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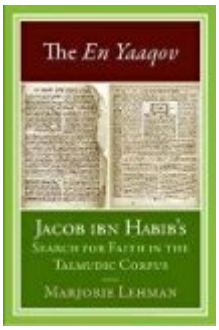

Marjorie Suzan Lehman. *The En Yaaqov: Jacob Ibn Habib's Search for Faith in the Talmudic Corpus.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012. xi + 319 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8143-3480-5.

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In this revised version of her dissertation, Marjorie Lehman analyzes one of the most popular works of the Jewish canon: ***En Yaaqov*** by Jacob ibn Habib. In doing so, Lehman examines not only the philosophical and literary aspects of the work itself, but also beautifully recreates for us the world of ibn Habib, a world beleaguered by the tensions and traumas of postexpulsion Jewry, and the one that prompted him to undertake this monumental project. Aside from a short 1975 article by Joseph Hacker, this book is the first major study devoted to this subject and as such presents an important scholarly contribution.[1]

Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib was born in Castile sometime in the 1440s and taught in the academy at Salamanca until his expulsion in 1492. After moving to Lisbon, where there was another decree of forced conversion in 1497, ibn Habib finally settled in Salonika. It was there that he decided to separate out the aggadot of the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi from their halakhic content and to publish them along with a selection of previous commentaries, his own running commentary as well as an introduction, a topical index, and an index according to the weekly Torah portion. Having begun this project late in life, ibn Habib succeeded in completing only tractate Berakhot and seder Mo'ed, which he published in 1516--the same year as his death. Jacob's son, Levi ibn Habib, took upon himself to complete the project, which he published as ***Bet Yaaqov***, although it reflects less "passion and commitment" than the work of his father (p. 14).

The combination of halakhah and aggadah in the Talmud Bavli, sometimes standing in tension with each other and often not easily dividable, is one of its distinguishing characteristics and has recently received significant scholarly attention.[2] While the Amoraim of Palestine created separate works of midrash aggadah, such as Genesis Rabbah, the Babylonian sages, as far as we know, did not. This can explain why as much as one third of the Bavli is aggadic while aggadah fills only one-sixth of the much smaller Yerushalmi. In light of the uneasy amalgam of genres in the Bavli, it seems almost predictable that someone

would come along and divide them. Indeed, already in the eleventh century, Rabbi Isaac Alfasi separated out the halakhic material of the Bavli, exemplifying an approach to the study of the Bavli that focused solely on its legal content. What, then, induced Jabob ibn Habib to take an opposite approach and choose only the aggadah?

In her first chapter, Lehman points to two historical factors that may have led to ibn Habib's focus on aggadah: the conversos and the friction between the Sephardic exiles and local Romaniyot communities. While some Jews in Spain and Portugal chose martyrdom or exile over conversion, others submitted to forced baptism. Although they were not able to live or practice as Jews, many of these converts retained their Jewish identity and wished to rejoin the Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. Jacob ibn Habib, like most of his colleagues, made every attempt to accept these conversos as Jews on account of their lineage and faith. Although the ***En Yaaqov*** never mentions conversos explicitly, Lehman argues that the converso problem was one of ibn Habib's impetuses in compiling this work. By emphasizing the principles of faith that emerge from aggadah rather than halakhic practice, he could validate the Jewish identity of the returning conversos. In addition, when the Spanish exiles joined the Jewish communities in various cities throughout the Ottoman Empire, the two communities clashed over many matters of law and liturgy. Aggadah, on the other hand, had the power to defy "geographical boundaries and ethnic differences" and encourage unity among the various communities (p. 49).

The second and third chapters turn from the historical and political milieu that created the ***En Yaaqov*** to its intellectual context. Lehman here points to three competing areas of study among medieval Jews, from each of which ibn Habib distinguished his own project: halakhah, philosophy, and Kabbalah. In his introduction, ibn Habib laments that the success of Alfasi's code led students to belittle and ignore the aggadot of the Talmud. He therefore decided to "right the wrongs" of Alfasi's work by creating a book that would complement it. Significantly, ibn Habib chose to follow the order of the Talmud, just as Alfasi did, and also create a Talmud "lookalike" with the Talmudic text in block letters alongside various commentaries in Rashi script, including Rashi and Tosafot. This would send the message that study of aggadah was on a par with and deserved the same devotion as the study of Talmudic halakhah.

Ibn Habib's project also challenged those, like Saadya Gaon and Maimonides, who derived their fundamental beliefs from Greek philosophy and who denied the literal meaning of aggadot and instead hung their philosophies on allegorical readings of a few select aggadot. Kabbalists similarly sought to disseminate their ideas through aggadah by revealing their esoteric meaning. By writing a running commentary on all aggadot, ibn Habib conveyed the central importance of studying aggadot comprehensively and the need to adopt a more literal approach. He felt that philosophy and Kabbalah were deleterious to the spirituality of the Jewish community and therefore pushed for a return to the worldview of the Talmudic rabbis.

In chapter 4, Lehman offers a selection and analysis of ibn Habib's comments on various topics, such as fear of God, the nature of God, prayer, reward and punishment, messianism, and the World to Come. Lehman's analysis reveals that ibn Habib takes a middle path between philosophical and literal approaches to these subjects. For example, he describes God as being immutable but still responsive to prayer because, as Joseph Albo wrote, prayer itself improves and changes the supplicant. Ibn Habib teaches that blessing God induces God to bestow benefits to humans; but at the same time, he encourages people to have faith regardless of reward. He upheld belief in resurrection and national redemption but did not want people to question or calculate when the messiah would come. Lehman explains that ibn

Habib's interest was not to create a rigorous and consistent philosophy but rather a practical one that could bolster the faith of a community facing difficult theological challenges.

Chapter 5 is entitled "The Success and the Failure if ibn Habib's ***En Yaaqov***." On the one hand, ***En Yaaqov*** was wildly popular as proven from the scores of printings "in almost every city that had a printing press" (p. 178). On the other hand, printers took many liberties in changing ibn Habib's text and format: they inserted more texts that ibn Habib left out (including some halakhic pericopes), added indexes and commentaries, and in one instance omitted ibn Habib's own commentary. Lehman calls for future research into the many printings of the ***En Yaaqov*** and what they reveal about the study of aggadah in each generation.

Lehman includes fascinating tangents on the Maimonidean controversies, challenges to the study of Talmud by philosophers and Kabbalists, and the methodology of Isaac Canpanton. Despite repetition of some material across chapters, Lehman's engaging style and nuanced analysis make this an important contribution to medieval intellectual history. Admittedly, her analysis of ibn Habib's motivations are sometimes conjectural--based more on her careful reconstruction of ibn Habib's character and milieu than on his explicit writing. After all, ibn Habib never mentions conversos in his commentary and rarely makes any reference to his historical experience. He does not provide programmatic statements about the value and dangers of philosophy and Kabbalah and, as Lehman points out, is not consistent in his use of those approaches. Nevertheless, by deftly reading between the lines of ibn Habib's commentary, Lehman succeeds in presenting a convincing synthetic portrait that brings to life the world that created the ***En Yaaqov*** and the world that the ***En Yaaqov*** created.

Notes

[1]. Joseph Hacker, "Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib: Toward the Image of Jewish Leadership in Early Sixteenth-century Salonika,"(Hebrew), ***Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*** 2 (1975): 117-26.

[2]. See Daniel Boyarin, ***Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Barry Wimpfheimer, ***Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories*** (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011).

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