in this article are taken from Yahalom and Katsumata’s critical edition.

15. It should be noted that the way Yosef ibn Zabarah treats the topic of wine may differ from that of Yiṣṣaḥ ha-Qaṭan and Yehudah al-Ḥarizi: since he was a physician, the imprint of contemporary medical literature informs the character’s views on the advantages and disadvantages of wine from a health viewpoint.

the cause of every transgression. The story has it that three men gather in a house to eat and drink. When they find themselves completely drunk and the wine is all gone, they decide to go and look for more from the house of a Jewish female wine merchant. After obtaining the wine, they kill the woman and kidnap her daughter, who is raped by the men in the house. On the following morning, fearing the girl's accusatory testimony, they kill her and flee to Rome¹⁶.

Chapter 49 of *Mišle he-'arab*, titled *Do not drink unless it is with friends, for you don't know whether the wine will do you good or make you angry*, deals with the topic of wine from a different viewpoint: there is an introduction in prose about the advantages and disadvantages of drinking wine followed by twenty-three poems, supposedly translated from Arabic, praising wine, its color, smell, and positive effects.

And lastly, chapter 42 of *Sefer taḥkemoni*, entitled *maḥberet ha-yayin* [the *maqāma* on wine], tells the story of the narrator Heman ha-'Ezraḥi who, after spending a whole year without drinking wine, decides to drink again. Heman is tempted and tries to rationalize his temptation by focusing on the supposed benefits wine has for both the soul and the body, benefits that he feels he has been missing. He then meets a group of young people who are drinking and praising wine. However, among them, there is an old man who is not impressed by their praise: he takes the floor with a speech in rhymed prose on the advantages of wine and finishes with a beautiful eight-verse poem. When he is done, the crowd asks him to talk about the negative characteristics of wine, and he follows the same format: a rhymed-prose admonishment against drinking wine and a seven-verse poem. This old-man-turned-poet happens to be Ḥeḇer ha-Qeni, the hero of each episode of the book.

According to these three accounts, the main benefits of wine are that it cheers the soul, makes one forget misery and troubles, expels sadness from within the body, stimulates intelligence and understanding, and is the cause of sweet dreams and good sleep. On the other hand, the main problems caused by wine are that it leads to other transgressions and sins, makes one lose one's money, provokes quarrels between friends, is harmful for some of the organs of the body, disturbs the understanding, and darkens the teeth. We see, therefore, that these three authors writing in Christian Iberia and Provence at the end of the twelfth and first half of the thirteenth centuries are using the same literary mechanisms – a combination of plain prose, rhymed prose, and poetry – to present their conflicted views about wine. Indeed, the prose authors are partially drawing upon previous Hebrew Andalusí poetry, in which descriptions of wine parties in palace courtyards with music and beautiful male and female singers, dancers, and

16. For the implications of this story from a cultural translation perspective, see Torollo (2020). The idea that an excess of wine is a transgression that leads to other transgressions is quite common in medieval works belonging to different literary traditions. In fact, the prototypical story, with many Arabic, Hebrew and Romance adaptations, is the one identified as «the three sins of the hermit», Thompson's motif J485 (1955/1958). On the concatenation of transgressions triggered by drunkenness as explored through chapter 28 of *Mišle he-'arab*, see Torollo (2020: 340-342). On moderation in eating and drinking in medieval Iberian Romance literature, see Haro Cortés (2010); and on uncertainty and ambiguity about eating in the banquet scene of *Sefer ša'ašu'im*, see Einat-Nov (2019).

cup-bearers are abundant. In this poetry, wine poems are usually one of two things: either descriptions of the wine itself and the circumstances surrounding the drinking, or meditations on the sad feelings that the wine arouses in the poet-drinker¹⁷.

However, what is novel in these prose works is the discussion on the intrinsic characteristics of wine and the effects it has on the behavior and health of human beings. This debate appears explicitly with expressions that call for moderation and restraint in drinking, something that is less common in Andalusí poetry¹⁸. Through those meditations on wine, drinkers, and drinking venues, our prose authors revisit and adapt the idea that drinking is a very complex action in which the secular and the sacred worlds meet. In fact, this idea is in accordance with Ecclesiastes 11:9 «Rejoice, o young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of youth; walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all this God will bring you into judgment», which encourages men to enjoy life, but at the same time to be aware of the existence of the final judgment, hence the insistence on moderation¹⁹.

In other words, what these prose compositions advocate for is the Aristotelian golden mean, the notion that the ideal lies midway between two extremes, excess and abstinence²⁰. This is supported, for instance, by the conclusion of the discussion in chapter 1 of *Sefer ša 'ašu 'im*, where 'Enan acknowledges that «a small quantity is beneficial while a huge quantity is harmful»²¹ or by the main idea in *Mišle he- 'arab*, that «the common habit among the old wise men is drinking with moderation, so as to let intellect govern wine and not wine govern intellect»²². In this last case, it is not only the content that makes a case for moderation, but form. Chapter 49 of *Mišle he- 'arab* is made up of two parts: a prose section and twenty-three poems. If we were to look at those twenty-three poems without their context, we would think that the author is praising, in the Andalusí fashion, wine and the circumstances in which it is consumed. However, it is the first section in prose with statements for and against wine that guides the reading of the chapter as a whole and of the poems in particular through the lens of *musar*. Once the reader has read the prose section, he will read the poems that follow more cautiously and with the virtue of moderation in mind.

Lastly, considering the secular nature of *Sefer taḥkemoni*, Yehudah al-Ḥarizi introduces a surprising twist. He first presents the ambivalence towards wine in the behavior

17. Scheindlin (1986: 25). The literature on wine poetry in the medieval Arabic and Hebrew traditions is vast, but for a study on wine in the Andalusí *maqāma*, see Young (2004).

18. The debate genre through which the qualities of two items are compared is quite common in the medieval Arabic, Hebrew and Romance traditions; see, for example, Bossy (1976), Colahan (1979), Van Gelder (1987), Van Bekkum (1991), Franchini (2001), Alba Cecilia (2008), or Salvatierra (2014).

19. This same idea appears in a wine poem by Šemu'el ha-Nagid calling for moderation in drinking; see Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona (1988b: II, 162).

20. Aristotelianism became an important topic for discussion in the intellectual circles of Muslim and Jewish writers since the twelfth century, although it had entered the Islamic world before. See Alwishah and Hayes (2015) for a group of essays on the reception of the writings of Aristotle and their impact on the Arabic tradition.

21. The Hebrew reads מִזְק מֵעַט מוֹעִיל וְהַרְבַּ מֵעַט מוֹעִיל (Sefer ša 'ašu 'im, chapter 1, lines 89-90).

22. The Hebrew reads מִשְׁפָּטוֹ הַגּוֹדֵר מִהַקְדוּמִים וּמִהַחֲכָמִים שְׁתוּתוֹ כְּשִׁיעוּר שִׁיגְבֵר הַשְּׂכֵל עַל הַיַּיִן וְלֹא יִגְבֵר הַיַּיִן עַל הַשְּׂכֵל (Mišle he- 'arab, chapter 49, lines 11-12).

of the narrator, who has been able to stay sober for a whole year, but who has been tempted and yields to the temptation. Then, while the youngsters seem to be besotted with admiration for wine, the old man makes a speech showing himself to be the only one capable of distinguishing between the positive and the negative effects of wine, a skill that one acquires perhaps only with age. When he has finished both speeches, the problems that wine gives rise to seem to be overwhelming, and that makes many of those who are present renounce drinking: «when the people heard his wonderful speech, their hearts were attracted to his words, so many of them abandoned wine, despised it, and promised to God that they were done with it, and never again were going to drink it»²³. In this sense, moderation is rejected, since it seems that the oath taken by many of the young drinkers with God would reflect the final advisable approach: not to drink wine *at all*. However, the nature of the Jewish practice itself contradicts this conclusion, for wine is an integral part of many religious rituals.

2. On wandering

Another topic that piqued the interest of medieval authors is travel: wandering is a trope central to the *maqāma* genre, beginning with al-Ḥarīrī and echoed in al-Ḥarizī and others, in that the narrator is often on a long, meandering journey²⁴. In fact, they regularly use three types of analogies to explain wanderlust. In the most common type, these writers point out that water in rivers and streams that is moving remains fresh, clean, and valued, while stagnant water in puddles pollutes, deteriorates, and is not suitable for drinking. Another kind of analogy refers to birds, which are willing to fly for long hours in search of food but go back to their nests when night falls to take care of their chicks. And finally, travel is also compared to the reeds in swamps, for the wind can move them from one side to the other, but they never leave the places where they are rooted.

Traveling is treated at the beginning of chapter 2 of *Sefer ša 'ašu 'im*: after eating and drinking, 'Enan tries to convince Yosef to embark on a trip with him²⁵. Yosef is hesitant, and another debate ensues between the two about the advantages and disadvantages of leaving one's city and traveling. 'Enan goads Yosef by saying «leave this land and I

23. The Hebrew reads לא למען לשלמה, ונדרו נדר לאדני ושלמה, למען לא ישחררו (*Sefer tahkemoni*, chapter 42, lines 118-120). In fact, this is a common feature of the *maqāma* genre: the trickster thoroughly convinces the audience of his point, and they end up agreeing with him.

24. See, for example, al-Ḥarizī's own accounts in Yahalom and Blau (2002). Furthermore, the idea of wandering from place to place in search of wisdom lies at the core of many medieval journeys and books. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the topic of medieval traveling for the sake of knowledge, but for a comprehensive introduction organized by topics, see Friedman and Figg (2000). For another influential work focused on Latin lyric poets in medieval Europe, see Waddell (1927). In the medieval Arabic literary tradition, there is the travel genre or *rihla*, usually associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca and the recounting of the adventures of that journey. For an account of how travel was instrumental in early and medieval Islam and practiced by many Muslim scholars for both the acquisition of knowledge and the formation of scientific disciplines, see Touati (2010). For an analysis of Jewish traveling in the Middle Ages, see David (2013) and Mirones Lozano (2018).

25. Einat-Nov (2021: 165) advances the hypothesis that 'Enan may try to inebriate Yosef with the goal of convincing him to leave the city.

will unveil mysteries and secrets for you, since in this place nobody knows about your wisdom or recognizes your craft and virtue»²⁶. Yosef replies that he does not need that because his land is already wonderful and full of sages, friends, and good doctors. But ‘Enan attempts to manipulate him by arguing that, by traveling, he would be sharing all those good qualities with other communities that are not as lucky as his own. He also insists that travel is for Yosef’s own good, using one of the well-known comparisons mentioned before: the man who does not travel «is like stagnant water, for in a few days people get irritated with it»²⁷. They then exchange tales and sayings about health, friendship, and women, and Yosef is finally convinced to go along with ‘Enan.

Chapter 43 of *Mišle he-‘arab*, titled *Do not set up a home that will oppress you and make you vomit: go and wander, you will feel relieved and your pain will be alleviated*, enumerates the benefits of traveling when one feels stressed at home. The chapter begins with the admonition of a sage to his sons: «look at water, for the kind that is stagnant in cisterns rots while the kind that flows is good»²⁸. With this saying, the author sets the tone in favor of wandering, and this wise man continues saying that traveling, listening to new things, seeing the traditions of other lands, and meeting the good people of other cities is relief for the body and calms the soul. The rest of the chapter consists of advice for becoming a good traveler, such as respecting one’s fellow travelers, taking good care of the horse that carries the weight, and behaving extremely well wherever one goes, for «an offence in your land is a small mistake, but a small mistake in a foreign land is a big offence»²⁹.

The next chapter of the work, chapter 44, titled *Do not prolong your absence if you leave your home; remember your children and the people who miss you*, warns against traveling too much, since one should not forget that there are duties at home, especially if one has a family: «and remember that birds move away from their nests but return to sleep in it and to flutter on their chicks»³⁰. We clearly see here another application of the Aristotelian golden mean, the balance between two extremes: moderation.

Lastly, in chapter 27 of *Sefer taḥkemoni*, entitled *maḥberet ha-nedod* [the *maqāma* on wandering], the narrator Heman ha-’Ezraḥi arrives in Basra, in southern Iraq, where he encounters a group of young men who are entertaining themselves through *dibre musar* [*musar* topics], with an old man standing before them. He begins with a section in rhymed prose followed by a seven-verse poem in which he talks about the problems that traveling can lead to: exposure to natural phenomena, encounters with thieves and robbers, and the loss of everything one carries. He quotes what, according to him, poets say about it: *ha-haliḳah mebuḳah*, *we-ha-nesi’ah yegi’ah*, *we-ha-peridah ḥaradah* [wandering is an embarrassment, traveling causes pains, and separation pro-

26. The Hebrew reads קום צא מן הארץ הזאת ואגלה לך תעלומות ורוות כי במקום הזה אינם יודעים חכמתך ואינם מכירים מלאכתך ומעלתך (Sefer ša’ ašu’im, chapter 2, lines 9-10).

27. The Hebrew reads והנה הוא כמים אשר אינם נגרים, ולקצת ימים המרו גם גברים (Sefer ša’ ašu’im, chapter 2, lines 33-34).

28. The Hebrew reads הביטו במים, כי העצור בגבים יבאש והשוטף ימתק (Mišle he-‘arab, chapter 43, line 3).

29. The Hebrew reads האשם בארצך שגגה, והשגגה בגרותך אשם גדול (Mišle he-‘arab, chapter 43, lines 10-11).

30. The Hebrew reads הזכור כי העוף ירחיק מקנו וישוב ללון אליו וירחף בו על גזוליו (Mišle he-‘arab, chapter 44, line 5).

duces anxiety]³¹. When he is done, one of the young men asks him to tell *midoteiha ha-ṭobot ka'ašer siparta ha-ra'ot* [the good qualities, as you have mentioned the bad ones]³². He then composes another section in rhymed prose and another seven-verse poem to praise traveling and to remind his listeners of its benefits and advantages: it helps one to forget tragedies and troubles, to achieve new goals, to meet new people, and to bring the heart renewed joy; in addition, one comes back to one's native land full of energy and feeling appreciated by those who have missed one's presence. He also quotes what poets say about it: *ha-nesi'ah tešū'ah we-ha-haliḳah beraḳah* [travel brings about salvation and to wander is a blessing]³³. At the end of the anecdote, this old poet reveals himself as Heber ha-Qeni, the hero whom the narrator Heman ha-'Ezrahi encounters at the end of each episode³⁴.

Taking the three works together, we see again a game of contrasts played out here: these rhymed prose works take pains to present the two sides of the coin, so the reader and/or listener can be informed of the positive and negative consequences of their choices. At the end, in the three works, traveling is advised and seen favorably. Even though the problems it brings about are also detailed, any clear-thinking member of the audience would understand that the benefits outweigh the harm. After all, the characters themselves are traveling: Yosef travels with 'Enan in *Sefer ša'ašū'im*, the people referred to in the chapter of *Mišle he-'arab* are also on the move, and Heman ha-'Ezrahi in *Sefer taḥkemoni*, who has just arrived in a new city, is a true wandering scholar and thus always moving from place to place.

3. On wisdom

Wisdom deals with universal topics that are relevant for every human being, regardless of faith, socio-economic status, or cultural tradition, and that feature makes wisdom content very suitable for cultural translation. The long-standing wisdom tradition in Arabic that had developed in the East –collections of morality tales, anthologies of popular sayings, and to some extent the *adab* genre and the *maqāmāt*– enjoyed great popularity and prestige in the entire Arabic-speaking world, including al-Andalus. The spread of this tradition stimulated the development of literary genres with wisdom content in the Iberian Peninsula, not only in Arabic, but also in Hebrew, Latin, and the Romance languages.

In addition to the translations of collections of Eastern stories such as Kalila and Dimna, Barlaam and Josaphat, the tales of Sendebār, or the compilations of sayings and maxims that circulated widely in the thirteenth century, other works that were the product of this cultural diversity and exchange, such as Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina*

31. *Sefer taḥkemoni*, chapter 27, lines 18-20.

32. *Sefer taḥkemoni*, chapter 27, line 75.

33. *Sefer taḥkemoni*, chapter 27, lines 90-91.

34. For a comparison between the travel narratives in *Sefer taḥkemoni* and those in a sixteenth-century Hebrew work on moral instruction from Yemen, *Sefer ha-musar* by Zeḳariah al-Dhāhirī, see Münz-Manor (2019).

Clericalis in Latin or Yehudah al-Ḥarizi's *Sefer taḥkemoni* in Hebrew also became very influential³⁵. These works highlight the cultural encounter between the Arab-Islamic world, the vernacular Romance, and the Hebrew language, proof of which is the widespread phenomenon of translations in Iberia and Provence. It is in this context where we find the new books with wisdom content being written in Hebrew, among them the three works this article is exploring.

Wisdom is specifically dealt with in chapter 7 of *Sefer ša 'ašu 'im*. Yosef and 'Enan arrive in a city and stay with a friend of 'Enan's who offers to entertain them with maxims that he says he has taken from Arabic books: «Would you like to hear beautiful words that I have taken from Arabic books and that are good and pleasant?»³⁶ He then recites ninety-nine sayings that he attributes to anonymous sages, poets, kings, judges, and Arabs, or even to well-known philosophers such as Diogenes, Socrates, or Plato.

In *Mišle he-'arab*, all chapters contain epigrams on different topics. But a specific chapter on wisdom, chapter 7, whose title is *Do not distance yourself from the reflection on wisdom: acquire it, cherish it and it will exalt you*, uses several literary forms to praise wisdom and contrast it to wealth and beauty. Furthermore, the index of the work functions as an independent literary unit, a short treatise made of a group of fifty maxims that at the same time constitute the titles and establish the topics of each of the chapters in the compilation.

The idea of wisdom content translated from the Arabic tradition is also present here, for in the prologue to the work the author states, «when I was young, I read books on the sayings and parables of the Arabs, my ear caught a whisper of their wisdom, and I learnt a bit of their literature and of the laws of their kingdoms»³⁷. He later finds a book on ethics that surprises him and decides to translate it into Hebrew and add biblical verses to prove that the content is originally Jewish. Medieval Jewish authors often created a narrative in which all knowledge is the heritage of the Jewish people and is to be found in the books of the Bible. However, they claim, due to exile and persecutions, that knowledge has been lost or stolen by other peoples, the Arabs among them, and its recovery justifies the existence of the translated work³⁸.

Regarding Yehudah al-Ḥarizi, he worked as an active translator in Provence at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Apart from his translation of Maimonides's *Guide*,

35. For a survey of Castilian didactic works of the thirteenth century and an analysis of their content and narrative techniques, see Haro Cortés (1995); and for a study of the Hebrew wisdom tradition in Iberia and Provence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Torollo (2021).

36. The Hebrew reads והם נהמדים וטובים לקחתי מספרי ערבים, תרצו לשמוע מלים ערבים, (Sefer ša 'ašu 'im, chapter 7, lines 13-14).

37. The Hebrew reads ודתי מלכותם ודתי מספרותם, ואלמד מעט מספרותם, ותקח אזני שמין מחכמתם, (Mišle he-'arab, introduction, lines 14-15).

38. Brann (1991: 38). Besides Brann, other scholars have studied this phenomenon, such as Rothschild, who claims that «le thème le plus fréquent est celui de la science perdue des anciens Hébreux» (1989: 289); Alfonso, who says that «those who translated Arabic works written by Muslim authors into Hebrew would justify the need for translation on the basis of the need to preserve their useful contents. [...] Some of these translators presented the sciences as knowledge that had originally belonged to Israel and was then lost, as a result of Israel's exile among the nations» (2008: 49); or Torollo (2021: 81-84).

he was allegedly involved in the translation of three other works on wisdom: *Iggeret ha-musar* [Epistle on ethics], a pseudo-Aristotelian letter incorporated into the autobiography of an Egyptian physician, Alī ibn Ridwān³⁹; *Sefer sodot ha-sodot* [The book of the secrets of secrets], another letter that Aristotle supposedly sent to Alexander the Great, with advice on various sciences; and *Sefer musare ha-filosofim* [The book of the ethics of the philosophers], a collection of sayings attributed to ancient philosophers on the topic of wisdom, its value, and how to achieve it⁴⁰.

But where Yehudah al-Ḥarizi really shows his extraordinary Hebrew language skills is in how he expresses wisdom content in three of the *maḥbarot* of his *Sefer taḥkemoni*, using a different literary form in each of them. In chapter 21, titled *maḥberet ha-mešalim* [the *maqāma* on proverbs], Heman ha-'Ezraḥi arrives at a site along the Nile, even though we do not know exactly which city. There, he enters a palace where a multitude of people surrounds an old wise man who wants to test the wisdom of his fifty students and asks each of them to tell a beautiful *mašal*. These fifty *mešalim* revolve around virtues, including moderation in eating and drinking, the idea of educating one's children when they are young, the relevance and necessity of appropriate friendships, and the importance of pursuing wisdom. When the fifty students have finished, Heman wants to know who this old man is, and he identifies himself as the hero of all episodes, Ḥeḇer ha-Qeni. This *maḥberet* is important because it acquired a life of its own and circulated independently, at least since the end of the fifteenth century, with the title *Sefer mišle ḥaḳamim* [The book of the proverbs of the sages]⁴¹.

The *maḥberet ha-še'elah we-ha-tešubah* [the *maqāma* on questions and answers], chapter 46 of *Sefer taḥkemoni*, is an atypical *maqāma*, for it does not follow the structure of other episodes: the identities of the narrator and the protagonist are known from the beginning and in this case Ḥeḇer is the one who tells the story, not Heman, who is the narrator in the rest of the chapters. Ḥeḇer seems to be mocking the way Heman tells his stories throughout the book, for he uses the same form but the content of his tale is highly improbable: he escapes a besieged city, sleeps within the camp of the besieging army, and then is tested by strangers on his wisdom. In addition, in order to give his account credibility, he situates himself in the midst of a battle in which several ancient peoples of the Middle East are involved. This is an obvious exaggeration, since such

39. For a more detailed analysis of this work, see Langermann (2012) and Salvatierra and Urrutia (2013).

40. On these three works by Yehudah al-Ḥarizi, see Salvatierra (2010).

41. Salvatierra (2010: 282). Disperdi (2008) studies two bilingual Hebrew-Italian editions of this chapter, one from 1566 and the other from 1592. In both texts, the narrative frame has changed: both Heman and Ḥeḇer have disappeared and we just have the epigrams, so the audience can focus on the moral, ethical and instructive teaching without being distracted by the literary form. Furthermore, another instance of the circulation of this chapter as an independent work is found in Ms. 2131 of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, a manuscript that clusters together Jedaiah ha-Penini's *Sefer ha-pardes*, Ašer ben David's Kabbalistic treatises *Ma'amar 'al derek ha-qabbalah* and *Sefer ha-yiḥud* and, curiously enough, this chapter on wisdom from *Sefer taḥkemoni*. These two instances shed light on the ways in which these texts are anthologized and received by late-medieval and early-modern audiences, and on how these audiences understood generic conventions.

a battle never took place, but citing the names of so many different peoples gives the narrative an air of historicity⁴².

The literary form used in this chapter –questions and answers where an examiner asks one question after another, with no necessary connection between them, and the responder must answer– is a very common format for wisdom and ethical material, as in chapter 9 of *Sefer ša ‘ašū ‘im*, where ‘Enan tests Yosef’s knowledge on medicine through many questions related to the human body and its functioning, or in chapter 6 of Immanuel ha-Romi’s *maḥbarot*. Returning to this *maḥberet*, in the introduction to the scene, Heber presents himself as an expert in secular and religious sciences: medicine, logic, mathematics, astronomy, Torah, Talmud, commentaries, grammar, poetry, and *melišot lešon ‘arab* [poetic phrases in the language of the Arabs]⁴³. In a sense, he introduces himself as a man of *adab*⁴⁴. But at the same time, he is an expert in practical ethics and wisdom, *musar*, which we know thanks to the answers he provides to the questions of the examiner: wisdom is proclaimed as the road to success and all the questions and answers deal with the idea of a moral life.

Lastly, chapter 45, titled *maḥberet ha-midot ha-toḥot* [the *maqāma* on virtues], finds the narrator relaxing on the bank of the Euphrates River somewhere in what is now Syria and Turkey. He then encounters a group of eight young people talking about the highest virtues. The encounter with a wise man who talks about the highest virtues or the lowest vices and gives reasons for his choices is a very common motif in ethical and wisdom literature. Interestingly, for each virtue we have a prose section and a verse section, both presenting the same idea, something that is also characteristic of ethical books: the same content in prose and verse, whether to facilitate memorization, to prove the literary skills of the author, or to address different levels of intellectual capacity in the audience. The different virtues that we find in the episode are modesty, agility, bravery, faith, wisdom, ethical behavior, kindness, and generosity. Generosity seems to be the most important virtue for the author: it is addressed in the longest and the final section and the discussion is put in the mouth of the protagonist, Heber ha-Qeni.

Regarding wisdom, our three works share the nature of the ethical lesson. In fact, a device that is commonly used, either explicitly or implicitly, is conscious ambiguity. This dichotomy reflects the rhetorical need to oppose proper and advisable behavior (moderation, prudence, humility, wisdom, forgiveness, generosity, patience, hospitality, counsel, avoiding women of ill repute, or repentance of sins) to inappropriate and blameworthy behavior (vanity, pride, envy, foolishness, sarcasm, hypocrisy, tediousness, or abuse of hospitality). The emphasis on generosity and the fact that it is presented last are not by chance. Since authors rely on patrons to pay them for their compositions, it is only natural that they would emphasize the virtue of generosity, and that they

42. On this play between reality and fiction that lies at the core of the *maqāmāt*, see Drory (2000a: 11-33).

43. *Sefer taḥkemoni*, chapter 46, line 47.

44. On *adab* as understood by medieval Jewish authors, see below.

would do it near the end of their work. In doing so, they prime their audience to reward them well. In fact, this idea is not as clear in chapter 45 of *Sefer taḥkemoni* as it is in chapter 18 of *Mišle he-‘arab*, titled *Do not withhold good from him who deserves it and do not harden your heart: give your burden to the Lord and he will make your endeavor succeed*. At the end of the chapter there is a very short story that begins by reminding the audience how ancient kings used to appreciate literature, value poetry, and properly reward poets: panegyrics are compared to fancy clothes that never cease to exist –what poets offer kings– unlike material goods that cease to exist –what kings pay poets–⁴⁵.

But the most interesting point shared by these three works is the esteem afforded to Arabic wisdom as a source for Hebrew wisdom material. All three speak of the authority of the wisdom content not only because it is useful but also because it comes from a very respected tradition. The Arabic intellectual tradition was still much admired in northern Iberia and Provence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, for it was considered the link between the Greek, Hindu, and Persian worlds and the Hebrew, Latin, and Romance ones. An example of the prestige conceded to Arabic is the widespread and complex phenomenon of translations of Arabic works into Hebrew and Romance languages, mainly Castilian, that took place in that same geographic area during the thirteenth century⁴⁶.

4. Towards a comprehensive definition of *musar*

The insistence on moderation and restraint, along with the variety of ethical and moral themes that are addressed and the authority conceded to the Arabic tradition as a source of knowledge and wisdom in these belletristic works, call for a reflection on the nature and meaning of *musar* as understood in medieval Sepharad, especially after centuries of cultural contact with the Arabic tradition. This discussion is not new, but the selected chapters offer another opportunity to engage with the debate.

The term *musar* may refer to two different genres, which are related to one another but very distinct in both content and form. In the traditional understanding, *musar* deals with ethical traits and proper behavior, and there has been *musar* literature beginning with the Bible up to our own time. *Musar* defines the knowledge, behaviors, and moral practices that a Jew should acquire in order to lead a proper religious life beyond the practical fulfilment of the commandments. Structurally, *musar* works can be ethical compilations divided into independent chapters –each of them about a particular virtue that is encouraged or a vice that is discouraged–, ethical letters, collections of sermons, short guides on particular issues, books of ethical tales, or commentaries on the biblical

45. See *Mišle he-‘arab*, chapter 18, lines 55-60.

46. On the prestige and widespread use of Arabic in Christian Iberia and Provence, see Van Koningsveld (1992), Assis (1995), Gutwirth (1998), Pearce (2017) and Torollo (2021).

Book of Proverbs and the Mishnaic *Pirke abot* [Chapters of the fathers]⁴⁷. Medieval Sephardic examples include Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Tiqqun middot ha-nefes* [The improvement of the moral qualities], Bahya ibn Paquda's *Ḥobot ha-lebabot* [Duties of the heart], Jedaiah ha-Penini's *Behinat 'olam* [The examination of the world], Jonah Gerondi's *Iggeret ha-tešubah* [Epistle on repentance], or Bahya ben Ašer's *Kad ha-Qemah* [Receptacle of the flour].

However, in many medieval Jewish writings, *musar* deviates from this traditional focus on ethics and is similar to the Arabic concept of *adab*, a term that denotes, first, the general knowledge about varied secular, moral, and professional topics that every Muslim working at court should have; and, second, the literary genre that provides that knowledge⁴⁸. Among the most influential Eastern Arabic authors of *adab* literature that arrived in Iberia, we have Ibn al-Muqaffa' (eighth century), who translated the first Arabic version of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and authored two mirrors for princes: *al-Adab al-kabīr* [The great *adab*] and *al-Adab al-ṣagīr* [The small *adab*]. Another author was al-Ŷāḥiẓ (eighth-ninth century), who wrote *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* [The book of animals], seven volumes on theological, metaphysical, and sociological issues; *Kitāb al-bayān* [The book of eloquence], an inventory of Arab humanities; and his most famous work, *Kitāb al-bujalā'* [The book of misers], a satirical collection of anecdotes about greedy people from various social classes. We also have Ibn Qutaybah (ninth century), author of the collection *'Uyūn al-ajbār* [The sources of information] and of the poetic anthology *Kitāb al-šī'r wa-l-šu'arā'* [Book on poetry and poets]. And within *adab* literature, the *maqāma* genre came to be greatly admired after the writings of al-Ḥamadhānī (tenth-eleventh centuries) and al-Ḥarīrī (eleventh-twelfth centuries), who standardized the genre.

The grafting of the function of the Arabic *adab* genre onto the Hebrew *musar* manifests itself in the wide variety of literary forms used, such as rhymed and unrhymed prose anecdotes, poems, epigrams and sayings of philosophers, debates, biographies, and allusions to biblical passages and characters, that have the dual objective of instructing and entertaining the audience⁴⁹. Noting the similarities in content and form, Septimus defines the Hebrew *musar* in medieval Sepharad as «the Andalusian ideal of gentlemanly refinement»⁵⁰ and as a «loan-translation of the Arabic *adab* –the literary culture that was the mark of the well-trained gentleman»⁵¹. Furthermore, Tanenbaum demonstrates that medieval Jewish authors consciously played with both connotations of the term *musar* in their writings⁵². And Ratzaby even classifies the Hebrew works of *adab-musar* into three groups according to their literary form: Hebrew *maqāmāt*, such

47. On medieval Hebrew ethical literature, see, for example, the works of Dan (1975; 1988; 1992; 2007) and Mittleman (2012).

48. Fierro (2009: 87).

49. Dan (2007: 531).

50. Septimus (1983: 25).

51. Septimus (1982: 17).

52. Tanenbaum (2003). On the loan-translation of the Arabic *adab*, see pages 304, 305 and 317.

as *Sefer taḥkemoni*, *Sefer ša'ašu'im* and *Iggeret ha-musar* [Epistle on ethics]; poetry, such as *Musar haškel* [Prudent behavior], attributed to Ḥa'i Ga'on, Šemu'el ha-Nagid's *Ben mišle* and *Ben qohelet*, or Yosef Kimḥi's *Šeqel ha-qodeš* [The holy šeqel]; and prose works like *Mibḥar ha-peninim* [A choice of pearls], *Sefer musare ha-filosofim*, and *Mišle he-'arab*⁵³.

To conclude, in the medieval Hebrew tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as it had happened in Arabic writings after the work of al-Ḥarīrī, the *maqāma* genre became increasingly capacious and flexible as authors took liberties with the model and shaped it to fit their own purposes. As a consequence, *adab* works in Hebrew take new ways of expression. The three works that I have explored in this article are beautifully written works in poetic Hebrew. They are divided into independent chapters that deal with a different topic, either directly as the title of each chapter may suggest –*Sefer taḥkemoni* and *Mišle he-'arab*– or indirectly through the topics that the characters discuss –*Sefer ša'ašu'im*–. The goal of the three works is twofold: to entertain and impress through form and mastery of the Hebrew language, and to convey an ethical lesson of moderation and restraint. It is thus not accidental that this kind of non-traditional narratives with implicit lessons written in poetic Hebrew began to appear among Jews who lived in an Arabic or Arabized cultural milieu, further corroborating the claim that «literary contact is often manifest in the adoption of productive models and organizing principles for literary activity»⁵⁴. Within this context, the *adab* genre played that same role in Arabic and served as a model, translations from Arabic stimulated the literary creativity of Jewish authors, and original creations in Hebrew raised the status and versatility of Hebrew prose, once and for all.

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53. Ratzaby (1960/1961).

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