

Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh -- “Plato of the Italian Jewry”

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The Rabbi of his community for fifty years, professor of theology, philosopher, Kabbalah scholar, and a humanist above all, it is no wonder that Rabbi Elijah (Eliyahu) Benamozegh was referred to as "Plato of the Italian Jewry". This remarkable intellectual leader of the Italian Jewry in the nineteenth century has been commemorated with the Piazza Benamozegh as tribute to his name and distinction.

Rabbi Benamozegh (1823-1900) was born in Livorno to parents native of Fez, Morocco, who like many other Jews of the Mediterranean, left their birthplace and chose to settle in this city. Livorno's importance as a center of Sephardic Jewry dates back from the sixteenth century, following the decree set by the grand duke of Medici that granted religious freedom and equal rights to all the citizens. Soon enough, Livorno would come to attract Jews from all over the Mediterranean region, and many Moroccan Jews who were lucky enough to escape the dreadful conditions in Morocco, flocked to the city. The Jewish community became prosperous and successful, known for its scholars, as well as for its internationally recognized acumen for trade and business networking. The Talmudist, Jacobo Hagiz, the Montefiore family, and Amadeo Modigliani, were but few notable members of this community; two piazzas in Livorno have been named after distinguished members of the Jewish community: Piazza Benamozegh and Piazza Attias.

Benamozegh's father, Abraham, died in his infancy, leaving him with his mother, Clara, and his uncle, Rabbi Yehuda Coriat. A prolific writer from early age -- at sixteen Benamozegh wrote a preface to rabbi Coriat's *Maor Vashemesh* -- he left an extensive and daring number of books and articles in Italian, Hebrew, and French. *Israel and Humanity*, his major work on religious universalism; his philosophical thought on Judaism and its relations to other religions. His introduction leaves no doubt to its depth and scope: "Israel and Humanity: Proof of the Cosmopolitanism in Judaism's Principles, Laws, Worship, Vocation, History, and Ideals". Benamozegh's universalism and humanistic viewpoint is evident in this book; he juxtaposed and analyzed the thoughts and arguments of key thinkers, such as Maimonides and Spinoza; Greek and modern philosophers; German theologians as well as the Gospels.

Aimé Pallière, Benamozegh's disciple and posthumous editor of *Israel and Humanity* stated that Benamozegh's philosophical thought and attitude to the Kabbalah stems from both the European humanistic tradition and his Moroccan roots. Alessandro Gueta, a Benamozegh scholar, wrote that the centrality of the Kabbalah in Benamozegh's thought was "imported from Morocco". Kabbalah and Guemara - as the Sephardim call the Talmud - have been equally revered throughout the Sephardic world, yet the Kabbalah has been particularly central to the Moroccan-Jewish tradition, and Benamozegh regarded it as "the perfect form of Judaism".

Sephardic Rabbis have ever since encouraged the daily reading in the book of Zohar, and Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azoulay - the HIDA (Jerusalem, 1724-1806) - thought it to be instrumental for the perfection of the soul. Similar thought had been expressed by his great grandfather, Rabbi Abraham Azoulay (Fez, 1570-1643) and by other Sephardic rabbis as well. Thus, Benamozegh's approach to Kabbalah is not surprising; he regarded it as a philosophical system with spiritual qualities. At the same time, he regarded the Halakhah, as a universally all-encompassing ethical system. Thus, according to Benamozegh, the spiritual character of the Kabbalah coupled with the universal moral qualities of the Halakhah provide the entire humanity an ideal and practical framework for conducting a worthy life.

Benamozegh was an advocate for interfaith dialogue, and especially for Jewish-Christian reconciliation. Judaism, he thought, should not be isolated or set against the world; after all, Gentiles are bound in part to the Mosaic commandments, known as the seven Noachide Laws. He maintained that this common ground is more significant and unifying than whatever stands between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, misconception about Judaism persists; it stems from ignorance on its true nature and qualities. This false notion would continue among Gentiles and even among the emancipated European Jews, inasmuch as the moral and spiritual aspects of Judaism would remain unknown.

The European enlightenment had been embraced by all, but it posed a new challenge to European Jewry. The perception that enlightenment and Jewish faith and practice are two irreconcilable extremes had distanced many contemporary European Jews from their forefathers' faith. The Haskalah movement in the late eighteenth century - the German Jewry version for the European enlightenment - looked with admiration at the legacy of Sefarad. Nonetheless, they came short of adapting the Sephardic dictum of "Be an observant Jew at your home and a man of the world outside", and many forsake their religious root. Benamozegh's philosophical thought reconciles Judaism with the principles of enlightenment. The wide range of his spiritual, intellectual, and ethical works coupled with his religious tolerance, is striking.

Regrettably, the European intellectual Jewry have associated Benamozegh with merely the Kabbalah, which was viewed as a set of theological superstitions. On the other hand, his daring and original thought was rejected by orthodox rabbis. *Em La-Mikra*, his five-volume commentary on the Torah, from philosophical, philological, historical and Kabbalah point of view, was condemned for heterodoxy. The books were set on fire "by some excessively zealous rabbis from Aleppo", as Benamozegh commented on their rejection.

Benamozegh's ideas have recently been capturing the attention, and his books and publications are being translated into several languages. His latest book, *Israel and Humanity* (originally- *Israël et l'humanité*) has been translated into English a few years ago. It is unfortunate, however, that this great thinker remains largely unknown to a wider audience, especially in Israel. His liberal and humanistic teachings are extremely important, especially in Israel, where the religious views and interpretations are becoming more and more ultra-orthodox, and many Sephardim are forsaking the lenient Sephardic customs by following the austere Ashkenazic orthodox traditions. The teachings of this extraordinary intellectual rabbi should be part of the curriculum in Israel and abroad. "He is not included in the university course on nineteenth century Jewish intellectuals because he is largely unknown", was the reply of a university professor in the faculty of Jewish Studies, when asked why Benamozegh is excluded from the course teachings. And here we should ask, how can Benamozegh be known, if he is not introduced in the curriculum?

Glossary

Kabbalah - collective Jewish mystical thought.

Halakhah - collective body of the Jewish religious law and dictum.

Midrash - explications and interpretations of Jewish texts.

Guemarah or Talmud - commentaries and explications of the Torah by ancient rabbis that form the Jewish law.

Torah - the books of Moses.

Zohar - The book of splendor. The primary book of Kabbalah.

Books by Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh

Emat Mafgia (The Fear of the Opponent) Defending Rabbi Leone Modena

Ger Zedeq (A Righteous Proselyte)

Ner le-David (Lamp of David), commentary on the Psalms

Em la-Mikra (Matrix of Scripture), commentary on the **Torah**.

Ṭa'am la-Shad (arguing with Samuel David Luzzatto's on the Kabbalah)

Morale Juive et Morale Chrétienne (Jewish and Christian Ethics)

Israël et l'humanité (Israel and Humanity), translated by Maxwell Luria

sources

Angel, Marc. D. *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History*

Benamozegh, Elijah. *Israël et l'humanité* (Israel and Humanity), translated by Maxwell Luria

Gueta, Alessandro. *Philosophy and Kabbalah*

Pallièrre, Aimé. "Preface to the first Edition", *Israel and Humanity*

Trivellato, Francesca. *The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*

Schorsch, Ismar . "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy" in *Leo Beak Institute Year book xxxiv*

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