

DAVID, *Petah devarai* [The Beginning of My Words]

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

Italy, 16 Tammuz 5231 = July 5, 1471

ii (parchment) + iv + 41 folios on paper (unidentified watermark), modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals in upper-left corner of recto, folios after f. 36 and f. 39 skipped, complete (collation i-iii¹⁰ iv-v⁴ vi² [+1]), no catchwords, upper and outer margins only ruled in blind (justification 168 x 108 mm.), written in a compact Italian cursive script in brown ink in 26 to 33 long lines, new paragraphs indicated via indentation and/or triangular dot arrangements over the incipits, periodic vocalization, justification via abbreviation and use of anticipatory letters, marginalia in hand of primary scribe throughout, sometimes partially cropped, corrections and strikethroughs in hands of primary and secondary scribes, censors's signatures on versos of ff. iii (Renato da Mod[en]a, 1621) and [40] (Gio[vanni] Dom[enico] Vistarini, 1610; Gir[olamo] da Dura[zza]no, 1641; Fra Luigi [da Bologna], febraro 1599), slight staining to parchment flyleaves, faint dampstaining radiating out from gutter at head and along lower edge throughout, gutters intermittently strengthened, episodic ink blotches or smudging, small hole in f. vi, light worming in lower margins of ff. 2-8 and outer edges of ff. 18-27. Bound in dark blue library buckram, Montefiore name lettered in gilt along spine, Halberstam (124) and Montefiore (409) shelf marks taped to spine, spine splitting along joints at head, light damage to tailcap, corners rounded, modern paper pastedowns and flyleaves. Dimensions 190 x 140 mm.

One of the most systematic, well organized Hebrew grammars of the thirteenth century, *Petah devarai* is a monument of Sephardic linguistic scholarship whose importance as an introduction to the topic is attested in part by its *editio princeps* of 1492; there is still no modern critical edition. The present volume survives as a neatly written, dated copy of this text, and it is one of only two currently in private hands.

PROVENANCE

1. The scribe of our manuscript dated his work in the colophon (f. 39): "[The book] is done and finished – praised be the Creator of the World! I wrote and completed it on 16 Tammuz 5231 [July 5, 1471] in the seventy-sixth year of my life. May God, in His mercy, grant my children and their children the merit to study it and the other sacred secrets. Amen, so may it be His will. I wait for Your deliverance, O God [Gen. 49:18]." On the verso appears a poem beseeching God for national and personal redemption whose acrostic spells the name Moses Marheshvan. From the continuation of the text, it would appear that the scribe's name was Moses Ezra Marheshvan. Samuel Marheshvan, perhaps a relative, is mentioned on f. 6 University of Pennsylvania, Schoenberg Collection, MS LJS 469 (Italy, c. 1490).
2. The folded parchment flyleaves at the front of the book were made from a repurposed Latin real estate document. They bear the Hebrew words [Ma']amar lesbon limmudim (*shekel ha-kodesh*), a reference to two treatises – *Lesbon limmudim* on Hebrew grammar and *Shekel ha-kodesh* on Hebrew poetry – written by Rabbis David ben Solomon ibn Yahya (c. 1440-1524) and Solomon ben Jacob Almoli (before 1485-after 1542), respectively, and first published together in Constantinople in 1506. Because the titles do not match the contents, it seems likely that this parchment sheet originally belonged to a different volume. Below the titles are the words "from the heirs of Eliezer Richetti [Riqueti], may the memory of the righteous be a blessing." It is unclear whether Richetti owned this book or the codex to which the parchment sheet was previously attached. It appears that

the same Richetti was also the owner of Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS ebr. 419 (see f. 94v), a miscellany containing medical, philosophical, and halakhic (Jewish legal) texts. We have documentation of Richetti families living in Mantua and Venice during the relevant period (Benayahu, 1988).

3. Solomon Joachim Halberstam (1832-1900), a wealthy Polish Jewish scholar and bibliophile who had acquired hundreds of valuable manuscripts from the libraries of Leopold Zunz (1794-1886) and Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), came into possession of this manuscript and included it when cataloging his own personal collection. The first paper flyleaf (f. iii) contains his Hebrew initials in pen followed by the manuscript's shelf mark (MS 124). The shelf mark also appears on the spine, the pastedown of the upper board, the first parchment flyleaf (f. i), and f. 1.
4. The Judith Lady Montefiore College in Ramsgate, England, purchased 412 manuscripts from Halberstam's collection, including ours. The transaction was carried out by Rabbi Moses Gaster (1856-1939), principal of the College between 1891 and 1896. Wilhelm Bacher notes that he was able to examine this volume during a visit to Ramsgate in the summer of 1894. The manuscript contains the library stamp of the institution, known in Hebrew as Yeshivat Ohel Mosheh vi-Yehudit, on ff. 1, 39v, and 41v, as well as the library's shelf mark (MS 409) on both its spine and the pastedown of the upper board.
5. Between 1898 and 2001, most of the Montefiore manuscripts, including ours, were placed on permanent loan at Jews' College in London. In 2001, they were returned to the Montefiore Endowment Committee.
6. In 2004, part of the Montefiore Collection, including our manuscript, was sold at auction by Sotheby's in New York (lot 296).
7. Ariel Toaff (b. 1942), professor emeritus of Italian Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, acquired the manuscript and affixed his bookplate to the pastedown of the upper board.
8. The manuscript was again offered at auction by Kedem Auctions in Jerusalem in 2017 (lot 9).

TEXT

ff. i-ii, parchment flyleaves containing the title *Lesbon limmudim (shekel ba-kodesh)*, the owner's mark of Eliezer Richetti's heirs, and the text of a Latin real estate document;

f. iii, Halberstam shelf mark and censor's signature; [ff. iv-vi, blank];

ff. 1-39, *Petah devarai*, an introduction to Hebrew grammar, incipit, "petah devarai u-bi-levavi mesillah la-tet tehillah la-asher ein lo tikhlah u-tehillah ... va-ani lo nitkavvanti ki im le-katser le-kotser ruhi ve-da'ati ve-kilkul mahashavotai she-katavti katavti ke[n] ye[hi] re[tson] e-lohai ha-shomer[?] oti."

The work is divided as follows: introduction (ff. 1-2v); chapter on *shelemim*, verbs with complete, trilateral roots (ff. 2v-11v); chapter on *nabim*, *baserim*, and *kefulim*, various types of irregular verbal roots (ff. 11v-28v); chapter on *shemot*, nouns and adjectives (ff. 28v-30); chapter on *millot*, particles, conjunctions, interjections, prepositions, etc., alphabetically arranged (ff. 30-35v); chapter on *kimmuyyim*, pronominal suffixes that can be added to verb forms (ff. 35v-37v); explanation of the paradigms given in the chapter on *kimmuyyim* (ff. 38-39); colophon (f. 39).

f. 39v, Poem in which the scribe beseeches God for national and personal redemption, disclosing his name in the process, incipit, "moshia ram ve-nissa shokhen bi-shemei aliyah harem keren seh pezurah; explicit: ve-tihyeh nafshi tserurah bi-tseror ha-hayyim et ha-shem e-loheinu amen li-[yeshu'atekha] ki[vviti] ha-[shem]"; [f. [40], blank];

f. [40v], In a different hand and ink, the first line or so of the standard language used in a *ketubbah* (Jewish marriage contract), followed by material related to the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud (see Rashi to *Rosh ha-shanah* 11b, s.v. *ve-azedu le-ta'amaibu*) of the cycle of the constellations varying by month.

With the completion of the long process by which the so-called Masoretic Text of the Bible was fixed in the late ninth century, and especially with the spread of the Tiberian system of Hebrew vocalization throughout the Diaspora, Jewish scholars living under Muslim rule (and thus familiar with Arabic philological teachings) began to explore Hebrew linguistics as an independent field of study and research. The individual usually identified as the first Hebrew linguist was Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph Gaon (882-942), who wrote at least three works on Hebrew lexicology and grammar. He would be followed by linguistic luminaries such as Rabbis Judah ben David Hayyuj (c. 945-c. 1000), Jonah Ibn Janah (Abu al-Walid Marwan; first half of eleventh century), Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), and David Kimhi (1160?-1235?), among others, each of whom attempted to move the field forward by adding his insights into the inner workings of the language of the Bible.

The middle of the thirteenth century generally marks the start of the period of the *epigoni*, authors whose works rarely evinced any independence or creativity but sought instead to organize the material to which they were heir. *Petah devarai*, which draws its name from its first two words (themselves derived from the opening of Ps. 119:130), is one such tract. In five chapters (plus an introduction), it manages to effectively and succinctly summarize the main principles of Hebrew grammar, primarily based on the teachings of Hayyuj, Ibn Janah, and Ibn Ezra. In addition, much of its content and organization matches Kimhi's magnum opus on Hebrew lexicology and grammar, *Mikhlol*, though there are important points of divergence as well.

Scholars have long debated the authorship of *Petah devarai*. The manuscripts and early printed editions (Naples?, 1492; Constantinople, 1515; Venice, 1546) do not identify a specific author, leaving room for speculation. Such guesswork began already in the days of the physician and grammarian Abraham ben Meir de Balmes (c. 1440-1523), who attributed the book to Kimhi. Since his time, many other potential authorial candidates have been suggested, including Rabbis Moses ben Samuel ha-Kohen Gikatilla (Chiquatilla/Chiquitilla; eleventh century), Moses Kimhi (d. c. 1190), (a student of) Moses ben Shem Tov Ibn Habib (fifteenth century), David ben Judah Messer Leon (1470/1472?-1526?), and an otherwise-unknown figure named Ibn Hasdai.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Bacher, a prominent Hungarian Jewish historian of Hebrew linguistics, published two papers in which he argued that the book was likely composed by a Sephardic scholar named David around the time that David Kimhi wrote his *Mikhlol* (1885, 1894). Probably because of the great similarity between the works, the fact that both men were named David, and the tendency of scribes to copy the *Mikhlol* and *Petah devarai* together in the same codex (on which, see Olszowy-Schlanger, 2011), many, like de Balmes, assumed that the latter work, too, came from Kimhi's pen.

In his comprehensive, close textual studies of *Petah devarai*, David Sámuel Löwinger, another Hungarian Jewish scholar, concluded that Bacher was correct in his assertion that the book was by a Sephardic scholar named David, *not* Kimhi (1931, 1937-1938). This David was clearly a seasoned teacher of grammar who was familiar with Kimhi's work and most likely flourished not long after him. Moreover, Löwinger argued that originally only the book's introduction was called *Petah devarai*, not the tract as a whole, and showed, based on a careful examination of our manuscript (and others), that some of the material that made its way into the Venice, 1546 edition was not original to the work.

Petah devarai has survived in some thirty manuscripts (including ours), the earliest of which, MS Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, MS Levy 106, was copied in Ashkenazic lands in 1326. Aside from the present codex, however, probably only one other (formerly part of the collection of Ariel Toaff and, before him, Budapest, Országos Rabbiképző Intézet, MS K 59) is currently held privately; the rest can be found in libraries in Europe, Russia, and Israel, with only a single exemplar housed in an American institution (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 8099). No critical edition of the text has ever been published, making our volume a valuable potential resource for future scholarly research.

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Our MS (accessible from within the National Library of Israel)

http://rosetta.nli.org.il/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE5337430&_ga=2.138261552.1092968630.1533498291-1988024230.1468801374

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