December 12, 2021

**To:** Azrieli Fellowships Committee

**Subject:** Fellowship recommendation for Gabriel Ebensour

Dear Colleagues,

It is my honor to warmly recommend Mr. Gabriel Ebensour for the Azrieli Fellowship for doctoral students.

Since 2006, Gabriel has participated in a number of courses I taught in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His participation has been enthusiastic, perceptive, and insightful, and has made a valuable contribution to the classes. My acquaintance with him deepened after I read and discussed with him the two seminar papers that he submitted to me, the first during his undergraduate studies and the second during his graduate studies. In both works, I found that he had extremely strong research skills for an undergraduate student studying and writing in a language that was not his mother tongue.

Following his first seminar paper, which dealt with the halakhic rulings of Rabbi Joseph Messas (1892–1975) and his critical stance toward the integration of kabbalah into halakha, Gabriel successfully published an article in the journal *Pe’amim*. Recently, Gabriel published an article in the journal *Zion* on the secret society Lishkat Yesod Hamaaravi, established by Moroccan Jews in the late nineteenth century. The article examined rare manuscripts that enabled him to describe the secret society and its unique method of promoting internal processes of modernization among Moroccan Jewry. Another of his articles, on Rabbi Joseph Knafo's pioneering work in Judeo-Arabic and his support of activists working towards the democratization of the Mogador (Essaouira) community in Morocco, will be published in the upcoming issue of *Jewish Social Studies*. The article sets the standard for the study of Maghrebi Jewish-Arabic literature in modern times within a broad historical context. Two additional articles by Gabriel are under consideration by leading journals. Notably, one of his articles has been granted an award from Trinity College Dublin. These are undoubtedly admirable achievements, all the more so considering his young age (31) and the fact that he came to Israel alone, without knowing the Hebrew language, only a decade ago.

After immigrating to Israel at the age of 18, Gabriel studied in yeshiva, served in the Israel Defense Forces, and was admitted to the Hebrew University. There, he successfully completed a demanding bachelor’s degree in the Amirim Honors Program for outstanding humanities students and in the PEP program, the university’s integrative program for philosophy, economics, and political science. In 2016 and 2018, he achieved recognition on the Dean’s List, and in 2018, he won the Dean's Award. During his undergraduate studies, Gabriel served as a research assistant to Prof. Zvi Zohar of Bar-Ilan University, in the field of Jewish law in Middle Eastern and North African countries. Gabriel has worked for two years as a research assistant at the Center for Religion, Nation, and State at the Israel Democracy Institute, where his supervisors have emphasized his multidisciplinary abilities, as well as his original and critical thinking.

At the end of his undergraduate degree, Gabriel chose to dedicate his future to research and teaching, particularly in the field closest to his heart – the intellectual and cultural history of North African Jewry in modern times, with an emphasis on the philosophical and halakhic work of the sages of this region. Therefore, Gabriel devoted his thesis to analysis and discussion of the spiritual work of the sages of Mogador, Morocco; the power relations between the traditional rabbinic elite and the modernized Jewish elites of late nineteenth-century Morocco; and a halakhic and political dispute between the sages of Israel and Mogador. The thesis was awarded a grade of 97.5 and earned Gabriel the Gaon Prize for Research on North African Jewry.

Gabriel then began his doctoral studies under the joint guidance of Prof. Yaron Ben-Naeh and myself. In his doctoral work, he seeks to discuss the cultural history of Algerian Jews during the colonial period, focusing on their perspectives. To this end, Gabriel will examine the literature produced by Algerian Jews during this period – including responsa literature and popular rabbinic literature in Judeo-Arabic – from a multidisciplinary approach that will incorporate halakha, Jewish thought, and history and use diverse methodological tools. In the 2020-2021 academic year, Gabriel won the President’s Scholarship, awarded to outstanding doctoral students of the Faculty of Humanities. His research proposal was approved at the beginning of the second year of his doctoral studies.

Alongside his academic qualifications, it should be noted that Gabriel also works extensively outside the university setting. He maintains close contact with the French-Jewish community from which he immigrated, volunteering to write for community magazines and teaching young people in various settings. In 2019, he was invited by the heads of the Israelite Central Consistory of France to conferences of French Jewry. Gabriel is considered one of the most prominent voices among the younger generation of French Jewry. In Israel, Gabriel has taken an active part in reviving the heritage of the Jews of Islamic countries. He is involved in initiatives in the *masorti* revival and the strengthening of connections between Jewish emigrants from North Africa and Muslims in Morocco. Gabriel established a beit midrash for French speakers at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, and teaches in a number of non-academic institutions in French and Hebrew. Gabriel’s public activities testify to his aspirations to forge links between different parts of the Jewish world, deepen the Israeli public’s familiarity with the treasures created there, and bring the social and cultural wealth of Israeli society to the Jews of France.

His in-depth mastery of rabbinic literature, alongside his considerable knowledge, his analytical ability, his command of French (his mother tongue), the efforts he has invested in learning literary Arabic in general and Jewish-Arabic in particular, and the breadth of his horizons, afford him unique advantages in the studies he has chosen to pursue. Moreover, although research into the works of the Middle Eastern and North African sages began several decades ago, the writings of the sages of Morocco and Algeria – which had particularly large, diverse, and vibrant Jewish centers – have been relatively neglected within this field. This is an important area of study in need of exceptional minds to rise to the challenge. In my opinion, Gabriel is a rising force in this area, and he has already demonstrated his capability in his excellent articles.

In light of all this, I believe that Gabriel does not simply have “promise” or “potential.” Rather, he is a researcher and leader at the beginning of his journey, who has already begun to realize his promise and potential. It is worthwhile to invest in him and in the field of research he seeks to promote. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he is at the forefront of the younger generation of scholars in Jewish studies. Therefore, I strongly recommend granting him the Azrieli Scholarship and encouraging him to continue on his academic path.

Sincerely,

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