

The Perception of Jewish Women in Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí's *Me'am Lo'ez* on the Book of Genesis (A. 1730)

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A. Introduction

The introduction in the eighteenth century of rabbinical literature in Ladino, hitherto usually written in Hebrew, was a watershed in the cultural history of the Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire. It was Rabbi Ya'acov Khulí's initiative to publish the *Me'am Lo'ez* (Constantinople, 1730), a commentary on the Bible, in Ladino that inaugurated this new era for Ladino culture.¹ Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí decided to take this revolutionary step because of the cultural gap that existed between the Hebrew-writing rabbinical élite on the one hand and the rank and file Judeo-Spanish speaking and Ladino-reading Sephardic public on the other². The author of the *Me'am Lo'ez* was above all a compiler: he quoted the Talmudic *midrashim* and the commentaries of Jewish sages such as Rashi³ or Ramban; Bahya Ibn Pakuda's work *Hovot Ha-Levavot* as well as Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*. Most important: the *Me'am Lo'ez* was not only a learned commentary. Thanks to its author's ample explications and detailed admonitions included in the said commentary - such as the rules and customs of circumcision following the story of Abraham the Patriarch's performing this precept (Genesis, 17 & 18)⁴ or the rules of mourning included in the story of Patriarch Jacob's demise (Genesis, 49)⁵ - the

¹ Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí was born in Jerusalem c.1689. He died in Kushta (Kushtandina)- the Hebrew and Ladino name of Constantinople or Istanbul - in 1732. I read the edition of his *Me'am Lo'ez* on the Book of Genesis published in Kushta, 1823; hereafter referred to as: ML. The *Me'am Lo'ez* was printed in Rashi letters. Hereafter I shall use the Latin letters orthography accepted by the National Authority for the Promotion of Ladino Culture, established by law of the Israeli Knesset in 1997. This is a purely phonetic orthography that does not take into consideration the modern Spanish spelling.

² Meyuhas Ginio 2009:219-139.

³ Grossman & Japhet 2008.

⁴ ML, 197-205.

⁵ ML, 468-477.

Me'am Lo'ez soon became an encyclopedia of Jewish learning and customs and a regular manual for the proper conduct befitting Jewish men and women alike⁶. Soon after its publication the *Me'am Lo'ez* gained unprecedented popularity that continued to exist for the next hundred and fifty year,⁷ during which time the *Me'am Lo'ez* became the guiding authority on the everyday life of the Sephardic communities of the Mediterranean basin. After Khulí's premature demise, first his disciples and later other rabbinical scholars continued the master's project, publishing commentaries on various books of the Hebrew Bible and following Khulí's guide lines and index – *Llaves*.⁸ The extraordinary importance of the *Me'am Lo'ez* is manifest both in being a true mirror reflecting the everyday life, the social ideas and the moralist conventions prevailing in the Sephardic communities of Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí's time and place - the eighteenth century Mediterranean Diaspora - as well as in forging and shaping the dominant attitude towards life prevalent in those communities for the next hundred and fifty years to come.⁹

B. Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí's attitude towards womankind

By virtue of its Ladino language, the knowledge and popularity of the *Me'am Lo'ez* did not apply to Sephardic men alone, but to Sephardic women as well. Unlike Rabbi Ya'akov ben Yitzhak of Yanow (sixteenth century), *Tse'ena u-Re'ena*, the *Me'am Lo'ez* was not meant for women alone; on the contrary: it was meant for all observant Jews, especially *el hammon ha'am*¹⁰ [the common people], to study. Not at all the less, the *Me'am Lo'ez* soon became popular among Sephardic women. Although, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only very few Sephardic women could read and write in any language, they were nevertheless able to follow the reading aloud of the Ladino text of *Me'am Lo'ez*. Thanks to their acquaintance with this Ladino text, Sephardic women were able to follow the reading of the *parashah* [*perasha* in Ladino] in their synagogues. We may assume that Sephardic women,

⁶Molho 1945. A salonican erudite, survivor of the holocaust, wrote in 1945 an article entitled: *Me'am Lo'ez. Encyclopédie populaire du séphardisme levantain*, Thessalonique, 1945.

⁷ Benbassa & Rodrigue 2002:170-177.

⁸ Romeu Ferré 2000.

⁹ Meyuhas Ginio 2010:117-126

¹⁰ See, for example: ML, 7 and ML, 293.

acquainted with the *Me'am Lo'ez*, its ideas and perception of life, would be thoroughly influenced by its author's observations regarding womankind. It is therefore quite meaningful to elaborate on the attitude of Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí towards womankind, as it must have influenced the self-perception of Sephardic women. Generally speaking, Sephardic women were not entitled to have an independent opinion, let alone to voice it. They became dependent on men's patronage and were kept away from studies. Some Jewish Sages of the Talmud accused women of many negative character traits such as gluttony, eavesdropping, laziness and jealousy, even of prostitution and theft.¹¹ Above all: the creation of woman is described in the Babylonian Talmud¹² as God taking a rib from Adam and in return giving him woman – Eve [Ḥava] – to slave for him. The association with Rabbi Khulí's expression, *esklava de su marido*¹³, is therefore not surprising. The author of the *Me'am Lo'ez* did not dedicate a special chapter to women in general; we may learn about his attitude towards women either from his expounding the history of biblical heroines such as Ḥava or Sarah the matriarch; or from this author's side remarks regarding women while discussing other matters.

We should bear in mind that Rabbi Khulí was living in a patriarchal society established in an oriental country. He regarded women as inferior to men¹⁴. This inferior position of women was considered the result of the original sin committed by Hava. Rabbi Khulí listed ten *maldisiones* [curses] decreed against Ḥava on account of that sin: “*Dies kelalot* [curses] *ke se maldicho Hava*”. Women deserved all ten curses: the *tsa'ar* [sorrow or inconvenience] of menstruation, the virginal blood, nine months of pregnancy, possible miscarriage, the pains of childbirth – there are no such strong pains in the whole world – “*ke no ay tan fuerte dolor en el mundo*”¹⁵ wrote Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí - the troubles of raising one's children: breast feeding the baby; dressing it; cleaning it; carrying it in her arms. The seventh curse states the reason for all the curses and reads: “*Es ke siempre deve de ir kovijada la kavesa ke no se le vean los kaveyos i no avlar kon ombre ajeno ni amostrarse delante de djente ni apararse*

¹¹ See, for example, Rabbi Nehemia in *Bereshit Raba* 45, Edition of Maḥbarot le-Sifrut, Tel Aviv, 1965, pp. 334-335.

¹² Babylonian Talmud. *Masekhet Sanhedrin*, 39A.

¹³ ML, 112.

¹⁴ Women should have no opinion of their own in matters of *halakhah* – not even those related to dietary laws [*kashrut*], the keeping of which was consigned to them and was their responsibility. In case of any doubt, women should always apply to their husbands and ask for their guidance. See note 20 *infra* regarding the *Siddur de Mugerres*, Salonica, 1550. Also see: Meyuhas Ginio 2009: 225.

¹⁵ ML, 112.

por la ventana i kuando kuna a su kriatura ke no se sienta la voz entre la vezindad sola mente kantarlo kon voz basha. I todo esto podia eskuzarlo si no komia de akel arvol".¹⁶ Rabbi Ya'akov Khuli stated, referring to the eighth curse, that women ought to serve their husbands and obey all the latter's commands like a slave: "es de ser komo esclava de su marido de tener kargo de aparezarle su komida dia i noqe i lavarle su ropa i ke el marido podeste sovre elya ke no tenga orden di refuzar su palavra."¹⁷ Women are not qualified to give testimony in any case and lastly: Death. Since woman was the cause of human death, she should keep three precepts: *nida*; *hala*, and lighting Shabbat candles. Any woman – states Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí – who does not keep these three precepts shall die in childbirth. On the other hand, by keeping and observing the said three precepts, woman may redeem her soul and be pardoned for her sin, on account of which Death came into the world. It should be mentioned that according to Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí, Adam too deserved ten curses: his body became smaller; his forces weakened; the earth has become cursed because of Man's sin and thus men have to toil hard in order to gain their living; the troubles of gaining one's living; the earth does no longer produce the fruits of Paradise, but grass alone; mankind needs work hard to gain living; Adam lost the heavenly beauty of his face; mankind lost the possibility of using the snake to carry burdens, as the feet of the snake were cut off; the expulsion from Paradise. Man was left to live in the East, far away from the *Shekhina* that dwells in the West.¹⁸

The *Mishna* states that he who teaches his daughter Torah, does as much as teaching her nonsense or vanity¹⁹. Women were thus ignorant. The *Seder Nashim. Siddur de Mugeret*²⁰ edited by the Salonican Rabbi Meir Benveniste and published in Salonica, 1550²¹ affirms that men do not teach their wives or their daughters Hebrew, because they consider that mastering the sacred language requires a lot of work and that it may take too much time until a woman may study the Hebrew letters and punctuation. Others think that saying the prayers takes a lot of time and women may thus not be able to look after their children including babies; furthermore women are not obliged to perform all the precepts, but only a few of those. In an article published in 2001,

¹⁶ Ibid. The prohibition to hear feminine voice agrees with Babilonian Talmud, *Maskhet Kidushin*, 70 A: "קול באשה ערווה".

¹⁷ ML, 112.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Mishna, Sota*, 93, D.

²⁰ See also note 14 *supra*.

²¹ National Library, Jerusalem RO(e)99A681. See Also: Schwarzwald 2012.

Rachel Elior explains that women were exempt from performing many of the precepts in order that they may dedicate all their time to serving their husbands.²² Elior points at the affinity between the Hebrew words "משפחה" and "שפחה": the duties of women are to be fulfilled in the private space, inside the family home, not elsewhere. Women should keep away from the public space. The editor of the above mentioned *Siddur de mugeres* states that a Jewish woman “*tenga kargo de preguntar a su marido kuando le trae la karne si ay eneya algo de fregar i de mirar por los guzanos de las verduras i legumes i los de peshe i el figado [higado²³] i semejante pues ke de su mano komimos*”. Indeed, the editor of the *Siddur de mugeres* points out that the responsibility for keeping Jewish dietary laws rests upon the housewife because: “*pues ke de su mano komimos*”; yet, in case of any doubt, the wife should turn to her husband for directions. At the same time it is clear that the husband is the one who does all the shopping and brings the meat home – *trae la karne* – for his wife to cook. These words of the sixteenth century author of the *Siddur de Mugeres* bring to our mind both the sixth and the seventh curses inflicted upon Hava, according to the eighteenth century *Me’am Lo’ez*,²⁴ thus proving that Rabbi Ya’akov Khulí’s affirmations truly reflect the ideas regarding women prevailing in the oriental Mediterranean Sephardic diaspora. The author of the *Me’am Lo’ez* elaborated upon woman’s duties regarding the rules of *kashrut*: “*Las komidas ke pueden ser ma’akhalot asurim [prohibited foods] por munchas sibot [causes], si mehanat [because of] del mal de los guzanos ke ay en el pazi i espinaka y yaprakes i perishil [parsley] i saladas i resto de verduras ke estan yenos de guzanikos muy pekenios i kere muncho judezmo para mirarlos. I la ba’alat bayit [Lady of the house] no tiene mungo kargo de esto i se asufre sobre la esklava ke poko le enfade i la judia vieja ke no tiene vista para atinarlos por ser muy delgados* “. ²⁵ We obtain here a precious look at the Sephardic eighteenth century household: the housewife, her maid – probably not Jewish – and the old Jewish help: all working in the kitchen to prepare the meals for the family. We should be aware of Rabbi Ya’akov Khulí’s unhidden criticism of Jewish house wives: they leave the dirty and tiresome job of sorting the vegetables and tracing any insects therein, so as to comply with the rules of *kashrut*, to their servants: either a gentile slave who would not care, or an old Jewish help – perhaps a

²² Elior 2001: 42-82 (in Hebrew); esp. p. 45.

²³ The initial ‘f in *figado* is typical of Salonican Sephardic pronunciation.

²⁴ ML, 112.

²⁵ ML, 254.

poor relative staying at the family home – who cares, but does not have the required eyesight to do this job. Women do not have a say in matters of *kashrut* and in case of any doubt should turn to their husbands for guidance.

Women were not supposed to leave their homesteads unaccompanied. Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí drew this conclusion from the story of the giants in the earth and of the sons of God and their relations with the fair daughters of men²⁶: “*de aki deprendimos ke no es lisenziada la mugger de kaminar por la plasa i kuando sale de kaza por algum הכרח es obligada de tener los ojos en basho i no ir mirando la dgente ובפרט siendo noqe de טבילה ke aun si elya sea buena judia i la dgente de su lugar sean todos צדיקים ke ninguno pensa en koza de עבירה kon todo esto ay מציאות ke sus ijos ke pare de su marido sean ממזרים מקרוב porke viendo algun mansevo ke le plazze en sus ojos tengalo por seguro ke la מחשבה aze munga אפעולה ke akeya propia hora que esta kon su marido le viene en tino la forma ke vido*”.²⁷ According to Jewish *Halakha* a ממזר is a child born to a married woman out of wedlock. The children referred to in the above mentioned passage of the *Me'am Lo'ez* are “קרוב לממזרים”, since even thinking, at the moment of conception, of any man - other than the woman's proper husband - is considered a sin that may result in turning the new born baby to be considered almost a ממזר.²⁸ Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí was worried lest a woman be reminded, at the crucial moment of conceiving, of a stranger, she might have seen outside her home. Therefore he recommended that women stay indoors as much as possible. The story of Dinah, Patriarch Jacob's daughter²⁹ provides a vivid example regarding the duty of women to stay indoors: “*agora sinteresh el dezastre ke akontesio en una mugaga por salir de kaza ke de esto se preva ke deven las בתולות de estar enseradas en kaza ke no las vea ninguno kuantto mas las kazadas o despozadas*”.³⁰

Describing the merits of Sarah the matriarch³¹, Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí inserts a side remark reflecting, perhaps, his lack of confidence in feminine discretion: referring to the second merit of Sarah – saving: “*Es ke la ברכה [blessing] se topava en kaza de ke era regidora*; the author of *Me'am Lo'ez* comments that Sarah's behaviour was not similar to that of other women: *no komo resto de mugeres ke no les enfade del gaste de kaza ni pensan en eskuezer solamente lo ke bushkan es desvolarlo a su marido por*

²⁶ Genesis: 6, 1-5.

²⁷ ML, 127.

²⁸ See: Deuteronomy, 23:2.

²⁹ Genesis, 34.

³⁰ ML, 357.

³¹ Meyuhas Ginio 2009: 231-232.

azer su gusto".³² Women are not to be trusted with money, since all they wish is spending their husbands' funds and pay no attention to saving .

In view of feminine inferiority, there is no wonder that people were sorry at the birth of girls. Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí speaks of "*I uzansa de las komadres es de no dizir si es ijo o ija asta ke repose la parida de sus dolores ke ay algunas ke se toman צער saviendo ke es ija i pueden morirsen siendo estan en סכנה grande*".³³ It is quite clear that women accepted the common notion of their inferiority: both midwives and women in confinement agreed that there was no joy in giving birth to a baby-girl.

For all his criticism of feminine frivolity and his conviction that - very much like the Roman *pater familias* - the Sephardic husband should take care to ensure the proper conduct of his wife, Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí insisted on man's duty to respect his wife. Referring to Abraham the Patriarch who wherever he went, took care first to set up a tent for Sarah and then for himself, the author of *Me'am Lo'ez* wrote "*Ke siempre se akavide el ombre en el כבוד de su mugger porke la ברכה se topa en la kaza por su kavza*".³⁴ Yet everyday life in the Sephardic families was not so calm and peaceful. Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí goes on to state: "*I ansi deven de saver el המון העם ke tienen su luenga ojada de maldezir i dizhonrar a su mugger sepase ke es yero grande מלבד ke es pekado se rekere mungo dezastre ke en no aviendo paz i amor entre los dos*³⁵ *se aparte la שכניה...I todo hombre ke jarva*³⁶ *a su mugger es tanto komo se jarvara a su חבר I si es su mania esto de jarvarla a koroto deven los regidores de su lugar de kastigarlo i injirmarlo i tomarle שבועה ke no alse mano del todo porke esto es מעשה גי"ם*." This statement is loud and clear; yet Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí brings in some reservations: "*Ma si elya tiene la boka suelta ke lo maldize en su kara o ke menopresia a su suegro o su suegra delante de su marido estonses es מותר de jarvarla*".³⁷ Again we may take a precious look at a homely scene: husband and wife quarreling and shouting insults one against the other and the wife who brings her in-laws into the fight. We need to carefully read Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí's wording: he wrote that it was permitted- מותר - to smite one's wife in certain cases only; he did not

³² ML, 293.

³³ ML, 364.

³⁴ ML, 167.

³⁵ We should be aware that the second merit of Sarah the matriarch was "*ke teniya paz i amor kon su marido*", ML, 293.

³⁶ The Ladino verb: "jarvar" derives from the Hebrew root: ב.ר.ח and means to beat, to smite badly.

³⁷ ML, 167.

write that it was obligatory or even advisable to do so. Moreover: he suggested certain remedies to deal with a husband who took to regularly beating his wife. All the same, it is clear that since the husband was responsible for the proper conduct of his spouse - beating one's wife was a common usage in the eighteenth century Sephardic communities of the Mediterranean basin.

C. Conclusion

Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí belonged to his time and place: the eighteenth century Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire. Living in a Muslim country as *dhimmi*, Jews and Christian alike were subject to certain restrictions in their everyday lives. These restrictions specially affected women who were more or less confined to their homesteads. Inside the private space of the family, the husband was the ruling power who exercised his authority over his wife and children, widowed mother, unmarried sisters and younger brothers. Although Rabbi Ya'akov Khulí did not have much respect for feminine discretion or sound judgment, he demanded that the husband treats his wife with *7122*. However it seems that this was not the prevailing atmosphere. Woman was considered inferior to man. She was to be punished because of Hava's sin that caused the expulsion from Paradise and the introduction of Death into human life. Women were not taught to pray, to read or write and were left ignorant so as to be able to dedicate their lives to serving their husbands "*komo esklava*" and looking after their children. A major change in this world atmosphere occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century when modernity was gradually introduced into the major Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire. The key word for the advancement of women was: education. Once women were allowed to attend modern schools such as those established by the Alliance Israélite Universelle or by various Christian Missions, their lot was changed. True enough, this process applied much more to the upper social strata of the major Sephardic communities; yet their way of life served as a model worth of imitating for other social strata of the same communities.

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