

SOLOMON IBN GABIROL:
AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET



HIS METAPHYSICS emerge from desire: his ethics evolve to a science of sense. What begins there in wisdom ends in anger: what was anger gives way to a grace. He is a poet of poles and swells and reversals, of splits that propose a completion. He is the most modern of the Hebrew medievals, the most foreign to a modernist approach. In his verse what looks like a mirror is meant in fact to be passed through: transparency marks a divide. Hebrew is Arabic, Muslim Jewish, his resistance a form of embrace.

ABU AYYUB SULAIMAN IBN YAHYA IBN JABIRUL

The reconstructed facts are few. He is born Shelomoh Ben Yehudah Ibn Gabirol, in either 1021 or 1022, in Malaga, to an undistinguished family that may have fled the collapsing capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, Córdoba, with the same wave of refugees that included Shmuel Ha-Nagid, who would go on to become the period's first great Hebrew poet. At some point his father moves the family north to Saragossa, and Ibn Gabirol—or, in Arab circles, Abu Ayyub Sulaiman Ibn Yahya Ibn Jabirul—is raised in that important center of Islamic and Jewish learning. Ibn Gabirol's father dies while the precocious son is still in his early teens, and the young man is looked after by a Jewish notable at the Saragossan court, Yequtiel Ibn Hasan al-Mutawakkil Ibn Qabrun. He is writing accomplished poems by age sixteen, important ones by nineteen, though he is ill, already afflicted with the disease that will leave him embittered and in constant pain, suffering from boils that scholars reason were caused by tuberculosis of the skin (the actual condition has never been precisely identified). We can also infer from his poems that he was short and ugly. In 1039 Yequtiel gets mixed up in court intrigue and is killed, and Ibn Gabirol loses his patron. He leaves Saragossa sometime after 1045, when his mother dies, and most scholars assume that he goes south, to Granada, in order to try his luck at the court of HaNagid, who is, at that point, governor (nagid) of the region's Jews, prime minister of that Muslim *ta'ifa* (party state) under its Berber king, and commander-in-chief

of the Granadan army. Things appear to work out for a time, but wires get crossed, or the young, upstart poet insults his elder poet-patron, and even this meager trail vanishes, with Ibn Gabirol still in his mid-twenties. He is known, says Moshe Ibn Ezra, author of the age's most important work of Hebrew literary criticism, *The Book of Discussion and Remembrance*, for his philosophical temperament, and for his "angry spirit which held sway over reason, and his demon within which he could not control."

He writes secular verse, often gnarled with ambition and anger, and it is probable that later in life he is supported by his writing for the synagogue, composing radical and, in comparison with his court-centered verse, remarkably self-deprecating *piyyutim*, or liturgical poems, for the weekday, Sabbath, and festival services. Apart from his diwan and his philosophical masterwork, *The Fountain of Life*, he produces a short but striking ethical treatise, *On the Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, and claims in one of his poems to have written some twenty books—now lost—on philosophical, linguistic, scientific, and religious topics. (*A Choice of Pearls*, a volume of proverbs, is often attributed to him, but it is a bland gathering, hardly in keeping with the rest of his extraordinary oeuvre; and while other medieval authorities quote his biblical commentary, no mention of a collection survives.)

"Arrogant, orphaned, itinerant," in Allen Mandelbaum's characterization, he dies, says Ibn Ezra, in Valencia, not yet forty. His religious poems now form part of the regular prayer service in Jewish communities throughout the world, and downtown Tel Aviv traffic jams take place on a street that bears his name.

BEZALEL

"Shelter me in your shadow," he writes, "be with my mouth and its word."

The vocabulary of Jewish *poesis*, or making, goes back to a crisis of refuge and interior design. It has always been cultic, just as its ethos has most often been abstract, at a certain remove from the figure. Where the much more talked-about and vatic abstraction derives from the ambiguous second commandment, itself an extension of the first, "I am the Lord thy God: Do not make idols or likenesses," the more modest if not maligned ornamental idiom comes from the scriptural role played by Bezalel Ben Uri, of the tribe of Judah, whose God-given task was to build

and outfit the desert Sanctuary, “to adorn Him.” He was to construct the Ark and the Tabernacle, to fashion the curtains and cast the candlesticks that the midrash tells us baffled the more pedantic Moses. Bezalel saw to the loops and the veils and the sockets—the altar, the court, and the laver. Even the priestly vestments. His name means “in the shadow of God, the son of my light (or ‘fire’),” and Exodus 31:2 says that he was “filled . . . with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, in all manner of workmanship . . . of the craftsman, and of the skilful workman, and of the weaver in colors.”

Like the Bezalel of Scripture and midrash, and like King Solomon his successor and the poet’s namesake, who built the Temple and composed the most beautiful and wisest of biblical books, Ibn Gabirol would charge his ornament with complex value, bringing sublime vision to a space that artifice defined. Lacing his poems with allusions to the work of these forbears, he would devote his skill to the pursuit of wisdom and the evocation of magnitude.

CORRIDORS: CLUES

Scriptural figures apart, key precursors and contemporaries include:

the blind and reclusive Syrian ascetic poet Abu ’l-’Ala al-Ma’arri (974–1058), known for the dense patterning of his caustic poems, like Ibn Gabirol’s, at once “boundless and self-contained.” After beginning as a conventional poet working in the court modes, “milking the udders of time,” in his *Luzumu ma la Yalzam* (The Necessity of What Isn’t Necessary) Abu ’l-’Ala sets out against the grain of the poetry of his day and its neo-Aristotelian motto—the most pleasing poetry is the most feigning—and seeks “to speak the truth”: “You stand there as the driven / wheels of heaven spin / and choose, / while the fates are laughing”;

Abu al-Hakim al-Karmaani, a prominent scholar (born in Córdoba, d. 1066) who, after his travels in the East, introduced to Saragossa the doctrine of the tenth-century *Ikhwaan As-Safa’*, The Brethren of Purity. Their ecumenical, encyclopedic *Epistles* were read throughout the Muslim world and played an important role in the rise of Sufism. In the world of the *Epistles*, the pattern of the whole is always represented in the pattern of the parts: man is a microcosm, and correspondences exist between astronomical, ethical, and social planes. The sciences there are treated not as ends in themselves, so much as vehicles by which mankind gains awareness of the harmonies and beauty of the universe. When a new

Arabic lexicon, and author of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, which includes modern-sounding, “scientific” chapters on money, children, eroticism, eating and drinking, and the satisfaction of the thirst for revenge. It was Sa’adiah’s student Dunash Ben Labrat who introduced Arabic poetry’s secular genres and quantitative meters into Hebrew in the middle of the tenth century and set off a debate that split the Jewish intellectual community: Dunash was accused of desecrating the holy tongue with his importation of an alien poetic, and his work was attacked. Things turned nasty, and Dunash’s primary rival, an older and more experienced court-poet named Menahem Ibn Saruq, fell out of favor with the principal Jewish patron of the day, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, and was thrown into prison. The new spirit of rationalism and innovation took hold in Hasdai’s court, which, in turn, was modeled on the Córdoba court of the Caliph ‘Abd ar-Rahman III, where Hasdai served as a senior physician, customs director, and personal envoy for the caliph.

In the small body of his work that has come down to us, however, where he seems to have handled the new forms awkwardly, Dunash was more innovator than master, and it turns out that credit for the qualitative lyric breakthrough rightfully belongs to his wife, whose name we do not know. In a marvelous 1984 discovery, scholar Ezra Fleischer identified a single extant work of hers in the papers of the Cairo Genizah; this short poem to her husband (who also appears to have quarreled with Hasdai) is, says Fleischer, the first realized personal poem in the post-biblical Hebrew canon:

Will her love remember his graceful doe,
her only son in her arms as he parted?
On her left hand he placed a ring from his right,
on his wrist she placed her bracelet.

As a keepsake she took his mantle from him,
and he in turn took hers from her.
He won’t settle in the land of Spain,
though its prince give him half his kingdom.

Other echoing voices include the popular tenth-century liturgical poet and teacher Yitzhak Ibn Mar Sha’ul, of Lucena, who took up Dunash’s prosodic innovations and reportedly was the first Hebrew poet to write of the “gazelle,” the young, male love interest in so many of the erotic poems of the period; his central claim to fame lay in his penitential

poetry, particularly his petition, “Lord, Do Not Judge Me for What I Have Done,” which entered the liturgy in many communities and finds direct echoes in *Kingdom’s Crown*;

the powerful, prolific, and somewhat reactionary liturgical poet Yosef Ibn Abitur (c. 950–after 1024), legendary for having “interpreted” the Talmud for the Andalusian Caliph al-Hakim II (whose Córdoba library of some 400,000 volumes was the largest collection of books in Europe at the time). His poems for the synagogue often dealt vividly with religious-nationalist themes, especially that of exile, and he was also famous for his mystical poems of angelology, which were to have a marked influence on Ibn Gabirol. Ibn Abitur’s lone innovation was major: he was the first poet to develop the lyrical preludes, or *reshuyot*, to hitherto neglected parts of the Sabbath and festival morning liturgy. The genre would go on to figure prominently in the work of the great poets of the period, with Ibn Gabirol counted as the first master of this quintessentially Andalusian form;

Ibn Abitur’s contemporary, the first exclusively “professional” and secular Hebrew poet of the period, Yitzhak Ibn Khalfon, who was born in North Africa and raised in Córdoba in the latter third of the tenth century. Ibn Khalfon eventually set out as an itinerant poet, writing eulogies and other poems for Jewish patrons in Spain, North Africa, and even far-off Damascus. The outstanding member of the second generation of the new Hebrew poetry, he greatly widened the tonal and prosodic range of that verse, above all adding a personal, graceful and often comic dimension to its rhetoric;

and, finally, Ibn Gabirol was surrounded and no doubt influenced by a contemporary Saragossan Who’s Who of Jewish intellectuals that included the poet-linguist Yosef Ibn Hasdai, author of a single extant poem, known as the “Orphaned [unique] Qasida,” an erotically charged, petitionary encomium dedicated to his lifelong friend, Shmuel HaNagid, and looked upon as a model of its kind by many of the Andalusian Hebrew poets; the sharp-tongued, learned, and promising satirical poet, Moshe Ibn al-Taqaana, killed in his twenties when a wall fell on him along the Toledo Road; and one of the leading linguists of the age, Yonah Ibn Janaah, author of the important *Book of Roots* and, along with Ibn al-Taqaana, an outspoken detractor of HaNagid.

“NEXT to Ibn Gabirol,” however, proclaimed the thirteenth-century author Yehudah al-Harizi, with characteristic hyperbole and, it would seem,

without full knowledge of HaNagid's output, the previous poets were "only wind and emptiness."

DEATHS, DIWANS, DETECTIVES

The better part of his social life seems to have been spent making enemies, and the payback wasn't long in coming. Ibn Ezra tells us that after Ibn Gabirol's death—scholars have established the correct date as 1054, 1058, or 1070, with the middle figure being most probable—after his death, or deaths, his reputation came under assault and his work was criticized "by pedants" for assorted flaws, much as happened with the work of HaNagid after he died in 1056. "The poet sings," wrote Jacob Glatstein in a Yiddish poem some nine hundred years later, "the Jewish coffin-birds snap."

The medieval snip, it would seem, was equal to its snap, for the secular poems of both Andalusian poets came to similar fates: seldom copied and, on the whole, forgotten for reasons personal and political (fundamentalist Muslim invasion from the south, Christian reconquest in the north, with subsequent expulsion of the Jews), they were relegated to that underground nexus through which strong marginal poetry is often passed on. In HaNagid's case only fragments circulated, and a sixteenth-century copy of his collected poems, or diwan, surfaced in a crate in early twentieth-century Syria, though it wasn't published in an edition the general reader might absorb for another thirty years. The case of Ibn Gabirol is more complex, and in some ways even more fabulous. While many of his liturgical poems were taken up by communities throughout the Jewish world and preserved in prayer books, the nonliturgical poems were harder to come by and clearly not in great demand. Nor, prior to the discovery of the Cairo Genizah and its scrap heap of Scripture, scrolls, shopping lists, recipes, letters, and assorted literary gems, was there any mention of a complete diwan of Ibn Gabirol's poems. When German scholars in the mid-nineteenth century sought to assemble a selection of the poet's work, the material had to be pieced together from manuscripts held in libraries in Oxford, Parma, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere. The texts were sometimes in poor condition, and the overall picture was hard to construct.

Enter an Iraqi Jewish writer by the name of David Tzemah, who tells his story in a 1931 letter to David Yellin, a Jerusalem scholar who was preparing an edition of another of the Hebrew Spanish poets. Tzemah, it

appears, was aware of a family legend about an important manuscript of medieval poetry that had once been belonged to a certain eminent forebear but had been lost during that relative's lifetime, toward the middle of the nineteenth century. His curiosity piqued, Tzemah-the-younger set out in search of the lost manuscript. He wrote to all his Iraqi relatives, traveled to remote villages, but came up empty-handed. Ten years passed, he says, with neither rest nor repose. Finally he decided to become an antiquarian bookseller, on the outside chance that in this way he might some day come across his treasure! He announced himself in synagogues and to other booksellers, stating his readiness to buy old manuscripts any time and any place, but nothing turned up, and Tzemah came to despair of ever finding the legendary manuscript. Either it had been destroyed, lay tattered in a genizah, or else, he reasoned, it was not in Iraq.

One day, he continues, he was walking on his way, headed for the celebration of a *brit milah*, a circumcision, where he himself was to do the honors—a group of children were singing behind him, as was done in that part of the world, he notes for Yellin—when a woman began calling out to him. She had heard that the good scholar bought old books, and she had some; perhaps the honorable gentleman would like to see them. Tzemah explained that he couldn't come now, as he was expected at the *brit*, but his servant would go with her and see where she lived, and then bring him by later on. And so, after the ceremony and the meal that followed, his servant brought him to the woman's house. Tzemah climbed up to the attic where the "old books" were stacked, but found only dusty Pentateuchs, Psalters, and prayer books. Nothing of interest to an antiquarian. "I came down from the attic," he wrote, in his precise, if somewhat odd and old-fashioned Hebrew, "I and my servant, to return to my house, when I saw the kitchen open before me. A big pot of water was set out for the laundry and beside it was a basket of papers, all of them what looked to be old scraps, to feed the fire and heat the pot. I asked her: What is *that*? And she said: Tomorrow is our day for the laundry and we'll get up early to prepare the fire. I said to her: When will you people be done with this awful practice? Perhaps there are sacred writings among them. She said: We have already checked them. They don't contain any print. Anyway, what can I do? I want to rent the attic and I need the space. The books are for sale; the papers—for the fire."

"I approached the basket to see what it held, and there among the papers was the manuscript I'd been searching for all these years! How can

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I describe for you, good sir, that instant upon which I beheld both life and death at once, that moment which resembled the revelation at Mount Sinai! And here I was, the final redeemer among the sons of the sons of that righteous man! I could have taken the manuscript for nothing, but in my delight I gave her a proper reward.”

In his hands Tzemah now held a seventeenth-century manuscript containing more than four thousand poems, nearly complete diwans of Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, Yehuda Halevi, Todros Abulafia, and selections from other minor but important poets from Spain, Provence, and the Near East—which is to say, a sizable share of medieval Hebrew poetry’s greatest works, all of it literally snatched from the fire. Its lineage was spelled out within it as well: it had been copied in Egypt, then brought to Iraq, Bombay, and then back to Iraq. Tzemah’s letter goes on in similar fashion, telling of his attempts to find a buyer for the manuscript who would issue the books in accessible editions, and of the eventual sale to a Viennese antiquarian whose partner came to Baghdad to see him. The partner lit his cigarette, Tzemah explained that he preferred the narghila (“Had not the gentlemen read his ‘Song of the Narghila?’”), they hit it off, and the promise of publication was confirmed, though nothing had yet come of the pledge, Tzemah observes, as he closes: “But I must cut this letter short, for the postman is about to depart. . . . Here is the address of Benjamin the buyer and his partner in Vienna. And David sends blessings to David, [signed] David Ben Salmaan Tzemah.”

EMBRACING EVASION: THE EXOTIC

Perhaps the primary obstacle facing the contemporary reader of medieval Hebrew poetry is the overstuffed critical baggage of its ornament, which the textbooks would have us drag about on our way from line to line and poem to poem. Again and again the poetry is described as decorative or ornamental, without our ever stopping to ask what that means. The tacit assumption of modern art-talk is that ornament is unnecessary or quaint (domesticating). Baroque theories of the fold notwithstanding, we think of it often as fluff, or a lie. “Arabesque,” for Ezra Pound, was the ultimate put down, the representative figure of evasion and flight from the real. “The world is still deceived with ornament,” we hear in the *Merchant of Venice*, at the heart of another age of embellishment. “Thus ornament is but the gilded shore to a most dangerous sea . . . the seeming truth which cunning times put on to entrap the wisest.” Also prominent in the anti-

ornament camp is Adolf Loos's equation of "Ornament and Crime," as the title of his 1908 essay on the subject has it, and his saying elsewhere that "the less civilized a people is, the more prodigal it will be with ornament and decoration. . . . The Red Indian within us," he urges, "must be overcome."

There are, however, less mechanical or reductive ways to think about ornament. The apocryphal book of Ben Sira says: "To a sensible man education is like a golden ornament, and like a bracelet worn on the right arm," a reasonably familiar sentiment. But then it says: "A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like the stucco decoration on the wall of a colonnade" (22:17), already a much more interesting notion.

For the phenomenon is cosmetic, though in saying so we unwittingly arrive at the root and truth of the matter, the complex of definitions that accrue around the Greek word for the verbal form of the term, *kosmein*, that is, to order, and, secondarily, to ornament. It is from this cluster of meanings that we get our "ordered world," "a cosmos," as in the pseud-epigraphic *Prayer of Manasseh*: "He who made the heaven and the earth with all their embellishment [*kosmo*]. . . ." Which returns us to Bezalel and the sanctuary designed to "adorn Him."

Several modern writers who look at ornament in the visual arts and without condescension bring us closer still to the heart of the matter. The art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy traces the development of the word in Sanskrit, Greek, and English, from cult to court and on to the swamp of pretension and the dismissal of "arts and crafts." At the outset, he notes, ornament was "that which makes a thing itself"; and *ornamentum* in Ecclesiastical law didn't convey superfluous decoration, but the *equipment* of the sacred service. Discussing the various words used in traditional art-theory to express the phenomenon he says: "Most of these words, which imply for us the notion of something adventitious and luxurious, . . . originally implied a completion or fulfillment of the artifact or other object in question [. . . with a view to proper operation] . . . until . . . the art by which the thing itself had been made whole began to mean only a sort of millinery or upholstery that covered over a body that had not been made by 'art' but rather by 'labor'."

And Oleg Grabar states in *The Mediation of Ornament*: "Ornament is, to coin a word . . . calliphoric: it carries beauty with it." Echoing Coomaraswamy he observes that the words used to express the act involved in ornamentation imply "the successful completion of an act, of an object, or even of a state of mind or soul." He notes the daemonic, intermediary

