

## BETWEEN WORLDLINESS AND TRADITIONALISM: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY JEWS DEBATE INTERCESSORY PRAYER \*

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The earliest known Jewish liturgical manuals, from tenth-century Babylonia or possibly earlier, include the following prayer for the pre-dawn ritual of the days of repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur:

Ushers of mercy, usher in our mercy before the Merciful one.  
Reciters of prayer, recite our prayer before the Hearer of prayer.  
Sounders of cries, sound our cry before the Hearer of cries.  
Ushers of tears, usher in our tears before the King who is appeased  
by tears.  
Beseech and engage in lengthy entreaties and supplications before  
the lofty and towering King.  
Utter to Him, sound to Him, the Torah and good deeds of those  
who dwell in the dust.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Seder Rav Amram ha-Shalem*, ed. Aryeh Leib Frumkin, Jerusalem 1912, fol. 157r. Amram headed the rabbinical academy of Pumbedita (in Babylonia) in the ninth century, but his prayer book is known to contain numerous later interpolations. However, the prayer also appears in the liturgy of Sa'adia b. Yosef, leader of the "Sura" yeshiva in tenth-century Baghdad: *Siddur R. Sa'adja Gaon*, ed. Israel Davidson et al., Jerusalem 1970, p. 357. Sa'adia's Karaite contemporary, Abu Yussuf Ya'aqub al-Qirqisani, in his *Kitab al-Anwar wal-marakib*, objected to the "Ushers of mercy" prayer and to its underlying principle of angelical intercession, which he claimed was based on the rabbanites' equation of angels with the "winged creature" of Eccl. 10:20. See Wilhelm Bacher, "Qirqisani, the Karaite, and his Work on Jewish Sects,"

This prayer is atypical of the Jewish liturgy, because of its appeal to angels for their intercession on behalf of the supplicant.<sup>2</sup> The idea of pleading with the angels to expedite human supplication has a source in the midrash that “the angel appointed over the prayers takes all the prayers... and fashions crowns from them which he places on the head of God.”<sup>3</sup> These rabbinic roots help to explain the durability of prayers like “Ushers of mercy,” which remained in the liturgy throughout the Middle Ages and early modern era, despite concerns about the appeal to intermediaries.<sup>4</sup>

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*Jewish Quarterly Review*, o.s. 7 (1895), p. 695; Leon Nemoj, “Al-Qirqisani’s Account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 7 (1930), pp. 332-333. The fourteenth-century Karaite, Aaron Elijah of Nicomedia, also disapproved of “Ushers of mercy”: see his *Keter Torah*, vol. 2, fol. 65v. This text was already noted by Leopold Zunz; see his *Die Synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*, Frankfurt a.M. 1920, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> However, it is by no means unique. Another well-known example is the penitential poem for the Fast of Gedaliah that calls upon the “Angels of mercy, ministers of the Most High” (*Mal’akhei rahamim meshartei ‘Elyon*) to beseech God to forgive the Jewish people. For a list of poems of this nature, see Solomon Sprecher, “The Controversy over the Recitation of ‘Ushers of Mercy’” (Hebrew), *Yeshurun* 3 (1997), pp. 706-711; Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Peering Through the Lattices.” *Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period*, Detroit 2000, p. 134, n. 4; p. 147. There are also prayers that beseech God’s attributes (e.g. mercy, patience) for intercession on behalf of human petitioners, and the legitimacy of these was also explored by medieval scholars.

<sup>3</sup> Ex. R. 21,4. Sandalfon is the name of the angel associated by the Sages with this task: see *Midrash Kohen* 26. Origen, however, identified him with Michael: *De Princ.* I,8.1. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5, Philadelphia 1947, pp. 48, 71. Sandalfon and his legendary function were immortalized in the poetry of Solomon ibn Gabirol and – of all people – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. For ibn Gabirol, see *Shirei ha-Qodesh le-Rabbi Shelomo ibn Gabirol*, ed. Dov Yarden, Jerusalem 1973, vol. 2, p. 534; for Longfellow, see his “Birds of Passage: Flight the First.” My thanks to Professor Daniel Frank of Ohio State University for his help with these references.

<sup>4</sup> On intercessory prayer in nonrabbinic postbiblical sources, see: Maxwell J. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*, Worcester 1992 [JSP supplement series 11], pp. 309-313; Rachel Elijior, “Mysticism, Magic and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993), pp. 3-53, esp. pp. 40-42; Michael Mach, “Studies in the Jewish Angelology of the Hellenistic-Roman Period” (Hebrew), Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Tel-

It is, therefore, startling to discover a heated debate over the issue at the end of this period, in Isaac Lampronti of Ferrara's *Pahad Yizhak* ("Isaac's Fear").<sup>5</sup> This work, compiled in the first half of the eighteenth century, is a fourteen-volume encyclopedia of Jewish law and lore, but it is also a repository of numerous letters and responsa, by dozens of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian rabbis, that were not published elsewhere. One of the longest articles in the encyclopedia, twenty-five densely printed folios in length, documents a contemporary controversy over intercessory prayer. The following study sketches the contours of the conflict and explores its historical significance. This emerges clearly when the debate is viewed against the backdrop of earlier, medieval sources. The discussion begins, therefore, with a review of the notion of intercessory prayer in talmudic sources and medieval Jewish law.

### **Do Angels Understand Aramaic?**

The debate appears in the *PY* under the entry entitled: "Let one not petition for his needs in Aramaic." This strange heading is based on the following talmudic exchange. It is related that, when visiting a sick person, Rabbi Ele'azar customarily wished him, in Aramaic: "May the Merciful One remember you in peace." The question is then posed: Did not Rabbi Judah say, in the name of Rav: 'One should never petition for his needs in Aramaic'; moreover, Rabbi Johanan said: 'When one petitions for his needs in Aramaic, the Ministering Angels (*Mal'akhei ha-Sharet*) do not heed him, for they do not understand Aramaic?' The difficulty is resolved with the response that this rule does not apply to invalids, who are always accompanied by the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, whose presence renders the linguistic shortcomings of the Ministering Angels moot.<sup>6</sup>

The prohibition on petitioning in Aramaic and the attendant explanation also make another talmudic appearance, following the declaration that one may pray in a language other than Hebrew. The

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Aviv University 1986, pp. 398-399; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christianity*, Tübingen 1995, pp. 173-180, 192-200.

<sup>5</sup> Henceforth: *PY*. The source of the title is Gen. 31:42 and 31:53. The relevant entry is in vol. 11, Lyck 1874, fol. 33v-58r.

<sup>6</sup> BT *Shabbat* 12a. This generalization appears elsewhere in the *PY*: vol. 3, Venice 1796, fol. 87r, s.v. *Holeh ha-nikhnas le-vakero*; vol. 12, Berlin 1885, fol. 137r, s.v. *Rahmana Yadkerinakh li-Shelam*; vol. 14, Berlin 1887, fol. 93v, s.v. *Tefillah bi-Leshon La'az*.

apparent contradiction between this rule and the prohibition on praying in Aramaic is resolved by the assertion that group prayer may, indeed, be conducted in any language, but prayer conducted in private may not be recited in Aramaic, for the reason cited.<sup>7</sup> The discussion then adduces anecdotal evidence to challenge the assumption that the angels do not know Aramaic. This thrust is parried with the response that the anecdotes in question refer to the type of divine speech known as *Bat-Kol*, which is formulated in the lingua franca of its target audience, because its purpose is communication with humans; prayer, on the other hand, is directed towards the Divinity, rather than towards humans, and must therefore be uttered in the Holy Tongue. Alternatively, the Talmud suggests that the *Bat-Kol* was issued by the angel Gabriel, who – alone among the angels – does know Aramaic.<sup>8</sup>

These exchanges appear to have plunged the Jews of tenth-century Qairwan (in north Africa) into confusion, for in 992 they submitted a query on the subject to Sherira, the *Ga'on* (i.e. Head) of the “Pumbedita” yeshiva in Baghdad, the seat of authority in matters of Jewish law.<sup>9</sup> The correspondents say that they cannot reconcile the talmudic material with the simple fact that Aramaic *is* the language of liturgical texts received by their ancestors from the yeshiva. Sherira replies that prayers directed towards God can, of course, be

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<sup>7</sup> On the basis of this resolution of the contradiction, the medieval lawbooks, beginning with that of Isaac Alfasi of eleventh-century Lucena, state that Aramaic may only be the language of public prayer. See Jacob b. Asher, *Arba'ah Turim, Orah Hayyim*, §101; Joseph Karo, *Shulhan 'Arukh* ad loc. See also Isaac b. Moses of thirteenth-century Vienna, *Or Zaru'a*, Zhitomir 1862, H. Shabbat, §50, fol. 11r.

<sup>8</sup> BT *Sotah* 33a. Accordingly, Isaiah de Trani the Younger of thirteenth-century Rome cited Gabriel's linguistic facility to justify the recitation of certain liturgical poems in Aramaic: see Joshua Boaz, *Shiltei Gibborim* on Alfasi to *Berakhot*, fol. 7r, §4. Medieval thinkers were unsure whether in these talmudic texts Aramaic serves as a paradigm for languages other than Hebrew, or whether it was singled out. Asher b. Yehiel (Germany-Spain, 13th-14th century) held that the angels considered Aramaic particularly odious, but others disagreed. See the novellae of Samuel Edeles ad loc.

<sup>9</sup> There is an explicit reference to this prayer in a letter sent by Sherira (ca. 906-1006) to the Jewish community of Fez. See *Ozar ha-Ge'onim*, 1-13, ed. Benjamin M. Lewin, Haifa and Jerusalem 1928-1942, vol. 5 (*Ta'anit*), pt. 1, p. 25. Abraham b. Isaac of twelfth-century Narbonne incorporated this document into his legal compendium; see his *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, ed. Shalom and Hanokh Albeck, Jerusalem 1935-1938, fol. 52r, p. 135.

formulated in any tongue, which explains the use of Aramaic in the received liturgy. Hence one is only prohibited from reciting supplications addressed directly to angels, who are known to enjoy a degree of autonomy in responding to human supplications; for example, they are the direct addressees of amulets. This division of labor, so to speak, fits the Talmud's explanation that prayers on behalf of the sick may be formulated in Aramaic, for God is their intended recipient.

The Jews of Qairwan also asked, simply, why the Ministering Angels do not heed prayers in Aramaic, and here Sherira seems to have been somewhat at a loss. He, himself, proffers several pieces of evidence of the liturgical use of Aramaic in rabbinic tradition, and acknowledges that no one seems to have heeded the warnings of Rav and Rabbi Johanan. He even concedes that "their dictum is remote from reason" (*merhak memrehon min sevara*), since it is known that some angels are charged with the duty of keeping a written record of human conversation.<sup>10</sup> Sherira concludes by notifying his Qairwan interlocutors that the injunction is not taken seriously.<sup>11</sup>

Less than a century later, Solomon b. Isaac (Rashi) of Troyes, in his classic talmudic commentary, took it upon himself to harmonize the two sets of supposedly contradictory talmudic texts about prayer in Aramaic. Regarding the prayer for invalids, he explains that while a well-wisher might require angelical intercession, "the one praying has no need for the Ministering Angels to bring his prayer behind the curtain (*pargod*) of heaven," and may therefore pray in any language. Similarly, Rashi maintains (citing Job 36:5) that although God invariably heeds the prayers of the collective, individuals require the cooperation of the Ministering Angels. Clearly Rashi's worldview was sufficiently mythical to include the doctrine of angelical

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<sup>10</sup> The source of this idea is unclear. There is a tradition, based on Amos 4:13, that even the frivolous conversations of husband and wife are read back to a person at the hour of his death: see Lev. R. 26,7; Lam. R. 3,29; *Tanhuma, Vayigash* 7,7. However, these texts attribute the recording of human conversation to God, rather than to angels. That angels keep a daily record of a person's actions is stated in *Pesikta Rabbati* 44, but nothing is said there about speech.

<sup>11</sup> *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim*, ed. Abraham Elijah Harkavy, Berlin 1887, pp. 188-190; *Ozar ha-Ge'onim, Shabbat*, pp. 4-6. See Joseph Yahalom, "Angels Do Not Understand Aramaic: On the Literary Use of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47 (1996), pp. 33-34.

intercession.<sup>12</sup> On this matter Rashi reflects a powerful Ashkenazic tradition, expressed before him, among others, by Simeon b. Isaac ‘the Great’ of Mainz (ca. 950-1030).<sup>13</sup>

Remarkably, Rashi’s intellectual heirs, the Tosafists of twelfth-century France, followed Sherira rather than their mentor in expressing wonder at the notion that the Ministering Angels might be ignorant of Aramaic, since ostensibly human thought is an open book to them.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in a departure from their standard mode of discourse, the query is not followed by a solution. Perhaps even more striking, the idea that one might legitimately offer supplication to supernal beings other than God did not strike Sherira or the Tosafists, much less Rashi, as downright idolatry. Yet this problem was already noted in the following passage from the Palestinian Talmud: “If troubles comes upon a person, let him cry neither to Michael nor to Gabriel, but let him cry unto me, and I shall answer him forthwith.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This is also evident in his exposition of yet another talmudic dictum. The Talmud records, in the name of Rabbi Johanan: “One ought always to plead for mercy, [so] that all may increase his strength, and let him not have enemies above.” Presumably the “enemies above” are angels, and it is therefore reasonable for Rashi to explain the word “all” as, likewise, referring to (benevolent) angels: “So that the Ministering Angels will assist him to ask for mercy, and so that he not have enemies above.” See Rashi on BT *Sanhedrin* 44b s.v. *le’olam yevakesh*.

<sup>13</sup> This worldview is rooted in the *Hekhalot* literature of ancient Palestine, which is known to have had a powerful impact on the Jewish culture of medieval Germany. Nonetheless, as was mentioned above, our earliest sources on the legitimacy of intercessory prayer were compiled in the Islamic ambient. On intercessory prayer in the thought of the mystics of medieval Germany, see Daniel Abrams, “The Evolution of Intention of Prayer to the ‘Special Cherub,’” *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 22 (1995), pp. 1-26.

<sup>14</sup> Tos. on *Shabbat* 12b, s.v. *She’ein*. Elijah, ‘the *Ga’on*,’ of Vilna suggested that the notion that the angels know human thought may have been drawn from the talmudic dictum that a person is ultimately reminded of his failure to concentrate when praying: see Tos. on *Rosh Hashanah* 16b, s.v. *Ve’iyun tefillah*. See his comment on *Shulhan ‘Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, §101. Note that a prayer for angelical intercession is attributed to Jacob b. Meir ‘Tam’ of twelfth-century Ramerupt, perhaps the greatest of the Tosafists. See Joseph Yozpa Hahn, *Yosef Omez*, Jerusalem 1965, §484, p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> PT *Berakhot* 9:12 (13a). Cf. the talmudic tale of the sinner, El’azar b. Dordiya, who broke down and prayed to God directly only after the hills, heavens and stars refused to intercede on his behalf, on the grounds that they must pray for themselves: BT *‘Avodah Zarah* 17a. Similarly, Jacob Halevi of

Nonetheless, in the course of the Middle Ages a series of scholars were troubled by this issue. Maimonides' fifth principle of faith cautioned against praying to angels or other celestial entities, including requests for intercession.<sup>16</sup> Citing this last talmudic passage, Nahmanides concedes that intercessory prayers, like "Ushers of mercy," could be considered idolatrous.<sup>17</sup> On a lighter note, Joseph

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thirteenth-century Marvege asked in a dream for the appropriate angels to help him achieve wisdom and other desirable commodities, but was told that he ought to direct his request directly to God, rather than to angelical intermediaries. See his *She'elot u-Teshuvot min ha-Shamayim*, Tel Aviv 1979, p. 54. See also Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages. Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams, Cambridge Mass. and London 1987, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> Mishnah Commentary, Sanhedrin, ch. 10. Maimonides' Code, the Laws of Repentance 3:7 defines as a renegade (*min*) one who worships an intermediary, such as a star or astrological sign, so that it should serve as an intermediary between himself and God. Cf. his explanation of the roots of idolatry in the Laws of Idolatry 1:1: Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, New York 1972, pp. 71-72. Joseph Albo of fifteenth-century Spain, in his articulation of the principles of faith, referred to mediation as a transgression of the biblical injunction against praying to other gods: see his *Book of Principles (Sefer ha-Ikkarim)*, trans. Isaac Husik, Philadelphia 1929-1930, pt. 1, ch. 3, vol. 1, p. 58. See also *Ibid.*, pt. 2, ch. 17, vol. 4/1, pp. 154-157; pt. 2, ch. 28, p. 184; pt. 3, ch. 18, vol. 3, pp. 158-159, 163-164. Albo's discussion formed the basis of the treatment of the topic by his countryman, Isaac Abarbanel, who quoted the text from PT *Berakhot* in his explication of Maimonides' principles of faith: see his *Rosh Amanah*, ed. Menahem Kellner, Ramat-Gan 1993, ch. 3, p. 55; ch. 12, pp. 90-93. Equally categorical was Moses b. Joseph di Trani of sixteenth-century Safed: see his *Bet Elohim*, Jerusalem 1985, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, ch. 1, pp. 3-5.

<sup>17</sup> Moses b. Nahman, *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Charles B. Chavel, Jerusalem 1963, vol. 1, p. 171. See also his commentary on Gen. 46:1, Ex. 20:3. The *Book of the Pious (Sefer Hasidim)*, which is mainly attributed to Judah b. Samuel 'the Pious' of twelfth-century Regensburg, likewise advises readers to refrain from adjuring angels and exhorts them to pray only to God, although it does not refer specifically to a liturgical context. See *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Re'uven Margaliyot, Jerusalem 1957, §205, p. 194, but cf. *Ibid.*, §1157, pp. 573-574. On the other hand, given the impact of Hekhalot literature on the German pietists, the mild objection to intercessory prayer clearly does not reflect their full thinking on the subject of angels. In any case, a similarly critical stance was also expressed by Jacob Anatoli of thirteenth-century Provence, in his collection of sermons, *Mamad ha-Talmidim*, Lyck 1866, pericope Jethro, 67v-68r. Anatoli's words also appear in the responsa of Me'ir (Maharam) b. Barukh of thirteenth-century Rothenburg: *Responsa*, Berlin 1891, §5, pp. 325-326. A similar formulation also appears in the work of Yom Tov Lipmann Mülhausen of 14th-15th century

Zuckmentel of fifteenth-century Germany alludes to the problem of heresy in a casual aside. Concerning the recitation of the hymn “Angels of mercy” on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, he allegedly quipped: “All day we stood before God and now we come before the angels?”<sup>18</sup> Jacob ibn Habib of sixteenth-century Salonika states as axiomatic that intercessory prayer is prohibited, and admits that for this reason he found the Talmud’s dictum on the angels’ ignorance of Aramaic puzzling, as well as Rashi’s explanation thereof.<sup>19</sup>

Others address the theological problem by throwing up defenses of various sorts. Zedekiah b. Abraham Anau of thirteenth-century Rome insists that prayers like “Ushers of mercy” do not violate the injunction against comparing God to something created.<sup>20</sup> El‘azar b. Judah of Worms (ca. 1165-1230) notes the appearance of “Ushers of mercy” and similar prayers in the responsa of heads of the Babylonian academies, who obviously did not consider them heretical. Mostly, however, El‘azar adduces texts from talmudic-midrashic literature that uphold the notion of intercessory prayer. A famous example is the custom of visiting the graveyard to beseech the deceased to intercede on behalf of the living.<sup>21</sup> The *Kol Bo*, an anonymous legal

Prague. See his *Sefer Nizzahon*, §132, and also: Frank Talmage, “Angels, Anthems and Anathemas: Aspects of Popular Religion in Fourteenth-Century Bohemian Judaism,” *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, ed. Barry Walfish, Haifa 1992, vol. 2 [= *Jewish History*, 6], pp. 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph b. Moses, Zuckmentel’s younger contemporary and compatriot, who preserved this tradition in his manual, *Leqet Yosher*, infers from the survival of the anecdote that Zuckmentel’s critical remark was considered legitimate and that, therefore, the custom ought to be abandoned. See *Leqet Yosher*, ed. Jakob Freimann, Berlin 1903-1904, pt. I, §4, p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> *Ein Ya‘aqov* on BT *Shabbat* ad loc.

<sup>20</sup> Lit. “associating the name of Heaven with anything else”: see *Sukkah* 4:4, BT *Sukkah* 45b. Anau mentions that his teacher, Avigdor b. Elijah Katz, held the same position, on the basis of BT *Sanhedrin* 44b and Rashi’s interpretation thereof (see note 12, above), as well as other sources. Anau also states that according to his brother Benjamin, some prayers are in fact recited in Aramaic because there are angels who know Aramaic, including those “appointed [as supervisors] over the gates of prayer,” although not those who serve as one’s constant spiritual companions. See Zedekiah b. Abraham Anau, *Shibolei ha-Leqet ha-Shalem*, ed. Solomon Buber, Vilna 1887, §282, fol. 133r-v. See also the contemporary (anonymous) work, *Tanya*, Mantua 1514, §72.

<sup>21</sup> This custom is based on BT *Ta‘anit* 16a. It was also cited by Menahem Recanati of thirteenth-century Italy, *Perush al ha-Torah*, Venice 1523, pericope *Shelah*. On the other hand, Me’ir b. Simeon of thirteenth-century



compendium from fourteenth-century Germany, explains that “any thinking person” ought to understand that the angels are only to be exhorted to usher our supplications, but that these are addressed solely to God, in accordance with the text about not crying to Michael or Gabriel.<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, Israel Bruna of fifteenth-century Germany compares the role of angels to that of courtiers, whom petitioners often ask to mediate between themselves and their Sovereign as a mark of respect, although they have the right of direct petition.<sup>23</sup>

Reinterpretation was another tack. Thus, Judah b. Yaqar of twelfth-century France maintains that the expression “ushers of mercy” does not refer to angels at all, but rather to the generation’s most righteous Jews, upon whom it is incumbent to pray on behalf of their contemporaries.<sup>24</sup> This luminary also observes that strictly

Narbonne wondered whether beseeching the dead might also be heretical; see his *Milhemet Mizvah*, pt. 4, published in his *Sefer ha-Me’orot on Berakhot*, ed. Moses Judah Blau, New York 1964, pp. 181-182. Also, Abraham b. Solomon Treves Zarefati, a sixteenth-century cosmopolite, penned a polemical essay against Recanati’s formulation. Treves mentions his essay in a parenthetical note to Menahem b. Zerah’s *Zedah la-Derekh*, Ferrara 1554, essay 4, §4, ch. 5, fol. 208r, and it has survived in manuscript: JTS mic. 9134, fol. 41r-47v. El’azar’s responsum has recently been published twice from manuscript: Joseph Samuel Zachter, “A Responsum by the author of the *Rokeah* on the Recitation of ‘Ushers of Mercy’” (Hebrew), *Yeshurun* 3 (1997), pp. 41-46; Simhah Immanuel, “On the Recitation of the Liturgical Poem ‘Ushers of Mercy’” (Hebrew), *Ha-Ma’ayan* 38 (1997), pp. 7-10. Immanuel questions the attribution of this responsum to El’azar b. Judah of Worms, since it is signed simply “El’azar.”

<sup>22</sup> *Kol Bo*, Fjorda 1782, §10. See also Aaron ha-Kohen of Lunel, *Orhot Hayyim*, H. *Qeri’at Shema* §19, Jerusalem 1956, p. 27. This is also the position of Avigdor Kara of fifteenth-century Prague: see Talmage (above, n. 17), pp. 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> *Responsa*, Saloniki 1798, §274. This view was also expressed by Isaac b. Jacob Yozbel Segal of sixteenth-century Venice, about whom more below.

<sup>24</sup> *Perush ha-Tefillot voha-Berakhot*, ed. Samuel Yerushalmi, Jerusalem 1979, p. 73. This text, too, was already noted by Zunz, loc. cit. (above, n. 1). Judah b. Yaqar’s interpretation also appears elsewhere. See Me’ir b. Simeon, *Milhemet Mizvah* (above, note 21), pp. 181-182; Johanan Treves, *Qimhah de-Avishuna*, printed in the margins of *Mahzor kefi minhag K”K Roma*, Bologna 1540-1541, pt. 2, pp. 14-15. The source for this notion may be BT *Nedarim* 20a-b or *Qiddushin* 72a, where the “Ministering Angels” are equated with the Sages. See Judith Z. Abrams, “The Reflexive Relationship of Mal’achei HaSharet and the Sages,” *CCAR Journal* 42 (1995), pp. 26-29. Note that according to Judah b.

speaking the talmudic text says that the angels do not “recognize” (*makkirin*) Aramaic, rather than “know” or “understand” it. He concludes that the angels understand Aramaic prayers, but ignore them; a preference for the Holy Tongue was the putative reason for their disdain.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Aaron ha-Kohen and Menahem ha-Me’iri, both of fourteenth-century Provence, turn the problem of Aramaic on its head and explain that it is not the angels, but rather the supplicants, who do not understand Aramaic; supplication in Aramaic was therefore prohibited because most people are incapable of praying with the proper concentration.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages, then, intellectual leaders grappled with the proscription of supplication in Aramaic and, more generally, with the legitimacy of intercessory prayer. The durability and ubiquity of the problem indicate that “Ushers of mercy” continued to be recited. Although Johanan Treves of sixteenth-century Rome writes that, on account of its heretical implications, the petitionary poem, “Angels on high” (*Mal’achei meroma*), is no longer recited “in most places,” his is the only evidence that pressure was being exerted to curtail the custom.<sup>27</sup> Other authorities describe the practice as deeply

Samuel ‘the Pious,’ “Ushers of mercy” is intended to sway the angels to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people precisely because the righteous refrain from doing so, for they consider themselves unworthy. See Daniel Abrams and Israel Ta-Shema, *Sefer Gematriot of R. Judah the Pious* (Hebrew), Los Angeles 1998, p. 17. Cf. the view of *Sefer Hasidim* in note 17, above.

<sup>25</sup> Judah b. Yaqar, *Perush ha-Tefillot ve-ha-Berakhot*, p. 20; Abraham b. David of Posquières, *Temim De’im*, Lwow 1812, §184, fol. 20r. See, similarly, Jonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel’s commentary on BT *Berakhot*, ch. 2; Jonah Gerundi on Alfasi, *Berakhot*, ch. 2, fol. 7r, s.v. *Aval be-yahid*. For the notion that the angels understand Aramaic but find it disagreeable, see also: *Zohar, Sitrei Torah*, pt. 1, fol. 89r (cited by Moses Isserles, *Darkhei Moshe* on *Arba’ah Turim, Orah Hayyim*, §101); Me’ir b. Simeon, *Sefer Ha-Me’orot* on *Berakhot*, p. 183; Joseph Karo, *Bet Yosef* on *Arba’ah Turim*, ad loc., where the idea is attributed to Asher b. Yehiel; Jacob ibn Habib, loc. cit. (above, n. 19).

<sup>26</sup> Aaron ha-Kohen of Lunel, *Orhot Hayyim* (above, note 22); Menahem ha-Me’iri, *Bet ha-Behirah* on *Shabbat*, ed. Isaak S. Lange, Jerusalem 1968, p. 52. The same sentiment appears in the *Kol Bo*, §10. This was of course the opposite of the tenth-century situation, as described by Sherira and his correspondents. The problem of praying in a tongue one does not understand has implications for other liturgical and ritual acts, as well: see, for example, Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, *Tosafot Yom Tov* on *Sotah* 7:1.

<sup>27</sup> Above, note 24.

engrained and impossible to uproot. Avigdor Kara of fifteenth-century Prague testifies that intercessory prayer “is spreading everywhere” ([*ha-]mitpashet be-khol ha-gelilot*) and admits that he feels compelled to legitimize such prayers because they are “an accomplished fact.”<sup>28</sup>

The sense that “Ushers of mercy” and its like were too deeply entrenched in the liturgy to be dislodged stimulates Judah Loew of sixteenth-century Prague, the famed Maharal, to craft a characteristically creative response to the ideological challenge. He acknowledges that prayers of this type had been part of the liturgy for centuries, and therefore proposes a simple emendation of the text, such that instead of the hortatory “usher in our mercy,” one prays, wishfully, in the future tense: “May the ushers of mercy usher in our mercies.”<sup>29</sup> The tide of custom was, however, against Maharal, and his initiative was ineffectual.

### The Trieste Controversy

Lampronti’s *PY* actually contains two entries entitled: “Let one not petition for his needs in Aramaic.” The first offers a very meager list of talmudic and medieval sources, including the unresolved question of the Tosafists. Lampronti interjects that he<sup>30</sup> fails to see a problem,

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<sup>28</sup> Lit. “since the matter has gone forth, it has gone forth rightfully” (*ho’il ve-yazah ha-davar, be-heter yazah*). Kara’s letter is in Ms. Oxford-Bodley Opp. 525, fol. 63r-66v, and the two phrases are on fol. 64r; cf. Talmage (above, n. 17), p. 16. Kara rationalizes the prayers as self-exhortations, which the supplicant utters while continuing to address the Divinity. Regarding the reservations expressed by both Mülhausen and Kara to intercessory prayer, Talmage emphasizes the impact of Maimonidean influence on Bohemian Jewry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This perspective is applicable, too, to the attack on “Ushers of mercy” in the diatribe against kabbalah by Moses Ashkenazi of Candia in 1466: see Efraim Gottlieb, “Vikuah ha-Gilgul be-Kandia ba-me’ah ha-15,” *Studies in the Kabbala Literature* (Hebrew), ed. Joseph Hacker, Tel Aviv 1976, p. 385.

<sup>29</sup> Lit. *Yakhnissu rahamenu*. See *Netivot ‘Olam*, ed. Hayyim Pardes, Tel Aviv 1982, vol. 1, “*Netiv ‘Avodah*,” ch. 12, pp. 279-280. Maharal also suggests that the prayer may, in fact, not be hortatory at all, but rather a command by the supplicant for the angels to perform their duty of ushering prayer.

<sup>30</sup> Lit. “I, the young author,” an expression which typically introduces Lampronti’s own view of the subject under discussion. See *PY*: vol. 1, Venice 1750, fol. 9v, s.v. *Avelut be-Purim*; vol. 2, Venice 1753, fol. 86v, s.v. *Dagim ve-Simanam*; vol. 12, fol. 119v, s.v. *Ro’eh Dam Mehamat Tashmish*.

for the angels only know what God allows them to know.<sup>31</sup> However, the next entry presents the views of those who did not fail to see a problem, although the focus is on the angels' intercession, rather than on their knowledge of Aramaic.

The *PY* presents six texts. The first two are a polemical thrust and apologetical parry, the former in opposition to intercessory prayer and the latter in its defense. These are followed by the responsum of Shabbatai Elhanan Recanati of Ferrara, who rules against the elimination of "Ushers of mercy."<sup>32</sup> The fourth and fifth documents are another exchange between the principal antagonists. A responsum by Samson Morpurgo of Ancona concludes the series, perhaps especially because Morpurgo, like Recanati, decides in favor of intercessory prayer. A second letter by Morpurgo on the subject appears elsewhere in the *PY*, and both were also printed in Morpurgo's collected responsa.<sup>33</sup>

The conflict can be dated to 1727, the year of Recanati's missive and Morpurgo's first epistle.<sup>34</sup> Morpurgo informs us that the debate

<sup>31</sup> The entry concludes with a few references to biblical and more recent sources. Particularly noteworthy are the references to the *Zohar* (1:101v) and to Isaiah Horowitz's *Shnei Luhot ha-Berit* (Amsterdam 1649, vol. 1, fol. 40v), which indicate that Lampronti was receptive to kabbalistic works, although his attitude towards kabbalah awaits careful scrutiny. This is relevant to the controversy, as we shall see.

<sup>32</sup> The critic claims that his adversary had traveled to Ferrara in search of confederates, but had only succeeded in enlisting Recanati, and even the latter had acted in defense of custom, rather than out of support for intercessory prayer. The critic also claims that although he had given his counterpart a copy of his essay, the latter had failed to reciprocate, and that only by chance did he obtain a copy of his adversary's response. The apologist replies that he concealed his text because he knew that his opponent was obstinate, and despaired of changing his mind: see fol. 51r, 54v.

<sup>33</sup> *Shemesh Zedakah*, Venice 1743, §23-24, fol. 30r-31r. For Morpurgo's second letter, see also the *PY*, vol. 6, Livorno 1840, fol. 136v-137r, s.v. *Minhag u-Qezat Dinav*.

<sup>34</sup> Recanati's letter is dated the eve of Yom Kippur [5]488, i.e. September 13, 1727. In the printed edition of the *PY*, at the conclusion of Morpurgo's epistle, the letters *taw*, *bet* and *pe* are enlarged, and their numerical value equals 482, corresponding to the year 1722; however, in the autograph manuscript the letter *waw* is also enlarged, adding six more years and thus matching the year stated in Recanati's text: see Ms. Paris-Bibliothèque Nationale Hébr. 548, fol. 164r. At the end of Morpurgo's second missive, the letters *lamed*, *het*, *yod*, *taw*, *nun* and *waw* are enlarged, and their numerical value indicates the year 504,

was conducted between two residents of Trieste.<sup>35</sup> From some of the documents it emerges that a new rabbinic leader had settled in Trieste, who disapproved of intercessory prayer but waited several years before taking action. When he did attempt to eliminate this practice, the congregants heeded his wishes, but only in his presence. A critique of the custom, composed by a student of the new rabbi, triggered a response by another young scholar, who held the opposite view.<sup>36</sup>

The social context that underlay the cultural conflict is, of course, of the greatest importance for understanding the concerns and considerations that motivated the antagonists and their supporters. Unfortunately, no light can be shed on this aspect of the affair, because virtually nothing is known of the Triestine Jewish community in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Acknowledging, therefore, that a full grasp of the controversy lies beyond reach, analysis must be limited to the case itself. The task shall be to identify the claims made by the parties to the conflict, and to compare and contrast their views with those articulated in earlier sources, in order to highlight the significant features of the struggle in Trieste.

corresponding to 1744. However this date cannot be right, for Morpurgo died in 1740, and we may therefore conjecture that originally the letters *yod* and *waw* were *not* enlarged, which would render the year 488, as in the other two responsa. This problem was noted by Wilensky, but not solved: see M. Wilensky, "On the Rabbis of Ancona" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 25 (1949), p. 71, n. 11.

<sup>35</sup> This information appears in the prologue to Morpurgo's first letter, but Lampronti omitted it from the *PY*. The names of the protagonists are not known, although Sprecher noted that the documents mention the names Benjamin (fol. 36v), David (fol. 49r) and Ephraim (fol. 52v): see Sprecher, p. 720, n. 64, 66. From context it would appear that Ephraim or Benjamin is the name of the critic and David is the apologist. Incidentally, Morpurgo mentions (fol. 57r) that he did not know the critic's name.

<sup>36</sup> The critic insists, in his first text, that importance ought to be attributed to his message, rather than his identity, which may mean that his social status was not very high.

<sup>37</sup> See: Riccardo Curiel, "Le origini del ghetto di Trieste," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 6 (1931-1932), pp. 446-472; Idem, "Gli ebrei di Trieste nel secolo XVIII," *Ibid.* 12 (1938), pp. 241-243; Gemma Volli, "La nazione ebrea a Trieste," *Ibid.* 24 (1958), pp. 206-214; Paolo S. Colbi, "Note di storia ebraica a Trieste nei secoli XVIII e XIX," *Ibid.* 36 (1970), pp. 59-73; Idem, "The Golden Age of Hebrew Literature in the City of Trieste" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 8 (1978), pp. 70-79; G. Cervani and L. Buda, *La comunità israelitica di Trieste nel sec. XVIII*, Udine 1973, pp. 42-43.

Turning, therefore, to the substance of the published documents, the opening salvo commences with a public outcry against intercessory prayer. Without naming names, the polemicist indicts all those rabbinic leaders who have allowed congregations to recite “Ushers of mercy,” “Angels of mercy,” and the like. He does, however, single out two literary opponents: Isaac b. Jacob Yozbel Segal of Venice, author of *Hadrat Qodesh*, a commentary on the liturgy, and Gedaliah b. Solomon Lifshitz of Poland, author of *‘Ez Shatul*, a commentary on Joseph Albo’s *‘Ikkarim*. Naming these authors was hardly an indiscretion, for Segal and Lifshitz lived in the sixteenth century and their works were printed fairly promptly: *Hadrat Qodesh* in 1568 and *‘Ez Shatul* in 1618 (both in Venice).

The initial manifesto against “Ushers of mercy” is followed by a point-by-point refutation of Segal’s defense of intercessory prayer. The latter is introduced by the ringing generalization that “these doubts are the opposite of the absolute reasoning (*ha-sevara ha-muhletet*) and axioms (*u-muskalot rishonot*),” which is then followed by nine arguments: (1) The use of an intermediary enhances a monarch’s glory and grandeur; paradoxically, the more the intermediaries, the stronger the belief in God’s exclusive sovereignty. (2) The appeal for intercession expresses the Lord’s greatness, because it conveys the supplicant’s awareness that he is unworthy to approach God directly. (3) One who prays thus cannot be accused of idolatry,<sup>38</sup> for in beseeching the angels to usher his prayer before God, one expresses belief in the absolute sovereignty of the Divine. (4) Intercessory prayer cannot be compared to cases of genuflection to angels, which is a mark of respect towards the angel per se. (5) The text from the Palestinian Talmud which prohibits crying to Michael or Gabriel cannot be adduced as proof against intercessory prayer, since it has never carried sufficient weight to move scholars to proscribe the latter. (6) Marks of respect towards intermediaries and servants also enhance the dignity of the monarch. Here Segal appears to withdraw his objection to genuflection, and this is evident from his next point: (7) As a rule, he summarizes, God scrutinizes one’s intention (*Rahmana liba ba’ei*), for in genuflecting to the angel (Jos. 5:14), Joshua intended to pay homage to the servant as a mark of respect

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<sup>38</sup> Lit. “the error of the generation of Enosh” (*ta’ut dor Enosh*), which in talmudic-midrashic literature was considered idolatrous, based on the traditional interpretation of Gen. 4:26. See Rashi ad loc., BT *Shabbat* 118b, Gen. R. 4:6 and elsewhere.

towards his Master, which is certainly true for the latter-day supplicant. (8) God expressed satisfaction with this view of genuflection when he told Moses, in the Golden Calf incident: “Now let me be, that my anger may blaze forth” etc. (Ex. 32:10).<sup>39</sup> (9) Neither experience nor reason have indicated that expressions of respect towards intermediaries and requests for their mediation loosen the reins of human devotion to God.<sup>40</sup>

The critic responds to Segal’s opening reference to “axioms” with a great deal of bluster and indignation, and with a quotation from Maimonides’ fifth principle of faith, with its condemnation of intercessory prayer. He then provides a Hebrew translation of the statement, from *Theologia Judaica*,<sup>41</sup> by Joannes a Lent, a seventeenth-century Christian Hebraist, that the God of Israel is not too proud to accept the prayer of his people, such that they would find it necessary to pray to intermediaries for its acceptance. Similarly, he cites the words of Menasseh ben Israel of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, who wrote that God has no need for the strategem of human rulers, who strive to instill awe in their subjects by not deigning to accept petitions directly.<sup>42</sup> In refutation of Segal’s claim that intercessory prayer is not idolatrous, the polemicist maintains that the notion of intermediaries was central to the polytheism and idolatry of ancient Greece. The idolators of yore, he explains, believed in the supreme dominion of Jove, but erected a hierarchy of lesser divinities, because they felt that the distance separating Creator from creature is unbridgeable.

Beyond emphasizing the abundance of biblical verses about direct petition and the absence of prooftexts to the contrary, the author attacks the notion of intercession on the grounds that it should not end

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<sup>39</sup> In *Tanhuma* ad loc. (pericope *Ki Tissa* §22), God utters this phrase immediately after complaining that the Israelites have genuflected to the golden calf. However, midrashic sources (and Rashi ad loc.) interpret this verse as an invitation to Moses to pray on behalf of the Israelites. Thus, perhaps Segal means that God expressed here a liberal attitude towards the genuflection to intermediaries.

<sup>40</sup> *Mahzor ke-minhag K.K. Ashkenazim*, Venice 1599, pt. 1, fol. 87r. The critic writes that Lifshitz (pt. 2, ch. 28) holds the same position as Segal, but neither recapitulates nor refutes it (fol. 40v).

<sup>41</sup> Sic. The full title of this work is: *Emunah shel Yehudim Aharonim seu de moderna Theologia Judaica*, Herborn 1694. See p. 282 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Menasseh ben Israel, *The Conciliator of R. Manasseh Ben Israel*, 1-2, London 1842, vol. 1, Que. 102, pp. 162-163.

at angelical intercession: by rights one ought to pray to the deceased for intercession. As we have seen, a number of medieval authors held this point of view, but the polemicist argues that the dead are oblivious to the concerns of this world, and are therefore incapable of intercession.

Prayers for angelical intercession, the writer observes, are not found in Sephardic or Italiani prayer books, nor in those of the Jews of the Ottoman empire and north Africa; German and Polish Jewry are the only centers to have incorporated them into their liturgy, and moreover, this practice is a relatively recent innovation, dating back a mere three hundred years. He goes on to express amazement that Ashkenazic Jews should transgress the biblical sin of adhering to “the laws of the gentiles” (*hukkot ha-goyyim*), for they initiated the custom of eating before dawn on the morning preceding Rosh Hashana precisely so as to avoid this very offense.<sup>43</sup> How, he asks, could they, whose punctilious behavior is known to all, be so careless with their words as to echo the Christian petitionary prayer: “Omnes sancti Angeli et Arcangeli orate pro nobis” (“All the holy angels and archangels – pray for us”)?<sup>44</sup>

The response to the attack on “Ushers of mercy,” entitled *Agudat Ezov* (“A Bunch of Hyssop”),<sup>45</sup> consists of two sections. First, *Agudat Ezov* (as its author might well have been labelled in rabbinic parlance) offers brief, often caustic, rejoinders to the formulations of his adversary. These jibes are not entirely free of personal invective and contribute little of substance to the debate.<sup>46</sup> Yet in this section the

<sup>43</sup> He cites *Minhagei Maharil*, in which the custom is indeed cited, in the laws of the High Holy Days, although it is referred to as a custom of “youths and maidens” (*ne'arim u-vetulot*) and no mention is made of “the ways of the gentiles.”

<sup>44</sup> The Latin text is from the “Invocation Sanctorum” section of the “Litaniae Sanctorum.” I have used Lampronti’s autograph copy of the *PY* to correct the printed text, which reads: “Omnes sancti Arjeli et Arearajeli orosi pro iis dis” (21v). See Ms. Paris-Bibliothèque Nationale Hébr 548, fol. 133r.

<sup>45</sup> The title reflects the writer’s purpose. It alludes to the biblical commandment to use a bunch of hyssop in order to purify a person tainted with impurity (Num. 19:18). Thus it symbolizes the author’s intention to purge his adversary of his incorrect views. The symbolism is made fairly plain in *Agudat Ezov*, at the bottom of fol. 48v.

<sup>46</sup> Incidentally, in his preamble he states plainly that his words are only directed towards the critic, rather than towards “the Rabbi,” to whom he refers as his own teacher (fol. 37r).



author also expands the scope of the discussion, by introducing broader issues, particularly the age-old conflict over the legitimacy of “Greek wisdom” (fol. 37v). Responding to the charge that intercessory prayer violates Maimonides’ fifth principle of faith, *Agudat Ezov* condemns Aristotelian philosophy and science. Quoting Menasseh ben Israel, he characterizes Maimonides as having denigrated prophecy by maintaining that the insights revealed to the prophets could be attained through rational enquiry. He piles on examples of biblical incidents which Maimonides interpreted as imagined, rather than prophesied, and cites Hasdai Crescas’ critique of this position.<sup>47</sup> Then, in an abrupt reversal, *Agudat Ezov* voices doubt that Maimonides could have authored such unorthodox views, and quotes the well-known tradition that Maimonides was ultimately initiated into the mysteries of kabbalah and consequently rejected much of his earlier writing.<sup>48</sup> He then argues that “Ushers of mercy” does not really contravene Maimonides’ fifth principle, since the petitioner does not attribute power to angels, but rather beseeches them to usher his prayer before the Omnipotent. Similarly, *Agudat Ezov* affirms Segal’s view that intercessory prayer is not tantamount to the worship of intermediaries, since it does not constitute “worship.”

The importance of fidelity to custom is a second broad issue to which *Agudat Ezov* links the problem of intercessory prayer. Injecting a measure of ethnic pride, he trumpets the reputation of “the sons of Ashkenaz [i.e. Germany] and Poland” for wisdom and orthodoxy, and takes umbrage at the suggestion that the controversial prayers are marginal and hence of questionable legitimacy because they are only recited by these ethnic groups.<sup>49</sup> *Agudat Ezov* proceeds to defend the

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<sup>47</sup> This formulation is quoted from Menasseh ben Israel’s *Nishmat Hayyim*, Amsterdam 1651, pt. 3, ch. 12, fol. 140v (Although there is an error in the pagination of *Nishmat Hayyim*, and the page number should read 114, not 140, Lampronti’s reference is technically correct). *Agudat Ezov* cites the *Guide*, II, 42 and Crescas’ critique ad loc.

<sup>48</sup> Gershom Scholem, “From Scholar to Kabbalist” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 6 (1935), pp. 90-98; Michael A. Shmidman, “On Maimonides’ ‘Conversion’ to Kabbalah,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* 2, Cambridge Mass. 1984, pp. 375-386; Moshe Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky, Cambridge Mass. 1990, pp. 31-81.

<sup>49</sup> *Agudat Ezov* attaches the Ashkenazic Jews of Italy to the category of German-Polish Jewry which he extolls, and specifically names the Ashkenazic community of Ferrara, which he labels “a large city of scholars and kabbalists” (*‘ir gedolah shel hakhamim u-mequbbalim*). Apparently *Agudat Ezov* or his

concept of liturgical diversity, which stems, he affirms, from the myth that each of the twelve Israelite tribes has its own window to heaven, over which a particular angel presides.<sup>50</sup>

In the second part of *Agudat Ezov*, short, staccato bursts of polemic and apologetic give way to a chapter-length review of talmudic and midrashic sources, as well as exegetical, halakhic and mystical texts from the Middle Ages, with the intention of demonstrating the antiquity of intercessory prayer. Prominent in this torrent of erudition is the notion that angelical intercession is particularly salutary for Diaspora Jewry, because outside the Holy Land the *Sefirah* of Judgment (*Din*) prevails over that of Mercy and interposes obstacles between the supplicant and God.<sup>51</sup>

*Agudat Ezov* also devotes a chapter to the legitimacy of invoking the intercession of the dead, which his mentor had called into question because of the biblical prohibition of necromancy (Dt. 18:11). Again *Agudat Ezov* offers a mass of references to “the pillars of the world” (fol. 48r), namely classical and medieval authorities, to document the orthodoxy of this custom. In refutation of his adversary’s contention, the author strives to demonstrate that the souls of the deceased are aware of the activities and predicaments of the living.<sup>52</sup> He observes, for example, that it would make no sense for the dying to express burial wishes if indeed “the dead know nothing” (Eccl. 9:5). *Agudat Ezov* also distinguishes intercessory prayer from necromancy, which he defines as the adjuration of the dead for the purpose of acquiring information.

adversary enjoyed some sort of relationship with the Ferrara community, but no details are known, apart from the fact that Lampronti and Recanati lived in Ferrara.

<sup>50</sup> *Agudat Ezov* cites Aaron Berechia Modena’s *Ma’avar Yaboq*, “*Sifte Zedek*,” ch. 31. Cf. Dt. R. 2:20, according to which the angels seal the windows of heaven to block the prayer of the wicked King Menasseh b. Hezekiah, but God digs beneath the heavenly throne to receive it.

<sup>51</sup> Fol. 44r-v, 45v-46r. The roots of this idea are located in the *Zohar*, vol. 3, fol. 225v. For the notion that there are innumerable celestial servants who seek to obstruct human prayer, *Agudat Ezov* also cites a text from the *Zohar*, vol. 2, fol. 248v and Menahem ‘Azariah da Fano, ‘*Asarah Ma’amarot*, Venice [1597], fol. 104. See Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein, Oxford 1989, vol. 3, pp. 956-957, 959.

<sup>52</sup> He relies heavily on Menasseh ben Israel’s *Nishmat Hayyim*, which labored to prove that the soul continues to exist after death.

Following the exchange of critique and defense, the *PY* publishes the opinion of Shabbatai Elhanan Recanati of Ferrara.<sup>53</sup> Recanati weighs in with a resounding, multifaceted defense of intercessory prayer. The custom, he holds, has ancient roots, and furthermore, the Babylonian Talmud is later and therefore more authoritative than the Palestinian Talmud, which prohibits crying to Michael or Gabriel. Recanati particularly objects to the attack on custom, especially one that is widespread, ancient, and solidly grounded in Zoharic and halakhic literature. He cites unimpeachable sources that express approbation of the notion that one may beg the dead for intercession, from which the legitimacy of intercessory prayer to angels is implicit.<sup>54</sup> Recanati concludes by dismissing the charge that a disciple may not take issue with his teacher, citing several precedents.<sup>55</sup>

The rivals studied each other's tracts and embarked upon a second round of challenge and response. The critic challenges the sanctity of custom. He laments the popular tendency to defend any and all customs, including *kapparot*, the penitential slaughter of a rooster on the eve of Yom Kippur, which he labels "a custom of folly" (*minhag shetut*), that ought to be suppressed.<sup>56</sup> The polemicist also revisits the themes of genuflection and "the laws of the gentiles," arguing that since genuflection was banned in order to shun "the laws of the gentiles" even though it is abundantly attested in the Bible, *a fortiori*

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<sup>53</sup> Recanati wrote his responsum in reply to a query, which appears to have been circulated among several scholars, since it is addressed to addressees, in the plural. The query is not signed, but appears to have been written by a third party.

<sup>54</sup> *Shulhan 'Arukh, Orach Hayyim* §579; *Zohar* pt. 3, fol. 70r-71v.

<sup>55</sup> This was a very broad issue, from which the critic sought to draw strength, just as his adversary sought to "plug in" to the argument that custom enjoys an almost sacred status.

<sup>56</sup> No less an authority than Joseph Karo had already recommended that *kapparot* be suppressed, because it constitutes "the ways of the Amorites": *Shulhan 'Arukh, Orach Hayyim* §605:1. On *kapparot*, see: Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "The Ritual for the Kapparot-Ceremony," *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, ed. Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx, New York 1935, pp. 413-422; Idem, "*Tashlik*, A Study in Jewish Ceremonies," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 11 (1936), pp. 262-282, 312-313; Daniel Sperber, *The Customs of Israel* (Hebrew), 1-6, Jerusalem 1989-1998, vol. 1, pp. 33-34; vol. 2, pp. 84-86.

prayer to angels, which has no biblical foundation, ought also to be proscribed.<sup>57</sup>

The issue of whether or not one ought to don the *tefillin* on the intermediate days of festivals also serves the purpose of this writer. *Agudat Ezov* had drawn heavily from the *Zohar* in defense of the German-Jewish tradition of intercessory prayer. The critic voices disdain for the supreme authority attributed by his antagonist to the *Zohar*, but now uses it to his advantage, since while Ashkenazic tradition required that the *tefillin* be worn on intermediate days, the *Zohar* forbade this. Which, needles the author, should an Ashkenazic devotee of the *Zohar* follow – Ashkenazic tradition or the *Zohar*?<sup>58</sup>

The writer also takes aim at his adversary's use of the legitimacy of ethnic diversity as an argument in defense of intercessory prayer; the issue, he insists, is the appeal to intermediaries, about which reservations were expressed in Germany, too. In a surprising move, the critic concedes that intercessory prayer is not the sole prerogative of the Jews of Germany and Poland; he has discovered a penitential poem from the Italiani liturgy, recited in the final moments of Yom Kippur, in which the supplicant pleads with "those beloved of the Lord, guardians of the gates of the glorious palaces" to hear the voices of God's loyal servants and open the gates of heaven at this the eleventh hour.<sup>59</sup> He adds, however, that many Italiani Jews have told him that these verses ought to be skipped, as was in any case recommended by Johanan Treves.<sup>60</sup>

In reply, the apologist focuses on the relative merits of philosophy and kabbalah. He lambasts his opponent for basing his position

<sup>57</sup> He cites Issachar Baer Eilenburg of seventeenth-century Gorizia's *Be'er Sheva*, Frankfurt a.M. 1608/9, §74, fol. 89v. *Agudat Ezov* responds that Eilenburg discussed the gesture of praying with one's hands pressed together, rather than genuflection.

<sup>58</sup> *Agudat Ezov* later (fol. 56r) comes back with the well-known policy of following the Talmud whenever it contradicts the *Zohar*. On the *tefillin* controversy, see the *PY*, vol. 14, Berlin 1887, fol. 99v-114v, s.v. *Tefillin beholo shel Mo'ed*. See also Jacob Katz, "Tefillin on *Hol ha-Mo'ed*: Differences of Opinion and Public Controversies of Kabbalistic Origin" (Hebrew), *Proceedings of the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 191-213 [= *Halakhah and Kabbalah* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1984, pp. 102-124].

<sup>59</sup> *Yedidei El shomrei sha'arei zevul armonim*. This poem is not listed in Israel Davidson's *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, 1-4, New York 1933.

<sup>60</sup> See above, n. 24.

entirely on “the method of investigation and reason, for such is the way of the philosophers: [they] believe only in what rational analogy requires... They became intoxicated by the pride of the Greeks and swayed by their arrogance, [as a result of which] they distort the Law... and scorn the wisdom of the true tradition [*ha-qabbalah ha’amitit*] etc.”<sup>61</sup> This tirade dovetails with the outrage *Agudat Ezov* expresses over his rival’s attack on *kapparot*. Countering with his own litany of halakhic sources, including the Talmud, he asks: Why stop there, and not ridicule the custom of eating the head of a ram on Rosh Hashana, or other customs, which are likewise grounded in the Talmud? Apparently *Agudat Ezov* felt that the image of intercessory prayer and *kapparot* as irrational underlay the scorn heaped upon them by his opponent. A bit later he cites a text by Asher b. Yehiel on the superiority to philosophy of Torah, which originates in Revelation and is therefore not bound by natural law. Follow the example of Maimonides, urges *Agudat Ezov*, and replace philosophy with kabbalah!

The final document in the *PY* is Samson Morpurgo’s decision. Morpurgo reproves the critic for his ill-considered critique of *kapparot*, which he notes was practiced by an impressive string of medieval Ashkenazic authorities. He recounts having heard from his teacher, Samuel Aboab of Venice, that the statement in Joseph Karo’s *Shulhan ‘Arukh* to the effect that *kapparot* is a “custom of folly” was authored by typesetters, rather than by Karo himself.<sup>62</sup> If, however, the polemicist knows this, and used this expression merely for rhetorical effect, Morpurgo simply advises him to exercise greater caution and discipline in the future.

As for intercessory prayer, Morpurgo feels that the legitimacy and authority of custom must carry the day. The idolatry of ancient times, he explains, has been eradicated, and there is really no danger that the average Jew will confuse the angels with God. He concludes that

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<sup>61</sup> Fol. 52v. *Agudat Ezov* repeats his anti-Maimonidean position, including the complaint that according to Maimonides, various prophetic visions recorded in the Bible were products of the imagination.

<sup>62</sup> The formulation appeared in the first edition of the *Shulhan ‘Arukh* (Venice 1565), in the heading of *Orah Hayyim* §605, but it is not to be found in standard printed editions. Neither Morpurgo nor Aboab was the source of this idea: see Me’ir Benayahu, “Why and for Whom Did *Maran* Compose the *Shulhan ‘Arukh*?” (Hebrew), *Asufot* 3 (1989), p. 266. See also Sperber, *The Customs of Israel*, vol. 2, p. 84.

supporters of intercessory prayer can cling to their tradition, and their opponents must bow to the will of the majority.<sup>63</sup> Morpurgo acknowledges that the arguments martialled by the polemicist were as numerous and weighty as those of his rival, but he dismisses them as derived from foreign sources, namely natural science and rational theology, rather than from “the true tradition” (*ha-qabbalah ha’amittit*), which lies beyond reason.<sup>64</sup>

Morpurgo penned a second letter on intercessory prayer, or rather on the abrogation of customs, including “Ushers of mercy.”<sup>65</sup> Assuming a very conservative stance, he champions with passion and eloquence the sanctity of even the most bizarre customs. As an example, Morpurgo cites the respect that Issachar Baer Eilenburg shows the *kapparot* ritual in his discussion of its problematic nature.<sup>66</sup> He also discusses the practice of genuflection during the Yom Kippur service, and narrates the following anecdote. In the Ashkenazic synagogue of Padua it was customary for the cantor alone to genuflect during the confessional prayer of Yom Kippur, but in 1700 the rabbi, Isaac Vita Cantarini, promulgated a ruling that henceforth the entire congregation, too, must genuflect with the cantor. Worried that this might constitute “the laws of the gentiles,” Morpurgo consulted the rabbis Solomon Nizza of Venice and Mordecai Bassan of Verona, who dismissed his concern, citing the Talmud’s rule that every locale should adhere to its own custom.<sup>67</sup> Morpurgo concludes from this incident that, contrary to the view of the critic, genuflection was not abrogated out of concern for “the laws of the gentiles,” but rather for other reasons.

Turning to “Ushers of mercy,” Morpurgo corrects the claim, apparently aired by his interlocutor, that this prayer had been abrogated by Hefez Gentili, the rabbi of neighboring Gorizia. Morpurgo recollects that Gentili merely altered the text so as to read:

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<sup>63</sup> It is not clear whether this expression refers to a majority of the Trieste constituency, or to a majority of German-Jewish halakhic authorities.

<sup>64</sup> As above, “the true tradition” appears to refer to kabbalah, towards which Morpurgo held a lukewarm, if respectful, attitude. On Morpurgo’s attitude towards philosophy, kabbalah and science, see David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 213-228.

<sup>65</sup> See above, n. 33.

<sup>66</sup> *Be’er Sheva*, §53, fol. 86r.

<sup>67</sup> Lit. “every river has its own course” (*nehara nehara u-fashteh*): see BT *Hullin* 18b.

“May our prayers enter...” (*Yikanesu tefillotenu*), and that he sang the tune so as to conceal the new formulation from the congregants.<sup>68</sup> Morpurgo refers to a certain Rabbi Marini, and writes that he is not swayed by his indifference to the disappearance of the intercessory prayers, because Marini is an Italian; Ashkenazic Jews, he asserts, ought to respect the tradition of their ancestors.<sup>69</sup>

A note of caution and humility caps Morpurgo’s second responsum: “Whenever I studied metaphysics, I knew that I did not know.”<sup>70</sup> Apart from this, I saw with a discerning eye that anyone who acquires knowledge of God according to the roots of the traditional wisdom adds pain.”<sup>71</sup> The expression “traditional wisdom” (*ha-hokmah ha-mequbbelet*) typically refers to kabbalah, the mystical counterpart of metaphysics. As David Ruderman has shown, Morpurgo was an experimentalist rather than a theoretician, which explains his diffident stance vis-à-vis both philosophy and kabbalah. Perhaps this is why in this letter, rather than expatiate upon the relative merits of these disciplines, Morpurgo underlined his traditionalism.

### Echoes and Adumbrations

Most entries in the *PY* include a generous string of citations of sources, and thus the appearance of a mere handful of sources in the entry on intercessory prayer might lead one to conclude that this was a new issue. The preceding review of the medieval literature makes it abundantly clear that the eighteenth-century controversialists echo themes and arguments articulated as much as six hundred years earlier. For example, in support of intercessory prayer, El‘azar of Worms had invoked the tradition of graveyard visitation, and Israel of Bruna had suggested that addressing angels is a mark of respect

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<sup>68</sup> This rabbi’s behavior is clearly modeled on the course of action mandated by Judah Loew of Prague. See above, n. 29.

<sup>69</sup> The reference is probably to Sabbatai b. Isaac Marini of Padua (d. 1748). This is the first mention of Marini in connection with intercessory prayer, and what role, if any, he played in the Trieste conflict is unknown. See Mordecai Samuel Ghironi, *History of the Great Men of Israel* (Hebrew), Trieste 1853, pp. 342, 344, §51.

<sup>70</sup> Similarly, writing about resurrection, Aviad Sar Shalom Basilea of Mantua writes: “As a rule, I am not embarrassed on matters of this nature to say: ‘I do not know...’” See the *PY*, vol. 14, Berlin 1887, fol. 28r, s.v. *Tehiyyat ha-Metim*.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Eccl. 1:18.

towards the true Sovereign. The scholars of Trieste elaborated these and other medieval ideas, but clearly their controversy was merely the latest stage in a conversation that had been proceeding for centuries, among thinkers of various stripes, operating in diverse disciplines.

Recognizing the hoary roots of the discussion throws into relief the novel features of its Trieste stage. The sheer volume of writing on the subject was unprecedented. Medieval authors rarely addressed the matter in more than a few sentences, and absolutely no one tackled it on such a grand scale. Nor was the scale of the *PY* writings a function of their late date, for although they quote and cite the basic classical texts, polemicist and apologist do not present litanies of precedents, but rather detailed expositions of the subject at hand, the like of which had never been written before.

The eighteenth-century debate also exhibits new ideas and emphases. The most novel feature of the critic's polemic is his citation of works that are normally beyond the purview of halakhic discourse. He draws from the writings of Menasseh ben Israel, labelled "a knowledgeable and wise man." Although he was the leading rabbi of the western Sephardi diaspora in the seventeenth century, citations of Menasseh's writings are quite rare in halakhic literature.

More arresting are the citations of non-Jewish works, which are rarely found in rabbinic discussions of Jewish law. The critic quotes from Joannes a Lent's *Theologia Judaica*, and is clearly cognizant of his innovation, for he apologizes for introducing into evidence the work of a non-Jew, excusing himself on the grounds that it merely "recounts the story of our faith" (*sofer sipur emunatenu*). Similarly, Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* serves as a proof-text for the explanation that the idolators of yore created a hierarchy of lesser divinities because they felt that the distance separating Creator from creature is unbridgeable.

The critic's worldliness extends beyond mere booklearning to a remarkable awareness of Christian praxis. His citation of the Christian intercessory prayer, "Omnes sancti Angeli et Arcangeli orate pro nobis" is a doubly innovative contribution to the literature on intercessory prayer: not only is it the first text to quote an eerily similar text from the Catholic liturgy, but it is also the first indictment of intercessory prayer to raise the halakhic issue of "the laws of the gentiles."

Admittedly, the comparative approach was not altogether unprecedented. In the anti-Christian polemic of Joseph Kimhi of twelfth-century Provence, the Christian (*min*) interlocutor defends the



Christian practice of petitioning the dead (i.e. saints) with the explanation that it is common practice for petitioners to appeal to courtiers to intercede on their behalf before the monarch. Predictably, Kimhi has the Jew (*ma'amin*) reply that God has no need of intermediaries, be they angels or the deceased, for He knows people's thoughts and emotions.<sup>72</sup> The Christian worship of non-Divine entities is also attacked in the polemic of Yom Tov Lipmann Mülhausen, who explains that in the few instances in which biblical figures appeal to human intermediaries, they continue to address their prayer to the Lord.<sup>73</sup> The reference to Christian practice in anti-Christian polemics such as these is still not as striking as it is in the *PY*, where the documents are situated in a halakhic, and therefore intra-Jewish, literary context. The appearance of "the laws of the gentiles" in eighteenth-century documents is particularly noteworthy because it is such an obvious mechanism for attacking intercessory prayer; considering that Jews had been living in Catholic society for centuries, it is remarkable that this argument should make virtually its first appearance on the eve of the modern era.

In the Trieste controversy, however, "the laws of the gentiles" was not nearly as significant a theme as the clash between rationalism and traditionalism. This was clearly not a new issue. Maimonides' fifth principle of faith was the basis for the opposition to intercessory prayer expressed by many medieval writers, leading up to Gedaliah Lifshitz's commentary on Albo's *Ikkarim*, which was one of the works criticized by the Trieste critic. Remarkably, in the sixteenth century it was Segal, the apologist for intercessory prayer, who waved the flag of rationalism, but his was the only breach of the lines of affiliation. In the name of Maimonidean dogma, the critic in the *PY* bases his attack on a conception of monotheism so pure as to exclude intercessory prayer. Predictably, *Agudat Ezov* responds with a critique of philosophical rationalism that could have been penned at any stage of the protracted Maimonidean controversy. This aspect of the polemic seems to have struck Lampronti as fundamental, for he created an entry devoted to Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which states simply: "and his words are very problematic" (*u-devarav*

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<sup>72</sup> See his *Sefer ha-Berit*, ed. Frank Talmage, Jerusalem 1974, pp. 54-55.

<sup>73</sup> See above, n. 17.

*temuhin harbei*), and is followed by a cross-reference to the “Ushers of mercy” entry.<sup>74</sup>

In the early modern age kabbalah largely replaced philosophy as the key to an understanding of metaphysics in general, and of Judaism in particular, and this sort of symmetry finds expression in the *PY*, as well. *Agudat Ezov* cannot resist introducing the tale of Maimonides’ ultimate repudiation of philosophy and conversion to kabbalah. He cites Sefirotic doctrine to explain the importance of angelical intermediation for Diaspora Jewry. And both *Agudat Ezov* and Morpurgo counterpoise the wisdom of “the true tradition,” namely kabbalah, to Aristotelian philosophy and “Greek wisdom,” generally.

The polemicist plays the kabbalah card to his own advantage, by pointing to the controversy that had arisen within recent memory in nearby Gorizia over the innovative kabbalistic prohibition of *tefillin* during the intermediate days of festivals. His point is that to equate kabbalah with tradition and custom is to distort the historical record. This argument highlights the peculiar role assigned to kabbalah in the Trieste conflict: although adduced repeatedly, to bolster intercessory prayer and to whip that perennial whipping boy, Aristotle, it is neither the heart of the dispute nor even an integral component. Regardless of the contribution of Zoharic literature to intercessory prayer, the medieval authorities who aired their opinions on the subject neither cited the *Zohar* nor considered it significant. In *Agudat Ezov*, too, kabbalistic sources and concepts constitute only part of the total arsenal and are not presented as essential. A clear illustration of the peripheral role of kabbalah in the conflict is the point of view of Morpurgo, who rules in favor of intercessory prayer, but expresses reservations vis-à-vis the metaphysics of both philosophy and kabbalah.

Rather than kabbalah, a fierce and stubborn traditionalism was the counterweight to philosophy in the *PY* controversy. *Agudat Ezov* defends intercessory prayer in the name of custom, specifically the aggregate of customs that carry the stamp of German-Jewish tradition.<sup>75</sup> This value dictated other aspects of the debate. By its very

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<sup>74</sup> *PY*, vol. 6, Livorno 1840, fol. 67r, s.v. *Moreh Nevukhim*. I treat Lampronti’s attitudes towards philosophy, kabbalah and science in a work in progress.

<sup>75</sup> Ashkenazic Jewry attached great value to its tradition even in the Middle Ages, and hence this was hardly a new phenomenon. See Israel Ta-Shema, “Ashkenazic Jewry in the Eleventh Century: Life and Literature,” *Ashkenaz: The German-Jewish Heritage*, ed. Gertrude Hirschler, New York 1988, pp. 30-

nature, a blind traditionalism invites a rationalist critique, and hence it was completely foreseeable that the struggle would take on the complexion of a Maimonidean controversy of sorts. It was equally predictable that the critic would widen his assault to include other customs that could easily be depicted as irrational or absurd, like *kapparot*.<sup>76</sup> Kabbalah thrived on such customs, and thus the kabbalist defense of these customs was also practically inevitable.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, *Agudat Ezov*'s basic defense was simply that Jews faithful to the Ashkenazic rite had been reciting "Ushers of mercy" for centuries. Traditionalism, too, it seems, was a kind of ideology, albeit not of the metaphysical kind.

If the Trieste controversy was medieval in the sense that it echoed the claims and perspectives of earlier centuries, it was also modern, for its main theme was the tension between a rationalist approach to religion on the one hand and nonrational religious practices on the other, and both of these concerns were central to the Berlin Haskalah (Enlightenment) later in the eighteenth century and to the Reform movement a few decades later. For the Haskalah, the classic example is Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, which judiciously scrutinized the rationality of Jewish ceremonial law (though not only custom). The

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42; Idem, *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz: Their Lives, Leadership and Works (900-1096)* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1981, pp. 13-105. However, Sephardic Jews, too, venerated custom, perhaps none more eloquently than the mighty Joseph Karo of sixteenth-century Safed. See Israel Ta-Shema, "Rabbi Joseph Karo: Between Spain and Germany" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), pp. 153-159.

<sup>76</sup> A polemic over the rationality or absurdity of Jewish customs had been going on between Christians and Jews for at least a century, since the publication of Johan Buxtorf's *Synagoga Judaica* in 1603 and Leon Modena's *Historia de' Riti Hebraici* in 1638. See Mark R. Cohen, "Leone da Modena's *Riti*: A Seventeenth Century Plea for Social Toleration of the Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 34 (1972), pp. 287-321. Other authors, too, attacked both intercessory prayer and *kapparot* as irrational, superstitious or even heretical customs, such as the anonymous author of *'Alilot Devarim*: see *Ozar Nehmad* 4 (1864), pp. 187, 188. Aaron Worms of Metz is an eighteenth-century example: see Jay R. Berkowitz, "Authority and Innovation at the Threshold of Modernity: The *Me'orei Or* of Rabbi Aaron Worms," *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer et al., Jerusalem 2001, pp. 275-277.

<sup>77</sup> See Gershom Scholem, "Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists," *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York 1965, pp. 118-157.

Reform movement altered or did away with rituals that did not seem to jibe with modern values, including (but not only) customs that appeared irrational or absurd, such as *kapparot*.<sup>78</sup> As it happens, Moses Sofer of Pressburg, the father of modern ultra-orthodoxy, authored a responsum in defense of “Ushers of mercy,” which reads like the direct continuation of the discussion that had been going on for centuries.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the 1727 conflict adumbrates the modern struggle, with the rationalist, reformist critic seeking to abrogate an ancient custom and the apologist fighting for its survival, rational or not.

By coincidence, the “Ushers of mercy” debate also finds expression in another cultural issue debated in the days of Haskalah and Reform, namely the importance of Hebrew. Although Haskalah brought about a revival of Hebrew, Mendelssohn translated the Bible into German and the Reform movement advocated prayer in the vernacular. The abandonment of the holy tongue outraged the traditionalists, who drew upon the rabbinic literature on the legitimacy of prayer in languages other than Hebrew.<sup>80</sup> From this perspective, too, therefore, the *PY* controversy raises a problem that was soon to attract substantial attention.

There is also, finally, an Italian perspective on the Trieste controversy. Rightly or wrongly, Italy’s Jews are usually portrayed as having enjoyed an extraordinary degree of acculturation. The documents in the *PY* appear to support this crude generalization, specifically the critic’s use of non-Jewish sources, and especially his quote of “Omnes sancti Angeli etc.” The acculturation of Italian Jews does not mean that they were necessarily Maimonidean rationalists, for as is well known, Isaiah di Trani the Younger opposed Greek wisdom in the thirteenth century and Yehiel Nissim da Pisa championed kabbalah at its expense three hundred years later. Italy was no exception to the worldwide embrace of kabbalah in the early

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, New York and Oxford 1988, pp. 157, 158.

<sup>79</sup> *Responsa, Orah Hayyim* §166. Sofer takes it upon himself to explain the Maharal’s inclination to suppress “Ushers of mercy,” but he concludes with the admission that the prayer is still recited.

<sup>80</sup> See Sofer’s *responsa*, pt. 6 (*Likutim*), §84, 86. On the concern in this period with the generally low level of Hebrew literacy among the Jewish rank and file, see Simhah Assaf, *Sources for the History of Jewish Education* (Hebrew), ed. Samuel Glick, Jerusalem 2001, index s.v. *lashon ha-qodesh*.

modern era, and indeed, if one were to oversimplify and portray the 1727 conflict as a microcosm of the competition between philosophy and kabbalah, then there can be no doubt that kabbalah carried the day. Nevertheless, other voices continued to be heard, including the famous critiques of kabbalah by Leon Modena and Jacob Frances, and the more balanced worldview advanced by Morpurgo, in his *Tree of Knowledge (Ez ha-Da'at)*.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, even kabbalah sympathizers in Italy, such as Aviad Sar Shalom Basilea, did not champion cultural insularity, but rather shared the general desire to remain attuned to contemporary fashions in the arts and sciences.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the Jewish culture that developed in Italy during the Renaissance has been portrayed as an adumbration of the Berlin Haskalah.<sup>82</sup> More to the point, in the 1780s Naftali Herz Wessely, a leading architect of the Haskalah program, saw Italian Jewry as his natural allies and canvassed their support.<sup>83</sup> Wessely was right to assume that Italians would identify with his claim that every Jew ought to acquire a broad, general education, but he did not anticipate the conservatism with which his initiative would be met. His Italian correspondents expressed the concern that the new program might undermine traditional Jewish values and religious observance.<sup>84</sup> This conservatism was at least one of the factors that prevented the Reform movement from gaining a foothold in Italy. Although communal leaders discussed the need to reform certain religious practices, few changes were enacted and no Reform movement took root on Italian soil.<sup>85</sup> The balance between the

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<sup>81</sup> See above, n. 64.

<sup>82</sup> Isaac E. Barzilay, "The Italian and Berlin Haskalah (Parallels and Differences)," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960), pp. 17-54.

<sup>83</sup> Lois C. Dubin, "Trieste and Berlin: The Italian Role in the Cultural Politics of the Haskalah," *Towards Modernity*, ed. Jacob Katz, New Brunswick and Oxford 1987, pp. 189-224; Idem, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture*, Stanford 1999, pp. 95-137.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Lois C. Dubin, "The Rise and Fall of the Italian Jewish Model in Germany: From Haskalah to Reform, 1780-1820," *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach et al., Hanover and London 1998, pp. 271-295. On Italian reform initiatives, see David Malkiel, "Technology and Culture Regarding Cremation: A Historical and Phenomenological Analysis" (Hebrew), *Italia* 10 (1993), pp. 37-70; Idem, "Texts and Themes of Modern Italian Halakhic Literature" (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 86-87 (2000), pp. 272-290.

Enlightenment-like values of Italian Jews and their tenacious traditionalism remained much as it had been in 1727.

Trieste played a prominent role in the Haskalah and Reform campaigns, presumably because of its proximity to the metropolitan centers of the Hapsburg empire. The *Scuola Pia Normale* of Trieste, which opened its gates in 1782, embodied Wessely's educational reforms, and his most staunch Italian supporter was Elia Morpurgo of neighboring Gradisca.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, Abraham b. Eliezer Halevi, the rabbi of Trieste, led the Italian anti-Reform campaign in 1819. Obviously various factors determined which positions were assumed at any given time, but nevertheless, the leadership displayed by the Trieste community – pro and con – in confronting Haskalah and Reform exemplifies the complex combination of worldliness and traditionalism displayed in the 1727 struggle over intercessory prayer.

That Trieste was the site of this controversy is an intriguing coincidence, because the *PY* controversy was an actual attempt to change the official, public liturgy. This is altogether different from what had come before. Unlike medieval texts, which typically present this or that scholar's deliberations, rationale or condemnation,<sup>87</sup> the *PY* documents state plainly that "Ushers of mercy" was in real danger of being censored. This was a social confrontation, with the critic making an earnest bid to eradicate intercessory prayer and *Agudat Ezov* striving valiantly to thwart his efforts. It is this sense of imminent and far-reaching change that links the story of the 1727 controversy in Trieste to the revolutionary movements that were to touch Trieste when modernity dawned.

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<sup>86</sup> See n. 83.

<sup>87</sup> A possible exception is the statement by Menahem Recanati: "This dictum will muzzle the mouths of those who say that one ought not to recite 'Ushers of mercy,'" although Recanati may refer here to predecessors, like Nahmanides, rather than to contemporary critics. See above, n. 21. Recanati's words were later quoted by Menahem b. Me'ir Ziyon of fourteenth-century Köln, in his *Ziyyoni*, Cremona 1560, ad loc.