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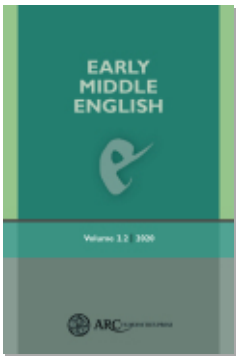

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A HEBREW DEBATE POEM FROM MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

PINCHAS ROTH*

VERY FEW HEBREW poems are known from the Jewish settlement in medieval England, which began in the wake of the Norman Conquest and came to an end with the expulsion of 1290. The best known, and most prolific, Anglo-Jewish poet from the Middle Ages known today was Meir ben Elijah of Norwich, who was probably active some time during the thirteenth century.[1] Cecil Roth noted poetic passages included within Hebrew books on other topics—Moses ben ha-Nesiah's grammatical work *Sefer ha-Shoham*, which contains introductory poems, and three or four liturgical poems found in Jacob Hazan of London's legal compendium *Etz Ḥayyim*.[2] Berechiah ha-Nakdan, who probably spent a portion of his career in England during the twelfth century, wrote a cycle of short philosophical poems, but it cannot be determined where he was living when he composed it.[3] The discovery of a poem (and possibly more) by a previously unknown poet from medieval London, within the folios of Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Ebr. 402, is therefore an exciting revelation and a significant addition to the literary corpus of medieval English Jewry.

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1 A. M. Habermann, "Hebrew Poems of Meir of Norwich," Hebrew appendix to *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, ed. Vivian Lipman (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1967); Susan Einbinder, "Meir b. Elijah of Norwich: Persecution and Poetry among Medieval English Jews," *Journal of Medieval History* 26, no. 2 (2000): 145–62; Miriamne Ara Krummel, *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 49–67; Kieron Pim, *Into the Light: The Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Meir of Norwich* (Norwich: East, 2013); Shamma Boyarin, "'Rhymes so good the likes of which have not been seen in all the land of Spain': Meir of Norwich and Friendship Poetry," *Early Middle English* 1, no. 2 (2019): 67–71.

2 Cecil Roth, *The Intellectual Activities of Medieval English Jewry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 50–52, in reference to Benjamin Klar, *The Sepher haShoham (The Book of the Onyx) by Moses ben Isaac haNessiah* (London: Jewish History Society of England, 1947), 1–2, and Jacob ben Judah Hazan of London, *Etz Hayyim*, ed. Israel Brodie (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1962–67), 1:130–32. See also Einbinder, "Meir b. Elijah," 148–49.

3 Aviyah Unna Baruchi, "A Series of Paronomasia Poems by R. Berechiah ha-Nakdan," *Kovetz al Yad* 21 (2012): 27–46. Berechiah's biography has been much debated by scholars, and he has been tied to three geographic regions—Normandy, Languedoc, and England—all of which he seems to have lived in at some stage of his life. See Roth, *The Intellectual Activities*, 48–49; Tamás Visi, "Berechiah ben Natronai ha-Naqdan's Dodi ve-Nekdi and the Transfer of Scientific Knowledge from Latin to Hebrew in the Twelfth Century," *Aleph* 14 (2014): 9–75; Ruth Nisse, *Jacob's Shipwreck: Diaspora, Translation, and Jewish-Christian Relations in Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 75–77.

The significance of MS Ebr. 402 for Anglo-Jewish history was first recognized in the nineteenth century, when the poems of Meir ben Elijah of Norwich were discovered within its folios.[4] On the basis of this discovery, it was suggested that the manuscript as a whole was produced in England—a suggestion that was later rejected by experts in Hebrew paleography, since its quires do not contain the double pricking in the inner and outer margins of every sheet (to guide the ruling of lines) that they identified as a defining feature of pre-1264 English manuscripts.[5] Malachi Beit-Arié, the dean of Hebrew manuscript studies, initially claimed that the poems contained in the Vatican manuscript had been copied as an independent codicological unit that was attached to the rest of the codex at a later date.[6] However, when he examined the manuscript *in situ* some twenty years later, Beit-Arié concluded that the manuscript formed a single codicological unit that was produced by four scribes in the early to mid-thirteenth century.[7] Meir of Norwich's poems appear on fols. 114v–117r, in a section copied by the second and fourth scribes and therefore were apparently included in the original composition of the codex. An additional section of MS Ebr. 402 with a likely English element is found on fols. 1r–23r, a section copied jointly by the first and second scribe.[8] This section, which opens the codex, contains the only surviving exemplar of *Sefer ha-Galuy*, a work of biblical lexicography by Joseph Kimhi.[9] Kimhi's work was preserved in Ebr. 402 accompanied by critical comments by a scholar named Benjamin.[10] Emanuel Blüth suggested that the glossator should be identified as Benjamin of Cam-

4 Abraham Berliner, *Hebräische Poesien des Meir ben Elia aus Norwich* (London: David Nutt, 1887).

5 A. Marmorstein, "New Material for the Literary History of the English Jews before the Expulsion," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 12 (1928–31): 103–15; Malachi Beit-Arié, *The Makings of the Medieval Hebrew Book: Studies in Palaeography and Codicology* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993), 130; Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, *Les manuscrits hébreux dans l'Angleterre médiévale: étude historique et paléographique* (Paris: Peeters, 2003), 42

6 His analysis was first published in Malachi Beit-Arié, *The Only Dated Medieval Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 CE)* (London: Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985), 5, and reprinted in Beit-Arié, *Makings of the Medieval Hebrew Book*.

7 *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library: Catalogue*, ed. Benjamin Richler, palaeographical and codicological descriptions by Malachi Beit-Arié in collaboration with Nurit Pasternak (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2008), 348–50. According to the catalogue, the codex was copied by three scribes while "a different hand" copied fols. 24r and 114v–115v. This seems to hark back to Beit-Arié's earlier claim that Meir of Norwich's poems were added after the manuscript was complete. However, since Meir of Norwich's poems reach fol. 117r, and thus straddle a transition between the fourth ("different") hand and the second scribe, it seems clear that the fourth scribe was an integral member of the scribal team. Fol. 24r, also copied by the fourth scribe, contains an elegy for Menahem Vardimas of Rouen, who died in 1224. See Adolph Neubauer, "Menahem = Vardimas," *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 36 (1887): 372–73; Norman Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 388–90; Pinchas Roth, "Rouen—Radom—Darom," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2019): 35–42, at 37–38.

8 *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library*, 350.

9 Published as *Sepher ha-Galuj von R. Joseph Kimchi*, ed. H. J. Mathews (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1887).

10 Mathews, *Sepher ha-Galuj*, xi.

bridge, whose name appears in the Northampton Donum of 1194 as the wealthiest Jew in Cambridge.[11] These two works by English authors do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the entire codex was produced in England, but they certainly reinforce its English connection.

The Vatican manuscript contains another, hitherto unnoticed, English composition.[12] The very last folio of the codex contains a number of short poems that were probably added in the vacant space left after the original manuscript was completed.[13] One of these poems identifies its author as "Menahem, son of Rabbi R. Jacob Solomon, of *melaḥ rppa*."[14] *Melaḥ* is a Hebrew word meaning salt, while "*rppa*" is probably a Hebrew transcription of the Latin *ripa*, meaning "bank of a river, or a wharf."[15] Combined, they form a translation of "Saltwharf," a section or street in the medieval London neighbourhood of Queenhithe, on the north bank of the Thames.[16]

The Jewish community of medieval London was concentrated in the vicinity of Cheapside, a few streets to the north of Queenhithe, but some Jews lived outside that area.[17] Queenhithe was an important commercial hub that also included residential buildings from the twelfth century onwards.[18] As its name implied, Saltwharf was associated with the import and commerce in salt.[19] Menahem of Saltwharf may

11 Adolph Neubauer, "English Massorites," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, o.s. 2, no. 3 (1890): 322–33 at 327 (quoting a personal communication between Blüth and Mathews); Emanuel Blüth, "Joseph Qimchi und seine Grammatik," *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 18 (1891): 1–26, 119–32, 197–208, 269–86 at 130n6; Israel Abrahams, "The Northampton Donum of 1194," *Miscellanies of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 1 (1925): 59–74 and 81–86 at 65; R. B. Dobson, *The Jewish Communities of Medieval England* (York: University of York, 2010), 109–11.

12 The poem was noted briefly in *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library*, 350, without further comment.

13 The preceding folios (122–25), original to the codex, contain poems by Andalusian Hebrew poets from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Jonathan Vardi, "Between Shemuel ha-Nagid and the Poets of Zaragoza," *Tarbiz* 84, no. 3 (2016): 437–67.

14 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Ebr. 402, fol. 125r. Together, half of this page plus its verso (fol. 125v, the last page in the codex) in its entirety, contain short poems in the same hand as the poem published here. It is quite possible that they were all composed by Menahem, and I hope that literary experts will grapple with their interpretation and attribution.

15 *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London: British Academy, 1975–2013), *s.v.* "ripa" 2, fascicule XIV, 2841. The double *pe* in the Hebrew transcription may signify a hard "p" sound, as opposed to a soft "f" (*rafe*).

16 Ken Steedman, Tony Dyson, and John Schofield, *The Bridgehead and Billingsgate to 1200*, Aspects of Saxo-Norman London 3 (London: London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 1992), 126.

17 Joe Hillaby, "London: The 13th-Century Jewry Revisited," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 32 (1990–92): 89–158; Hillaby, "The London Jewry: William I to John," *Jewish Historical Studies* 33 (1992–94): 1–44. Rabbi Elijah Menahem, for example, owned a house on Candlewick Street, close to the river but further east. See *Calendar of the Plea Rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews*, ed. J. M. Rigg, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1905), 300. I am grateful to Dean Irwin for this reference.

18 Julian Ayre and Robin Wroe-Brown, "The Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Waterfront and Settlement at Queenhithe: Excavations at Bull Wharf, City of London," *Archaeological Journal* 172, no. 2 (2015): 195–272.

19 S. A. M. Adshead, *Salt and Civilization* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 95.

have lived in the area, away from other Jews. Alternatively, he (or his father) may have been a merchant, with business interests on the wharf, who did not actually reside there.[20] I have not located Menahem's name, nor his father's, in published documents from the period. Based on its location at the end of the Vatican codex, and on the assumption that it was Menahem himself who inscribed his lines into the manuscript, it seems reasonable to assume that he lived sometime between the middle of the thirteenth century and the termination of the Jewish community of England in 1290. If so, this would confirm the manuscript's presence in England after its completion, while leaving open the question of where it was originally produced.

The poem itself is short, comprising two rhyming strophes—the first with four lines in Sephardic meter and the second with six lines and no recognizable meter. It is introduced by a short explanation, and each section carries a heading. As the introductory explanation makes explicit, this is a debate poem, pitting against each other the two components of a candle—the wick and the tallow.

The genre of debate poems is rich and ancient, appearing in a wide variety of cultures.[21] Many poems frame debates between dichotomous ideas or concepts, such as body and soul or Judaism and Christianity.[22] Over centuries, though, poets utilized the debate framework to explore the rival virtues of innumerable pairs of cities, people male and female, animals and inanimate objects.[23] The genre was very popular in medieval England, and it is tempting to locate Menahem's poem within a Middle English context.[24] However, a fair number of Hebrew debate poems were composed throughout the Jewish world during the Middle Ages.[25] Abraham ibn

20 For a recent suggestion tying a Jewish family from Norwich with the salt trade, see Judith Olszowy-Schlanger and Sian Collins, "Samuel of Norwich in the Marshland of King's Lynn: Economic Tribulations Reconstructed from a Newly Discovered Thirteenth-Century Hebrew Starr in Cambridge University Library," *Jewish Historical Studies* 50, no. 1 (2018): 14–44.

21 *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East*, ed. G. J. Reinink and Herman L. J. Vanstiphout (Leuven: Peeters, 1991).

22 "As a metaphorical conceit, the conflict between Body and Soul was an ancient and conventional one"—Neil Cartlidge, "In the Silence of a Midwinter Night: A Re-Evaluation of the Visio Philiberti," *Medium Aevum* 75, no. 1 (2006): 24–45 at 24. See also Ophir Münz-Manor, "Jewish and Christian Dispute Poems on the Relationship between the Body and the Soul," in *Textures: Culture, Literature, Folklore for Galit Hasan-Rokem*, ed. Hagar Salamon and Avigdor Shinan, 2 vols., Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore 28 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2013), 1:187–209 (in Hebrew).

23 An extensive list was compiled from European and Near Eastern literatures by Moritz Steinschneider, "Rangstreit-Literatur: Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte," *Sitzungsberichte der Philosophisch-Historischen Klasse der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 155 (1908): 1–87.

24 John Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing: Colleagues, 1991).

25 Chava Turniansky, "The Evolution of the Poetical Contest in Ashkenaz," *Studies in Yiddish Literature and Folklore*, Research Projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies Monograph Series 7 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986), 60–98; Wout J. van Bekkum, "Observations on the Hebrew Debate in Medieval Europe," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*, ed. Reinink and Vanstiphout, 77–90; Susan L. Einbinder, "Pen and Scissors: A Medieval Debate," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 261–76.

Ezra, who visited England himself during the twelfth century and whose compositions would have been familiar to northern European Jews of the thirteenth century, wrote a number of poems in this genre pitting summer against winter, the Sabbath against festival days, and more.[26] It is therefore difficult to point to a specific vector of cultural influence in Menahem's choice of poetic genre.

The material aspects of the poem are more specific to the region of England. The use of tallow for lighting was typical in northern Europe, while in the south oil lamps were the norm.[27] In medieval Christian society, expensive wax candles were often reserved for liturgical use while the cheaper tallow—rendered from animal fat—was used for secular contexts.[28] A similar distinction existed among Jews, where wax candles were preferred for use in the synagogue.[29] Jewish sensitivity to the profane connotation of tallow was heightened by the concern that drops of non-kosher fat might drip onto food or eating utensils, causing serious religious problems.[30]

The religious and aesthetic connotations of tallow may provide some insight into the literary meaning of this poem. Debate poems between inanimate objects are generally understood as metaphors for other, usually philosophical, questions. In this case, the issue at root seems to be religious authenticity and the problem of external perception of piety as opposed to internal truth.[31] The flame presents itself as all-powerful, encompassing opposites (warm and cold, dark and light) and—like God (Deuteronomy 4:24 and elsewhere)—a consuming fire. The tallow responds that, unlike the everlasting deity, the wick will be eventually be reduced to ash. Conceding that it would also be debased by the burning candle, the tallow presents its

26 Haviva Ishay, "'It says that and that means that': The Debate Poems of Abraham ibn Ezra," in *Sefunot: Studies and Sources on the History of Jewish Communities in the East*, n.s., 11 (2019): 85–136 (in Hebrew). On ibn Ezra in England, see Uriel Simon, "Transplanting the Wisdom of Spain to Christian Lands: The Failed Efforts of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 8 (2009): 139–89.

27 For references from rabbinic literature, see Anat Kutner, "The Night in the Late Middle Ages in Ashkenaz" (Ph.D. diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2008), 22–28 (in Hebrew); Pinchas Roth, "On Exegesis of the Jerusalem Talmud in Medieval Southern France," *Sidra: Journal for the Study of Rabbinic Literature* 29 (2014): 117–25 at 121n31 (in Hebrew).

28 Jean Verdon, *Night in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 75–77; David Postles, "Lamps, Lights and Layfolk: 'Popular' Devotion Before the Black Death," *Journal of Medieval History* 25, no. 2 (1999): 97–114. In practice, the distinction was not necessarily so sharp since the materials could be combined in the same candle. See Jacquelyn Frith, Ruth Appleby, Rebecca Stacey, and Carl Heron, "Sweetness and Light: Chemical Evidence of Beeswax and Tallow Candles at Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire," *Medieval Archaeology* 48 (2004): 220–27.

29 Kutner, "The Night in the Late Middle Ages", 25–27.

30 Elisheva Baumgarten, "A Tale of a Christian Matron and Sabbath Candles: Religious Difference, Material Culture and Gender in Thirteenth-Century Germany," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2013): 83–99. See also Jacob Moelin, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Maharil ha-Hadashot*, no. 79; Israel Isserlin, *Terumat ha-Deshen*, no. 176.

31 Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), chap. 6.

deterioration as an act of pious expiation. This echoes a prayer that, according to the Babylonian Talmud, was recited by Rav Sheshet on fastdays:[32]

> Lord of the world, it is clear to You that in the time that the Temple was standing, [if] a person would sin [then] he would bring a sacrifice and [although] all that was offered was its fat (*ḥelev*) and blood, it would atone for him. Now I have kept a fast, and my own fat (*ḥelev*) and blood have been diminished. May it be Your will to consider my diminished fat and blood as if they were offered before You on the [Temple] altar, and regard me favourably.

Like Rav Sheshet in the Talmud whose fat was consumed by his asceticism, the tallow points to its reduction as testimony to its piety. Less brilliant and ethereal than the light of the wick, offensive to the senses of smell and touch, undervalued by society, the tallow lays claim to a more authentic and internal religiosity.

The discovery of a poem by a London Jew, with its pithy blend of humour and piety, constitutes a small but significant contribution to the history of Jewish culture in medieval England.

Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Ebr. 402, fol. 125r

זה עשיתי מן הפתילה שעושה מחלוקת עם החלב
מנחם בן הרב ר' יעקב שלמה ממלח רפפא
כה תשוב[ת] הפתיל[ה] על החלב
אני חמה אני קרה אני חושך אני אורה
סביביי אש ותבערה כאש אכלה[33] בהיערה
תשובה החלב על הפתילה
במה תרוממי ותתפארי וכאכלה התתעפרי[34]
ותתבאשי ותתקטרי בעת תאספי ותתקדרי
הלא בחלבי ובבשרי[35] לחט אכפר כדת עכרי

(I composed this about the wick holding a debate with the tallow, Menahem ben Rabbi R. Jacob Solomon of Melaḥ Rippa.

This is the response of the wick to the tallow:
I am hot, I am cold,
I am dark, I am light.
Fire and conflagration around me
Like fire devouring the forest.

The response of the tallow to the wick:
Why do you exalt and praise yourself?
Once consumed, you will cover yourself with dust!
You will smell foul and smoky when you are dead and dark!
Behold, with my fat and my flesh, I will atone for my sin as I turn foul.)

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32 Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 17a.

33 Cf. Deuteronomy 4:24, 9:3; Joel 1:19-20.

34 Perhaps this should read: תתעפרי.

35 Cf. Psalms 84:3: "לבי ובשרי" (my body and soul).

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Abstract: Very few Hebrew poems are known to have survived from medieval England. A newly discovered poem found in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Ebr. 402 and attributed to a Jew from Saltwharf, a London street on the north shore of the Thames, is published and discussed here. The verses belong to the genre of debate poem. They describe an argument between the components of a candle, the wick and the tallow, each claiming the prestige of the candle's flame. Linguistic hints and the historical and ritual uses of tallow in medieval Europe suggest that this poem is a metaphorical critique of Jewish religious authenticity.

Keywords: London Jewry, Saltwharf, Meir ben Elijah of Norwich, medieval Hebrew poetry, debate poem