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YEDAYA BEDARESI,

A FOURTEENTH CENTURY HEBREW POET AND PHILOSOPHER.

THE year 1306 enjoys a terrible notoriety in the annals of the Jews of France. At the beginning of that year, Philip IV, surnamed Le Bel, issued an edict of expulsion against all the Jews living in any of his dominions. The edict practically confiscated all the property of the French Jews, and its terms were so rigorous that any Israelite found on French soil after a certain short space of time became liable to the penalty of death. Philip's mandate was promptly executed by the royal officers, and some 100,000 Jews were mercilessly driven out from their native land—a land in which their fathers had already resided long before Christianity had become the dominant religion there. In consequence of this expulsion, several far-famed Jewish seats of learning that had long been established in various French towns, such as those of Beziers, Lunel, and Montpellier, ceased to exist, since masters and pupils became, like the rest of their unhappy co-religionists, weary wanderers and fugitives. One of these was Yedaya En-Bonet ben Abraham Bedaresi, the object of the present essay.

Yedaya, known also under the poetical pseudonym of Penini, has left no documentary evidence concerning the incidents of his life. The best biography, however, of a man like Yedaya is undoubtedly that which is found in his own works. Biographical material from such a source is, however, liable to vary with the judgment of the critic. Thus there is some diversity of opinion among bibliographers as to the exact date of Yedaya's birth, for while

Bartolucci, Wolf, and de Rossi assert that he was born in 1298, Steinschneider and Neubauer put the year of his birth between 1255 and 1260, without, however, attempting to fix the year of his death. Graetz, again, maintains that Yedaya was born in 1280, and died about 1340, and that his birth-place was Beziere, and not Barcelona, as some bibliographers assert¹. The only indisputable fact in connexion with Yedaya's early education is this, that he entered the school of Rabbi Meshullam of Beziere when he was fifteen years old.

From Yedaya's numerous and multifarious writings it is obvious that he was a philosopher and a moralist, a tal-mudical scholar and an expert in medicine, and above all, a clever writer of Hebrew prose and poetry. It is chiefly to his latter capacity that Yedaya owes his prominent position among the Jewish savants of the Middle Ages, and for that reason special attention will have to be paid in the course of this essay to his *chef d'œuvre*, entitled בחינת עולם, or *The Examination of the World*. It is true that Graetz finds fault with this poetical composition, of which he thinks that it has the appearance "of empty grandiloquence and artificiality." But, on the other hand, Munk, in his *Melanges*, p. 495, and Buxtorf, in his *Bibliotheca Rabbinica*, speak very highly of Yedaya's poetical talent, and the latter calls *The Examination of the World* an excellent literary production. And indeed, the same opinion will be shared by all those readers of the בחינת עולם who, like Munk and Buxtorf, are not prejudiced against it on the ground that its style is not so pure, elegant, and clear as that met with in some of the writings of the most prominent representatives of the so-called Spanish and Italian schools of Hebrew poetry. In fact, the little book in question has always enjoyed an extraordinary popularity among the Jews; and it is astonishing to notice the comparatively large number of manuscripts of the original,

¹ Comp. Graetz's *Gesch. d. J.*, VII, p. 277.

and of the commentaries on it, which are to be found in various libraries. In addition to this, it may also be mentioned that the same book has passed through more than forty-four editions, issued with or without commentaries at various times and in various countries, and has been frequently translated into German, as well as into Jargon, once into Latin, English, French, Italian, and Polish. It is interesting to note that the eleventh and twelfth chapters of one of the German editions, issued at Prague in 1795, by Moses Kunitz, were rendered into German by Moses Mendelssohn; and that the French translation, published at Paris in 1629, by Ph. d'Aquin, was dedicated to Cardinal Richelieu. The English version, which appeared in London in 1806, was inscribed by its author, Rabbi Tobias Goodman, to "The Most Reverend Solomon Hirschell, Presiding Rabbi of the German Jews"; and the Latin one, which has for its title, *Examen mundi, R. J. Bedreshitae, latina interpretatione*, was done by A. Uchtman, and issued at Leyden in 1650.

It is curious to notice that the editor of the first of the forty-four known editions of the *בחינת עולם*, printed, as some bibliographers think, at Mantua between 1476 and 1480, was a lady called Estellina, the wife of a certain Abraham Conath. She was assisted in her task by Jacob Levy, of Tarascon. The last known edition of the book under notice, or rather the greater part of it, was published only a few years ago by Dr. Harkavy, of St. Petersburg, from a MS. in his possession. Dr. Harkavy is also the owner of a hitherto unpublished commentary on the same book, composed in 1508 by Isaac Monçon, of Reggio. In some prefatory lines, the author states that he was induced to write his commentary because he had noticed that many Jewish young men in his country were in the habit of learning the original by heart, without knowing anything about its contents¹. This curious remark still holds good

¹ למה שראיתי הבהורים המתעננים בהלצה זו ער שיוודים אוהה על פה בפיהם
ובשפתותיהם כבודה ולבם רחוק מהם.

in its application to the mode in vogue in Russia and Poland, where parts of the Hebrew Bible are often learnt by heart by the Jewish youth in a mechanical manner, whilst their contents remain unknown to the learners. Yet there is something to praise in the method. The young may easily commit to memory passages which they will subsequently understand, and thus their minds may be stored with fine thoughts. In truth, all systems of education proceed on these lines. But the method is undoubtedly a dangerous one.

As regards the style and composition of the *בהי' עולם*, which seems to have been composed by Yedaya after the expulsion of the Jews from France in 1306, it must be admitted at the outset that the general reader will not find them quite in harmony with his modern taste. Already de Sacy, in his *Magasin encyclopédique*, III, p. 321, censures the author of that book for his employing therein certain Biblical phrases in a different sense from that which they bear in the Bible. But he readily admits that the Church fathers during the Middle Ages, and certain Arabic writers, have, at all times, taken the same liberties respectively with the Scriptures and the Koran. The finest of the Spanish-Jewish poets, not excluding Ibn Gebirol himself, allowed themselves the same license; while Charizi often derives his whole point from the witty misuse of a familiar Biblical phrase. Despite this defect, it cannot be denied that the *Bechinath Olam* possesses a peculiar charm of its own. This will easily be detected by those readers who, being well versed both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Midrash and the Talmud, cannot fail to appreciate the art with which Biblical phrases, used with an occasional striking play on words, are composed into a mosaic.

Take, for instance, the following few sentences which occur in Chapter IX¹: “By no means let thy pride in

¹ אַסּ כּי לֹא תְהִיָּה תְּפָאֶרֶת הַמְּכַנְנֶה נִמְשַׁכֶּת—עַד מַעַשׂ וּיִצְאָה רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים לְבוֹר רְכוּשְׁךָ—
וַיְדַחוּ כֹלֹּא הָיוּ הַמְּשִׁים אֱלֹפֵי וְהֵב אֲשֶׁר בְּקִנְיָנָם מִכְרַת נִשְׁפָּךְ : תַּחֲתָפֶךְ הַזֶּמֶן כַּמַּעַשׂ רַגַע לַקַּחַת
הֵן וְכִבּוֹר מַעַל רֵאשֶׁךְ—תִּרְדּוּ אֶשׁ הָאֱלֹהִים מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתֹאכַל אוֹתְךָ וְאֵת הַמִּשְׁכָּךְ.

possessing wealth be of long duration, for at any moment may a blast come from God, which will scatter and disperse all thy treasures. Then will vanish as nought the fifty thousand ducats for which thou hast bartered thy soul, and thy former honour and glory will likewise depart at the sudden reverse of thy fortune. Or a fire may come down from heaven, and devour thee along with thy five myriads of ducats." Here it will at once be seen how cleverly the author uses for his own purpose certain phrases found in the second chapter of 2 Kings, in connexion with the prophet Elijah, and how striking the play on the word *המשך* is.

As this peculiar mode of composition is a marked feature in the whole *עולם בחי'*, a few more examples, having, however, a somewhat different form, may be given here for the sake of illustration. In Chapter IV we read as follows¹:

"Thy longings in sooth are but passion and lust,
Thy strength sinks asunder like crumbling light dust;
Thy treasures, like thorns, are surrounded with stings,
And thy most lovely possessions but worthless things.
Thy pride is enkindled like flames in the night,
Thy riches, like insects, soon hasten their flight."

And again, in Chapter XI, the author gives the following description of the four seasons of the year²:

"The lovely Spring gives me no peace,
For constant cares disturb my ease.
The Summer, too, is full of pain,
Its glow and heat are but my bane.
The Autumn has no charms for me,
From cold and ills I ne'er am free.
When Winter brings its snow and frost,
Oh, then I am undone and lost."

וכלי הנשקים שקים	החשקים מחשכים	1
והשרשנים קמשונים	השנינים צנינים	
והרהבים ונבובים .	הרהבים להבים	
כאובות במכאובות חרשים יבקצני	האביב לא יאבה השקישני	2
יקיצני משנת מנוחה מקשב מרירי	הקיץ יקוץ בחיי במצוקות יציקני	
הסתיו יסית צנה וסגרירי לבלעני חנם .	החירף יחרפני למות יחרף לבני סהיות שלו בפני	

Another conspicuous feature of the *בהי' עולם* is its frequent use of poetical metaphors, which the author employs with great aptitude and force. The eighth chapter of the book in question, beginning with the words *התבל ים זועף*, may fitly serve as an illustration of this, and the following free English translation of it will afford the reader at the same time an insight into the general contents of the whole poem. It runs as follows :

“The world is as a boisterous sea of immense depth and width, and Time forms a fragile bridge built over it. The upper end thereof is fastened to the ground by means of weak ropes, and its lower end leads to a place which is shone upon by the rays of the divine light, emanating from God's majesty. The breadth of the bridge is but one short span, and has no lattice work to afford protection from falling over it. Over this narrow path thou, O son of man, art compelled constantly to go, and notwithstanding all thy might and glory, thou canst not turn either to the right or to the left. Now, threatened as thou art on both sides with death and destruction, how canst thou sustain thy ordinary courage, and how can thy hands remain firm? In vain dost thou pride thyself on the possession of vast treasures obtained by thee by vileness and wickedness; for of what avail are they to thee when the sea rises, and rages, and foams, thus threatening to wreck the little hut wherein thou livest [meaning the body]? Canst thou boast to be able to calm and subdue its powerful waves, or wilt thou try to fight against them? Intoxicated with the wine of thy vanity, thou art pushed hither and thither, until thou sinkest into the mighty abyss; and tossed about from deep to deep, thou wilt at last submerge into the foaming surge, and no one will bring thee up to life again.”

The ninth and eleventh chapters of the *בהי' עולם* contain some passages which refer to the author's own sufferings, caused to him by the aforementioned expulsion of the Jews from France, and to the cowardice displayed on that occasion by some wealthy French Jews, who, in order to

be permitted to remain in the country, and to retain their earthly possessions, had embraced Christianity. How shamefully these renegades behaved in the face of the great calamity which had befallen their French co-religionists may be seen from the following passages, which occur in Chapter XI. They run thus¹:

“What care they for those gloomy envoys of fate?
They dance all the night, and they rise very late.
Feasting they love, and high play and flirtation,
And laughter, and pleasure, and wild dissipation.
They look upon evil, of whatever sort,
As a mirth-causing jest, and an innocent sport.”

These few extracts from the *בחי' עולם*, together with the above-given English translation of its eighth chapter, may suffice to convey an idea of the style and contents of the whole book. The latter has certainly several faults, which chiefly consist in the frequent use the author makes therein of Chaldaic and Aramaic words and phrases, a proper translation of which is almost impossible. Yet, on the whole, this little poetical composition of Yedaya deserves, for the sake of its many peculiarities, that honourable position which has been accorded to it by general consent in the wide domain of Hebrew literature.

Another small treatise, composed by the same author when he was eighteen years old, is one that bears the title of *צלצול כנפים*, and has for its subject “The Defence of Women.” Till about ten years ago it only existed as a unique MS. in the Bodleian Library; but Dr. Neubauer published it for the first time in the *Jubelschrift* (Berlin, 1888), issued by some friends of Zunz on the occasion of his celebrating his ninetieth birthday, under the title of *אודה נשים* (*The Women's Friend*). This title is more appropriate than the one it originally bore, for the simple reason

אודהי כלילות	לא האמינו לשמועו אורבי מחולות	
שוחרי ערניו	נושקי אילות	חושקי יעלות
חשובוהו כמהלל וידו כמצחק בעיני חזתניו		סוחרי רגניו

that the treatise in question was evidently written by Yedaya in opposition to another composed, in 1208, by the physician, Judah ben Sabbatai, under the title of שוֹנֵא נָשִׁים (*The Woman-hater*), in which the author's strong aversion to the fair sex is clearly put forth. The אֹהֵב נָשִׁים, which Yedaya dedicated to two friends of his, viz. to Meir and Judah, the sons of Don Solomon Del Infanz, is written in rhymed prose, intermixed with a few short verses. Its style is rather heavy, and all that can be gathered from its subject-matter is this, that a certain king, called Cushan Rishataim, a great woman-hater, did once wage war against an army composed of the friends of the fair sex, and led on by a general named Seria. The latter ultimately defeated the king and his hostile troops, and, out of gratitude for his great victory, he himself was proclaimed king by his followers. Under his reign, a new and happy era opens for women in general, who are then wooed, and married, and loved more dearly than ever before, and wedded life is everywhere declared to be the most desirable state in existence. The אֹהֵב נָשִׁים closes with the description of the appearance of Judah ben Sabbatai's ghost on earth, and of how it agrees with all Yedaya's statements made there, with the exception of one. Every man, the ghost declares, ought certainly to marry once; but it would be the height of folly on his part if he were to enter again upon the matrimonial state, after his first marriage had turned out a failure.

In passing, it may be mentioned that the same controversy about the merits and demerits of the married state was still carried on in the sixteenth century among some learned Jewish writers in Italy. Among these are most conspicuous: Jacob of Fano, who in his poem שלטי הגבורים (*The Shields of the Mighty*), makes a strong attack on women, and Judah Sommo, of Portaleone, who in his treatise, מִן נָשִׁים (*The Women's Protector*), which exists as a MS. in the Bodleian Library, presents himself as a champion of women. To these writers may be added

Messer Leon (flourished at Mantua at the end of the fifteenth century), who, in a commentary of his on the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs, seizes the opportunity of eulogizing the female sex in general, and a few specially named women in particular. Among these he also mentions Laura, the lady-love of the poet Petrarch; and it is interesting to notice the trouble which the author takes in that commentary to prove that Laura was by no means a myth, as some writers on Petrarch consider her, but that she really existed in person, and was greatly distinguished by her exquisite beauty and grace.

Resuming now our review of Yedaya's literary compositions, especially of those he wrote when he was still very young, we have to refer to a Hebrew hymn of his, well known under the title of *בְּקִשַׁת הַמְּמִין*, the formal characteristic of which is this, that each word of it begins with the letter *mem* (מ). Bartolucci, in his *Bibliotheca Rabbinnica*, III, p. 7, gives the same hymn the title of *תְּהִלָּה לַשֵּׁם* (*Praise of God*). This seems to have been Yedaya's first literary attempt, as it is generally assumed that it was composed by him at the age of fourteen. His father, Abraham, himself a writer of Hebrew verses of inferior quality, was so delighted with his son's hymn, that he sang its praises in a short Hebrew quatrain. Although from a literary point of view, the *Supplication of the Memmin* has little to recommend it, it has passed through fifteen editions, and has frequently been translated into German, and once also into Latin by Hil. Prache, who published his translation at Leipsic in 1662.

Another short composition belonging to an early period in Yedaya's life is his *סֵפֶר הַפְּרָדִּיז* (*The Book of Paradise*), which was composed by him at the age of seventeen, and appeared for the first time in print at Constantinople in 1517. It is divided into four chapters, each of which has a different heading, while the fourth chapter is again subdivided into four sections. The principal subjects discussed in these chapters are (a) The worship of God; (b) Friendship

6. כתב הרעת (*A Treatise on Intellect*). This is also based on another book treating of a kindred subject, and bearing the inscription הסכל והמושכלות, the author of which is Al-Fabri. A Latin translation of the latter treatise exists under the title of *De Intellectu et Intellecto*, Venice, 1595.

7. הרעות בשכל החמרי (*Opinions on Material Intellect*).

8. המאמר בהפני המהלך is a philosophical treatise on the movements of bodies, and has been quoted by Ibn-Habib under the title of כתב הפני האנה.

9. כתב ההתעצמות (*Treatise on Consolidation*).

10. Is a MS. without any title; but judging from its contents, it seems to correspond with the הצורות המיניות, once quoted by the same Ibn-Habib.

11. מרבר קדמות (*The Desert of Kedemoth*). This is a commentary on the twenty-five propositions placed by Maimonides at the beginning of the tenth chapter of his מורה נבוכים.

12. Is a Hebrew poem, having for its subject the thirteen articles as arranged by Maimonides.

The authorship of the following four compositions is also attributed to Yedaya:

1. A Divan, compiled by a member of the family of Bedaresi, and that member is, according to Luzzatto, no other but Yedaya.

2. מערני מלך (*The Pleasures of a King*) is a short treatise on the game of chess, and has several times appeared in print.

3. Wolf, in his *Bibliotheca Rabbinica*, I, p. 403, attributes to Yedaya the authorship of a commentary on another commentary written by Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Genesis, the former of which exists as a MS. in a Paris library.

4. אגרת החשובה (*A Letter of Response*). This letter, which was published by Dr. Berliner in 1888, and copies of which are found in various MSS., is attributed to Yedaya by Bartolucci and de Rossi.

From all hitherto said about Yedaya and his multifarious

writings, it will be seen that he fully deserves the recognition accorded to him by several biographers. Indeed, his name will always be honourably mentioned among the host of other Jewish savants living during the Middle Ages, who, often as exiles and fugitives, and amidst all kinds of sufferings and deprivations, did not neglect their habitual researches into almost every domain of mental culture. Nay, in spite of the many obstacles Yedaya must have met with in his daily occupation, he found leisure to enrich Hebrew literature with a number of works which are even now read with some pleasure and advantage.

J. CHOTZNER.