

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

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“Plato of the Italian Jewry”, that is how Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh was called. He was an unusual orthodox rabbi: the intellectual leader of the Italian Jewry in the nineteenth century, rabbi of his community for fifty years, a professor of theology at the rabbinical school of Livorno, a philosopher, a Kabbalah scholar—and a humanist above all!

Benamozegh (1823-1900) was born in Livorno to parents native of Fez, Morocco, who like many other Jews of the Mediterranean, immigrated to Livorno. The city has been an important Sephardi center since the turn of the sixteenth century. Jews from around the Mediterranean flocked to Livorno in response to the invitation of the grand duke of Medici who wished to develop the city. The Jews were granted religious freedom and civil rights, equal to all the citizens. Soon enough Livorno had been transformed from a small town into a bustling port city; one of the most important ports of the Mediterranean. Livorno became a magnet for the Mediterranean Jews, and especially to Moroccan Jews who were lucky enough to escape the dreadful conditions in Morocco. The Jewish community soon became prosperous and successful, known for its scholars, as well as for the international trading acumen and the commercial networks its members maintained. Most of the books for the Mediterranean Sephardic communities were printed in Livorno until the Second World War. The Talmudist, Jacobo Hagiz, the Montefiore family, and Amadeo Modigliani, were but few of its notables; two piazzas in Livorno have been named after its famous members: 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 a young age -- at sixteen Benamozegh wrote a preface to Rabbi Coriat's *Maor Vashemesh*, he left an extensive and daring body of books and articles in Italian, Hebrew and French. *Israel and Humanity*, his major work, puts an emphasis on universalism, and is a synthesis of his philosophical thought about Judaism, its place in the world, and its relation with other religions. His introduction leaves no doubt of its depth and scope: "Israel and Humanity: Proof of the Cosmopolitanism in Judaism's Principles, Laws, Worship, Vocation, History, and Ideals". Benamozegh's humanistic viewpoint is evident in this book, where atypical of a deeply religious rabbi that he was, he juxtaposed and critically analyzed the thoughts and arguments of key thinkers, such as Maimonides and Spinoza; Greek and modern philosophers; German theologians and the Gospels.

Aimé Pallière, Benamozegh's disciple and posthumous editor of *Israel and Humanity* wrote that the philosophical thought and approach of Rabbi Benamozegh to Kabbalah stems from both the European humanistic tradition and his Moroccan roots. Alessandro Gueta, Benamozegh scholar, wrote that the Kabbalah of Benamozegh was "imported from Morocco".

The *Talmud* and the *Kabbalah* have been equally valued throughout the Sephardic world, and the *Kabbalah* has been particularly central to the Moroccan Jewry. Benamozegh highly regarded it as a philosophical system; "the perfect form of Judaism". Sephardic Rabbis have always encouraged the daily reading of the book of *Zohar*: Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azoulay - the HIDA (Jerusalem, 1724-1806) - said that a daily reading of the *Zohar* is necessary 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. Thus Benamozegh's approach to *Kabbalah* is not surprising; he regarded it as a philosophical system: a perfect spiritual guide for the aching soul and mind. The Jewish ethical system, as expressed in the *Halakhah*, is an all-encompassing and practical. Benamozegh stressed the humanistic, universal, and moral qualities in the *Halakhah*, and wrote that the latter coupled with the spiritual nature of the *Kabbalah*, offer a practical and perfect set of guidance for the entire humanity.

Benamozegh explored the theological relations of Judaism with other religions, particularly with Christianity, and called for a dialogue and for reconciliation. Judaism, he thought, should not be isolated or set against the world. He made a point of the fact that the seven Noachide Laws the Gentiles are bound to, are part of the Mosaic commandments. Thus this shared common ground is more significant and unifying than whatever stands between the Jews and the Gentiles. The misconception, with which Judaism has been viewed, stems from ignorance on its true nature and qualities. Thus, he wrote, false notion about it would persist, not only among non-Jews, but among the emancipated European Jews as well, as long as its moral and spiritual aspects would remain unknown.

The European emancipation had been embraced by all, but it posed a new challenge. The notion that modern life and Jewish faith and practice are two irreconcilable extremes had distanced many emancipated European Jews from their forefathers' faith. The *Haskalah* movement in the late eighteenth century- the German Jewry version of the European emancipation - 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 were forsaking their Judaism. Benamozegh took it upon himself to construct a Jewish philosophical system that would reestablish the connection between Judaism and the general disciplines.

The scope of his spiritual, intellectual, and ethical works, coupled with his religious tolerance, was uncommon. However, the European intellectual Jews 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*, approached from philosophical, philological, historical and other scientific disciplines in addition to Kabbalah, was condemned for heterodoxy. The books were actually set on fire "by some excessively zealous rabbis from Aleppo", as Benamozegh commented on their rejection.

Benamozegh's ideas have recently been capturing wider attention from Jews and non-Jews alike, 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 still remains

largely unknown to the wider audience. His liberal and humanistic teaching is extremely important, especially in Israel, where religious society is becoming more and more orthodox, and many Sephardim are forsaking the lenient Sephardic customs and are following the Ashkenazi orthodox traditions. The teachings of this extraordinary intellectual rabbi should be part of the curriculum in Israel.

Glossary

Kabbalah - collective Jewish mystical thought.

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

Midrash - explications and interpretations of Jewish texts.

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 Zedek (A Righteous Proselyte)

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

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

Ta'am la-Shad (arguing with Samuel David Luzzatto's on the Cabala)

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*

Pallièrè, 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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