A review essay of:

*Fragments of Five Books by Rav Nissim Gaon, ed. Shraga Abramson*

 Based on manuscripts, and including introductions, notes, and indices: Mekitzei Nirdamim: Jerusalem, 1968

A

“Whenever the Ark would set out” (Numbers 10:35). In the historical record of the arduous journeys of the Torah, shuffled from dwelling to dwelling, and from one home to another, North Africa, particularly the district of Kairouan – “the great metropolis of Africa” – stands as a humble yet pivotal sanctuary. It became both a custodian of wisdom and a crucible where new wisdom was forged. In the hushed moments of twilight, or, perhaps, in the veiled hours between dusk and dawn, North Africa emerged as a crossroads, where the legacy of the *ge’onim* of Babylon flowed forth like streams from a fountain. Here lay profound significance in the role of preserving, disseminating, and kindling the fading embers of knowledge – echoing the adage, “While the wine belongs to its owner, the gratitude is given to the one who pours it.” Moreover, the center in North Africa also offered its own, independent contributions, with distinctive interpretations of the Torah and the Talmud, and to a limited degree, even delving into the realms of Jewish thought through the nurturing of philosophical concepts and unraveling the enigmatic *aggadot* enshrined in the words of the Sages.

In this setting – one that received the Torah of the early sages (the great *ge’onim* of Babylon) and laid the foundation for the wisdom of the later luminaries (the great sages of Spain) – Rabbeinu Nissim ben R. “Jacob ben R. Nissim ben R. Isaiah ibn Shahin”[[1]](#footnote-1) emerges as the central figure in Kairouan. A prolific author, who was evidently constantly engaged in Torah study and scholarship, but also a devoted, well-recognized leader who grappled with the most intricate questions of Jewish law, “his hands soiled with the blood of a fetus and placenta.” Such dedication earned him profound admiration during his lifetime, both at home and abroad, where he was hailed as *rosh bei-rabbanan* and *rosh haseder va’aluf hayeshivah* (see page 246; “the head of the rabbinic house” and “the head of the order and the yeshiva chief [a prominent title in the Babylonian yeshivot]”). Revered as one who rejuvenated the religion and “in whose shadow the Jews lived amongst the nations,”[[2]](#footnote-2) he was enshrined in his rightful place by his contemporaries. If we recall that R. Nissim was the distinguished disciple of R. Ḥushiel and his son R. Ḥananel (d. 1056), the great admirer of R. Hai, Ga’on of Pumbedita (d. 1038), and a close peer of R. Samuel Hanagid (d. 1056), R. Nissim’s significant place in the annals of Jewish religious and societal evolution is clear.

It is customary for those engaged in the study of a new literary work – particularly those tasked with offering critical reviews – to meticulously engage with its foundational elements and to address a series of key questions that enable an informed evaluation of the work at hand. These questions include: To what literary genre does the book belong? What overarching objectives does it strive to achieve, and what specific challenges does it set out to confront? On what literature did the author draw? What was his contribution? Does the book incorporate new, previously undiscovered sources? Has the book introduced any advancements in methodology? Does it offer fresh insights or propose innovative approaches?

If we were to inquire about our knowledge of R. Nissim before the publication of Prof. Abramson’s seminal work, and to what extent our understanding has been enriched thanks to the dedication, diligence, and wisdom demonstrated by the scholarly author, the answer would become abundantly clear. Despite the notable strides made since Solomon Judah Rapoport’s monograph *Toldot Rabbenu Nissim Vekorot Sefarav* – a study widely regarded as seminal in this field – by luminaries such as Abraham Harkavy and Samuel Abraham Poznański, and contemporary scholars including Simḥa Assaf, Jacob Naḥum Epstein, Louis Ginzberg, Benjamin Manasseh Lewin, Jacob Mann, as well as Shelomo Dov Goitein and Ḥaim Zeev Hirschberg, our understanding remained fragmented and provisional. Numerous gaps in both the narrative of his life and the analysis of his works (including a precise list of his works and a comprehensive description of them) persisted, leaving much to be desired in terms of conclusiveness.

Enter Prof. Abramson, who stands as the unifying force bridging disparate scholarly perspectives and paving the way for continued exploration. Through painstaking research and scholarly acumen, Abramson has not only shed light on previously overlooked details but has also expanded the canvas of knowledge. Most notably, he has unearthed and elucidated significant chapters from R. Nissim’s works, previously obscured from view: (a) *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ Lemanulei Hatalmud*; (b) *Peirushim Latalmud*; (c) *Piskei Halakhot*; (d) *Megillat Setarim*; and (e) *Ḥibbur Yafeh Min HaYeshu‘ah*. Abramson’s scholarly endeavors have brought silent fragments and neglected scrolls from the depths of obscurity, and he has invested considerable effort into giving voice to these works and clarifying their meaning.

The structure of the book is dictated by this five-point framework, with each chapter offering an in-depth exploration of one of the above-listed books. Preceding these chapters is a comprehensive introduction, encompassing vital details and concise summaries concerning R. Nissim’s lineage, mentors, progeny, disciples, social circle (including connections in Spain), and literary oeuvre. It soon becomes apparent that this introductory framework serves as a foundation to be enriched by the wealth of information scattered throughout the subsequent sections of the book – in the preface to each work and the copious footnotes. It appears that the author did not intend to exhaustively cover every aspect in the general introduction but to leave room for further elaboration and contextualization elsewhere.

Overall, while historical analysis, panoramic synthesis, and comprehensive biographical reconstruction are significant, it becomes evident that in this book they are of secondary importance to the interpretive agenda that takes precedence in this scholarly endeavor.

1. The initial discourse delves into the ancestral lineage of R. Nissim, particularly spotlighting his father, R. Jacob. Renowned as the emissary of the *ge’onim* in North Africa, R. Jacob assumed the pivotal role of fundraising for the famous Sura and Pumbedita yeshivot, overseeing the collection on their behalf. Notably, R. Jacob was the recipient of the famous responsum known as *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*. The elevated status of R. Jacob is eloquently echoed in R. Shmuel Hanagid’s poetic tribute (p. 20), underscoring the rich heritage inherited by R. Nissim:

*The people of your city grant you rule,*

*As they did your parent, a man of trust.*

*A God-fearing elder, an advocate of Torah and integrity,*

*A venerable elder of Talmud, a remnant of sages past.

Acknowledged among the doers of great deeds*

*The honored of those wrapped in linen shawls,*

*His honor extends to Africa,*

*Where he is viewed as one of the Ge’onim.

Sought by men for Torah inquiries*

*As in days of yore, like the seventy elders.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Abramson adeptly integrates newly discovered documents, sourced from Mann and Goitein, as well as personal letters and documents that appeared in his book *Bamerkazim Uvatefutzot Betukufat Hage’onim* (Jerusalem, 1965). Of particular significance is the fifth chapter of that work, *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* *Lerav Ya’akov bar Nissim MiKairouan*, which offers profound insights into the organizational dynamics of the Yeshiva, procedural protocols for addressing inquiries, and the intricate web of support extended by the Jewish diaspora. A recurring motif emerges highlighting the unwavering advocacy of the *Ge’onim* of Babylon for their respective yeshivot within the wider Jewish community, continuously seeking assistance in every possible way. R. Nissim, inheriting his father’s fervent dedication, distinguishes himself through his steadfast commitment to the Babylonian yeshivot, actively engaging in their shared triumphs and tribulations. Commencing from page 18, the author carefully catalogs and identifies each correspondence dispatched to R. Jacob by the *ge’onim*. This meticulous bibliographic approach, coupled with an unwavering attention to detail, characterizes the author’s scholarly rigor and the breadth of his research pursuits.

1. Regarding the historical timeline of R. Nissim’s life, Professor Abramson establishes 990 as the year of his birth, with his passing in 1062. The date of his demise is testified to in a document published by Goitein (*Zion* 27, p. 11). However, historical uncertainties persist, as noted by Hirschberg in his introduction to R. Nissim’s essay *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu‘ah* (p. 21), where he notes, “we do not know where and when R. Nissim died.” The determination of the year of his birth remains uncertain unless it is rooted in the biblical adage, “The days of our years are seventy years.” R. Nissim had a son and a daughter, tragically losing his son at a young age. A poem of consolation composed by R. Samuel Hanagid for this tragedy has survived.

Despite lingering unresolved complexities – such as the absence of explicit familial references in R. Joseph ibn Nagrela Hanagid’s letter to Rabbi Nissim – the author accepts the assertion in Ibn Daud’s *Sefer Hakabbalah* that R. Joseph Hanagid, the son of R. Samuel Hanagid, married R. Nissim’s daughter. Once adopting this stance, Abramson vehemently defends it against detractors (including Avigdor Aptowitzer in his introduction to *Sefer Raavya*, p. 396) who question the reliability of ibn Daud and challenge the authenticity of his narratives (also see p. 30, and on another matter, p. 209). Similarly, Abramson refrains from scrutinizing the curious information presented on the title page of the Hebrew translation of *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu‘ah*, which claims the book was composed for R. Nissim’s “son-in-law,” despite the absence of any concrete evidence regarding R. Nissim’s having a second daughter. It is very surprising that he omits any mention of the hypothesis suggesting the text should read “his father-in-law” instead of “his son-in-law” (see Poznański, *Anshei Kairouan* p. 189; Hirschberg, p. 33). The dynamic between R. Nissim and his admirer and relative by marriage, R. Samuel Hanagid, is comprehensively illuminated within these pages (pp. 26-28 and p. 35). Additionally, Abramson delves into the nuances of Hanagid’s poetry, offering insightful interpretations that bring added depth to the text. Indeed, the author’s methodology is characterized by an interpretive lens that enriches every source he presents, whether in *halakhah* or *aggadah*, poetry or history. His commentary possesses a remarkable potency, adept at dispelling ambiguities in the text and unraveling enigmatic passages. For instance, consider the conclusion of the Hanagid’s initial poem, wherein he laments R. Nissim’s prolonged silence:

*If friendships are fleeting, lasting but one chance* (pa’am),

*Fading* (tzerurah be’amtaḥat) *upon a second glance* (pa’amayim),

*God’s hand could shatter every tie,*

*Save the bond between you and I.*

Abramson offers an astute interpretation of the poetic lines (p. 28, n. 41), evoking the transient nature of friendships and companionships: “If it is so that friendship is revealed only once *(pa’am)* and after which *(pa’amayim)* it is hidden *(tzerurah be’amtaḥat)*, God will bring their friendship and companionship down to the dust – except for His friendship and companionship.”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, he encounters challenges in his analysis of the lines: “For you a position, for you, a crown of priesthood (*keter kehunah*) / And glory, indeed, forever.” To support the assumption that this poem was indeed dedicated to R. Nissim, Abramson is forced to take issue with Sasson’s simple interpretation in his preface to the Diwan of Samuel Ha-Nagid, diverging from the literal meaning of “a crown of priesthood,” as we have no evidence that R. Nissim was a *kohen*. Instead, Abramson ingeniously interprets “priesthood” as symbolizing an esteemed position, akin to “the sons of David were priests,” as interpreted by the Sages in the *Mekhilta* at the beginning of *Parashat Yitro*. However, this scholarly erudition appears to be unnecessary when considering an alternative version of the poem published by Dov Yarden (p. 198), which reads “For you is the crown of glory (*keter tehillah*) and honor.” This rendition harmonizes seamlessly with the overall context and eliminates the need for complex interpretive maneuvers.

Abramson’s interpretations and emendations of R. Joseph Hanagid’s epistle to R. Nissim (p. 23) also deserve attention. To establish a proper perspective, it is worth noting the close and regular ties between R. Samuel Hanagid and the sages of Kairouan, as well as his diligent efforts to foster connections with them, as can be seen from the poem he penned in honor of R. Ḥushiel and the letter of condolence he sent to R. Ḥananel after R. Ḥushiel’s passing. The exchange of poems between R. Nissim and R. Samuel Hanagid continues this bond, shedding light on the multifaceted persona of R. Samuel Halevi – not only was he the head of the Jewish congregations in Spain and the king’s supreme minister (vizier), he was also a rabbinic scholar and prolific writer, keen on engaging with the sages and their disciples. Abramson convincingly suggests that R. Nissim indirectly sought the support of Samuel Hanagid, whose influence extended beyond Spain, with scholars and community leaders heeding his words and recommendations. According to the testimony of the author of *Sefer Hakabbalah*, Hanagid “greatly assisted R. Nissim financially, as he did not possess wealth,” and treated him with sensitivity and kindness. I believe that this testimony offers valuable insight for those seeking to comprehend the dynamics of the time and R. Nissim’s position, motivations, and responses. In contrast with the financially independent great scholars of Jewish Spain in subsequent generations, R. Nissim did not enjoy such financial autonomy. He relied on the support and sympathy of others and must have empathized with the *ge’onim*, whose lives were wholly dedicated to Torah, who “diligently collected funds on behalf of esteemed yeshivot and Torah scholars… for the heads of the diaspora, their judges, and disseminators of Torah,” (echoing the language of Maimonides in his Commentary to Avot 4:5).

In examining R. Solomon ibn Gabirol’s connections with R. Nissim, Abramson diverges from scholars like Hirschberg (*Ḥibbur Yafeh*, p. 32) and tends to place greater emphasis on Saadia Ibn Danan’s assertion that R. Nissim “came to the state of Granada... and taught there students and one of his students was R. Shlomo ben Judah ibn Gabirolthe poet.” However, unlike Jacob Naftali Simḥoni and Poznański, who understood that ibn Gabirol was actually R. Nissim’s student, Abramson believes that ibn Gabirol may have only encountered and learned from R. Nissim sporadically, but honored him and held him in high regard. Consequently, in ibn Gabirol’s poem *Veyikaḥ na berakhah me’ḥanikho*, the term *ḥanikh*, often interpreted as “student,” is viewed by Abramson as a humble expression of reverence rather than a direct indication of formal discipleship.

1. R. Nissim was a loyal student of his father R. Jacob, R. Ḥushiel, and R. Ḥananel. R. Nissim’s deep connection to R. Ḥananel transcends mere outward expressions, as Abramson tirelessly emphasizes and substantiates throughout his work (see, for instance, pp. 24, 35). It is therefore unsurprising to discover interpretations in works such as *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ* or *Megillat Setarim*, for which R. Nissim confidently takes credit, are elsewhere attributed to R. Ḥananel. For instance, R. Nissim asserts: “And this approach that offers an answer to this issue, was very hidden and the Almighty helped me to discover and interpret it and I did not see anyone before me who suggested this approach...” (p. 11). However, this same interpretation appears in *Teshuvot Hage’onim* in the name of R. Ḥananel (see also p. 23).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nevertheless, Abramson (p. 24) questions the authenticity of the paragraph found at the beginning of the commentary to Tractate Rosh Hashanah: “Our master and teacher R. Ḥushiel, our most esteemed rabbi, may his Creator protect him and lengthen his days and years, and our master and teacher, [his son], the beloved R. Ḥananel, the champion of the generation whose Torah goes out to all of Israel…” Despite his typically conservative approach, the author proposes that the effusive concluding phrases could be a later addition, not penned by R. Nissim himself. This suggestion arises from the improbability of R. Nissim lavishing such praise upon R. Ḥananel while R. Ḥushiel was still alive. However, it is worth noting that scholars such as Assaf (*Misifrut Hage’onim*, pp. 121-122), along with others who reference this source (most recently Hirschberg, *Toledot Hayehudim Be’africa Hatzefonit*, p. 244), have not questioned its authenticity, thus necessitating further investigation for clarification.

R. Nissim drew most deeply from the rich traditions passed down to him from R. Hai Gaon. Their relationship was so intimate that later writers (i.e., R. Saadia Ibn Danan) concluded that R. Nissim had studied with R. Hai in person. While the Me’iri (*Beit Habeḥirah*, Introduction to Avot, p. 64) comments on “R. Nissim who received from R. Hai z”l,” it remains unclear whether this refers to direct tutelage as a student or knowledge gained indirectly through transmission or *responsa*.

The author consistently highlights the influence of R. Hai on R. Nissim, and even after the publication of this book, continued to uncover compelling examples of this influence, as seen in “Three matters concerning R. Jacob and R. Nissim of Kairouan” (*Sinai*, vol. 60, 1967, p. 4-16). R. Nissim’s immersion in the Torah of the *ge’onim* is evident in his painstaking efforts to copy and disseminate their writings, and he was the conduit through which their teachings – and especially those of Rav Hai – reached R. Samuel Hanagid. It is not insignificant that R. Joseph Hanagid lauds R. Nissim’s wisdom as being recognized by the *ge’onim*, writing “Heads of the yeshivot and the *ge’onim* of Babylon (may they rest in peace) recognized his broad wisdom… and praised his greatness and his Torah” (p. 23). Furthermore, R. Samuel Hanagid himself pays tribute to R. Jacob, father of R. Nissim, writing “His honor extends to Africa / where he is viewed as one of the *Ge’onim.*” (p. 20). The *Rishonim* were resolute in bestowing upon R. Nissim the title of Gaon (see p. 33 and p. 275 n. 207).

In this context, there is a significant void that Prof. Abramson could have filled, by evaluating the phenomenon of R. Nissim’s connections with Babylonian *ge’onim* and its significance in the history of halakhic literature and study methodologies. We possess R. Hai’s fascinating letter that criticizes R. Ḥushiel’s failure to share his teachings with the yeshiva, thereby diminishing its prestige and severing ties with Babylonian scholarship. R. Ḥananel somewhat improved this situation at least from the perspective of the Babylonian yeshivot – corresponding with the *ge’onim* and embracing their influence. R. Nissim, however, took this a step further, reinvigorating the connection with Babylonian scholarship, and “returning the crown to its former glory.” R. Nissim’s association with the Babylonian yeshivot was, in effect, “dripping wet enough to make something else wet” (see Yoma 78a), that is, it influenced others; we find a parallel development that unfolded in Spain with R. Ḥanokh, the mentor of R. Samuel Hanagid. R. Ḥanokh held a staunchly independent stance, distancing himself from the Babylonian yeshivot and rejecting their authority outright, prompting Rav Hai’s desire to “defeat” him (see Mann, *Texts*, 1, pp.119-122, and Abramson, *Tarbiz*, 5722, p. 191 and above, p. 20, n. 18 and see also Prof. M. Margaliot, *Sefer Hilkhot Hanagid*, p. 9 and p. 33). In his youth, R. Samuel Hanagid staunchly adhered to the approach of R. Ḥanokh, paying no heed to Babylonian authority and even expressing vehement criticism of R. Hai. This critical tone persisted in his compositions over time, but as he neared the end of his life in 1051 while outlining the plan for his monumental work, *Hilkheta Gabarata*, R. Samuel Hanagid underwent a significant shift in perspective regarding R. Hai, writing (quoted by Margaliot, *ibid*. p. 18, and see Dov Yarden’s edition, pp. 91-92):

*Rav Hai, the greatest of all, let me boast of his wonders with sirens,*

*And from his cistern I draw, and from his bread I eat and I find no bitterness.*

*And from his clouds, I quench the thirsty and cause springs to flow in Israel.*

The tension between R. Hai and R. Ḥanokh, which had permeated Spanish intellectual circles – Ibn Daud records that R. Hai “hated R. Ḥanokh” – had eased and R. Nissim was largely responsible for this, fostering relationships of appreciation and respect while maintaining a critical and independent stance characteristic of the sages of Spain.

At this juncture, it would have been appropriate to discuss somewhat the protracted struggle between the Land of Israel and Babylon in Kairouan (see Prof. Shalom Spiegel’s impressive article “Lefarashat Hapulmus shel Pirqoi ben Baboi” in the *Jubilee Volume in Honor of Zvi Wolfson*, pp. 243-273). Such an examination would have shed light on the extent to which these contentious issues are reflected in R. Nissim’s writings. Additionally, R. Nissim’s utilization of the Palestinian Talmud – preceded by, for example, the author of *Sefer Metivot*, which was probably written in Kairouan – not only increased awareness of the Palestinian Talmud but also elevated and publicized its importance, leading to its increased use. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether Kairouan played a role in motivating R. Samuel Hanagid’s ongoing engagement with and important contributions to the study of the Palestinian Talmud. Scholars generally attribute this revival to the influence of R. Ḥananel and R. Nissim (see, for example, Rabbi L. Ginzberg, *Peirushim veḥiddushim bayerushalmi*, p. 107, and generally from p. 88 ff.).[[6]](#footnote-6) Prof. Saul Lieberman (*Jubilee Volume in Honor of Alexander Marx*, p. 288) highlights R. Nissim’s significant contributions, writing: “Mainly and notably, R. Nissim Gaon of Kairouan made significant strides in our matter in his book *Megillat Setarim*. Within its pages, he skillfully interwove Babylonian and Jerusalem methodologies, illuminating the reciprocal insights each tradition offered. He was among the pioneers in recognizing the interpretive potential of the Yerushalmi in elucidating certain passages in the Bavli…” Given R. Nissim’s central role in Kairouan’s intellectual milieu, and on some level, his position as the “final arbiter” in Kairouan, after which “the study of the Talmud ended in the land of Africa” (*Sefer Hakabbalah*), a more thorough exploration of these themes would have enhanced our understanding of his scholarship and its broader implications.

1. Among his disciples, Ibn Gassum, who is mentioned by Maimonides (*Teshuvot*, Freimann, 81; Blau, p. 682), merits special attention. Abramson provides a succinct summary of the bibliographic information regarding him (p. 25). Overall, R. Nissim fostered an environment where his students encouraged him to explore and innovate new interpretations. His study hall served as the focal point of his spiritual growth; numerous inquiries “emanated from the Beit Midrash of R. Nissim” (see, for example, Tosafot Megillah 31b, s.v. *kelalot* and many other examples brought by Abramson). This continuous intellectual stimulation is evident in all of R. Nissim’s works, embodying Maimonides’ assertion that “Students increase their teacher’s wisdom and broaden his horizons... Just as a small branch is used to light a large bough, so a small student sharpens his teacher’s thinking processes, until, through his questions, he brings forth brilliant wisdom” (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:13). *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ* sometimesreferences instances where students encountered difficulty with certain matters and sought R. Nissim’s interpretation. This sentiment is echoed in the introduction, where R. Nissim states: “Having observed that many contemporary students struggled with this and exerted efforts to seek this proof in vain, causing the halakhah to be difficult and obscure for them, I resolved to compile these insights into a book akin to a key for those who find themselves lost in obscurity so that the student in need of one of the topics mentioned will find it quickly and effortlessly” (p. 3). For our purposes, whether he is referring to his own students or students in a broader sense, the essence remains the same.[[7]](#footnote-7) R. Nissim held in high regard the “magnificent wisdom” that emerged from his study hall and the numerous innovative interpretations that he originated therein, often emphasizing his originality and precedence with certain ideas (see p. 11, 17, etc.). It is somewhat surprising that Abramson did not, as far as I can tell, discuss the claim made by the author of the *Sefer Hakabbalah*, that R. Alfasi was a disciple of R. Nissim (see pp. 213-222, discussion of passages in R. Alfasi’s *Halakhot* that evidently draw from R. Nissim’s *Megillat Setarim*, or R. Alfasi’s method of presenting passages from the Palestinian Talmud, in comparison to R. Nissim’s practice).
2. The introduction concludes with a brief inventory of R. Nissim’s literary output, as Abramson subsequently provides in-depth examinations of each work. However, Abramson inserts several key details into this initial overview that are more suited to the detailed discussions. Notably, he offers an intriguing and compelling interpretation of the name *Megillat Setarim* (see p. 37), suggesting it should be understood as: “*Megillat Setarim*, that is, places that are hidden from human understanding that our master reveals and interprets.” Such a compilation of interpretations of difficult subjects reflects a literary tradition common in that era, akin to works found in Maimonides’ oeuvre.

Abramson, following the lead of Poznański, refutes claims about Torah commentaries and a prayer book attributed to R. Nissim, as proposed by Shir (Solomon Judah Rapoport in his study, n. 22). He argues convincingly that all quotations attributed to these alleged works are found within *Megillat Setarim*, a compendium covering diverse topics such as biblical commentary, prayer laws, and aggadic interpretations. Thus, attributing specific books or commentaries to an author based on isolated quotes is an unreliable approach, warranting more caution in such assumptions. Regarding the existence of a *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Abramson leaves it as an open question (p. 40), emphasizing that “we are not allowed to doubt any source without foundation” (see also p. 360 d).

1. In this broad introduction and in important comments interspersed within the later detailed introductions, Abramson began to draw a portrait of the spiritual and intellectual character of R. Nissim and the historical context of his era, while pointing out the signs of religious and social confusion and spiritual struggle that became more acute. However, the depiction provided feels incomplete and somewhat unbalanced and there is more to be mined from these sources, explicitly or implicitly, than is presented here.

For example, Abramson rightly comments (pp. 27-28) that from R. Samuel Hanagid’s words of appreciation for R. Nissim’s poems (“*Balanced by the meter of the Ishmaelites/ and prepared with Greek wisdom*”), we learn that R. Nissim was a nimble and talented poet who mastered the ability to create “modern” poetry of his time. This is certainly a novel idea that adds a new dimension to the image that we have of R. Nissim. As for his knowledge of Greek wisdom, his books that we possess attest to the fact that he was conversant with philosophy, but we cannot be entirely certain about the scope of his knowledge, the sources of his wisdom, and the areas of study that dominate his system of philosophical-Talmudic thought. Nevertheless, we can discern a prototype of a Sephardi sage – a rabbinic scholar versed in various disciplines, a teacher, and a proactive individual attuned to contemporary issues and challenges. He made use of the philosophical content of R. Saadia Gaon’s *Emunot Vede‘ot* (pp. 4-5, and other places), although he does not always explicitly reference Saadia by name, as was customary in the Middle Ages. Moreover, R. Nissim demonstrates the ability to recognize approaches as stemming from the Islamic Kalam and to identify R. Samuel Ben Ḥofni Gaon as following the path of *mutakallimun* (p. 192). He diligently seeks to explain the foundations of religion and instructs readers in matters of faith, hinting at the possibility of a compendium of the laws of faith (akin to Maimonides’ later *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*), which he either composed or contemplated composing (p. 333).

Based on this, the “digressions” found in his works, which may appear superficially as such, are revealed upon closer examination to be well-considered. In his *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu‘ah*, R. Nissim explicitly justifies these digressions, stating, “I seek to explain what the sages of blessed memory said on the matter so that this book will not be of no use” (see p. 394, and also in Hirschberg, p. 89, and in the introduction, p. 52). One prominent theme that captures R. Nissim’s attention is the problem of reward and punishment (see, for example, pp. 330 ff.), a topic of significant concern in both the Jewish and Muslim worlds. The problem of corporeal descriptions of God preoccupied nearly all Jewish thinkers and R. Nissim’s teacher R. Ḥananel consistently expressed his strong objections to any attempts to describe God in physical terms. This topic was also extensively discussed by R. Nissim (e.g., pp. 93, 281, 332).

R. Nissim stands out as one of the first scholars who delved deeply into the systematic interpretation of *aggada* (p. 11, and elsewhere), aiming to refute the skeptics. In this regard, to give credit where credit is due, it must be said that Shir’s insightful comments are particularly enlightening. Yet, what sets R. Nissim apart, and has not been sufficiently emphasized, is how R. Nissim engaged not only with issues of the oral Torah, as was typical among the *ge’onim*, but also, and even more so engaged with those concerning the written Torah. As we seek to understand the motivations behind his occasional digressions, it becomes clear that his primary drive was to safeguard the integrity, coherence, and eternal significance of the written Torah (see p. 5, and beyond). The presence of Karaites in Kairouan is compellingly evidenced (see the intriguing discussion on p. 32 ff. regarding “the day after the Sabbath,” apparently a pressing concern in that time and place). While R. Nissim’s main scholarly pursuits focused on the oral Torah, his unwavering commitment to defending the written Torah against heretical attacks, such as the idea of “cancelation” (i.e., that since we find apparent contradictions in the Torah that indicate that commandments given earlier may have been canceled, one might entertain the notion that a subsequent revelation could indeed abrogate certain aspects of the Torah., see p. 5), or the allegation that the Torah had been forgotten (pp. 348-350), is unmistakable. R. Nissim emerges as a multifaceted figure, “adept in the wisdom of Torah and possessing vast knowledge” (as articulated in the words of Maimonides, Sanhedrin, 2:1).

B

Most of the book – the vast majority of it – is dedicated to the publication of the “fragments of [R. Nissim’s] works.” Prof. Abramson explains (p. 47) that he used this modest name because “the entire teachings of our Rabbi have not been revealed, only fragments of it.” Credit is due to the author for his relentless dedication to uncovering these fragments, even venturing into new territories like legal rulings (chapter 3). By establishing a literary framework for future discoveries, he sets a standard against which all subsequent identifications of R. Nissim’s writings will be measured. Prof. Abramson’s work is not only a great accomplishment, but also a foundation for future work. However, it is regrettable that Prof. Abramson stopped short of compiling a comprehensive edition of the accumulated material, bringing many fragments of sources – some longer, some shorter, and some in-between – but he did not place brick-upon-brick to erect a complete edifice. He meticulously annotates each section, providing invaluable insights in accordance with his vast erudition, but the lack of a complete structure diminishes the utility of his work. Students seeking to study R. Nissim’s writings, *Sefer Ha-mafteaḥ,* for example, still must rely on Goldenthal’s earlier edition (Vienna, 1847), albeit with the added task of cross-referencing Abramson’s contributions, although the detailed index will help with this. He undermined the reliability of Goldenthal’s edition and proved its incompleteness and imprecision but did not reward us with a replacement in the end. It is a shame that he did not reprint the complete Hebrew translation (the book was written entirely in Arabic, while *Megillat Setarim* was written partly in Hebrew and partly in Arabic) to (a) gather all the fragments into one convenient place, (b) correct the many mistakes that were made in the translation, (c) and add all his comments *in situ*. As it stands, Abramson’s rich work provides an introduction, glosses, and additions to Goldenthal’s edition, adding a wide variety of interesting comments. A definitive, comprehensive compilation of R. Nissim’s legacy is not revealed here.

The same is the case with *Ḥibbur Yafeh Min HaYeshu‘ah*, to which about 150 pages are dedicated. Abramson scrutinizes the question of authorship and carefully compares various manuscripts and editions. He underscores the deficiencies in the Harkavy manuscript, which served as the basis for Hirschberg’s Hebrew translation, revealing numerous erroneous additions and omissions. Through his thorough analysis, Abramson arrives at a crucial conclusion: “It would be correct to go back and translate the book according to the new manuscripts” (p. 393). I would venture to expand on this conclusion, suggesting that it would be correct for the new translation to incorporate all of Abramson’s insightful comments, given his mastery of the subject. In a similar vein, Abramson demonstrates this approach in the index to the book *Megillat Setarim*, discovered and published by the late Simḥa Assaf, which Abramson subsequently corrected and published “entirely according to manuscripts... to avoid publishing corrections that would be unintelligible without Assaf’s article” (p. 246). This demonstrates his commitment to accuracy and integrity, and regrettably, he did not do likewise throughout his work. Ultimately, any additional expectations placed on Prof. Abramson stem from a genuine appreciation for the valuable contributions he has already bestowed upon us, coupled with a hopeful anticipation of future endeavors.

C

The book assumes an interpretive form and adopts a concise and restrained style, which, rather than facilitating the reading, demands prolonged and attentive study. It includes interpretive digressions, as is customary among Torah scholars (“I have diverted my attention to matters that do not really concern the words of our Rabbi, but such is the way of a quill that is drawn after the heart,” p. 47). Methodological insights are embedded within the text or can be inferred from it, offering valuable guidance across various contexts. Many details provided extend beyond their immediate scope and hold broader applicability to diverse subjects. For instance, Goldziher (*REJ*, vol. 47, p. 181) once attempted to trace the influence of the Mu‘tazila on R. Nissim. Abramson (p. 4) astutely observes that the prime example cited by Goldziher can be explicitly found in R. Sa’adia Gaon’s *Emunot Vede’ot*, and it was almost certainly derived from there. This underscores the importance of exhaustively exploring internal sources before referencing external ones and distant parallels. Another instance is Abramson’s analysis (p. 394) of the phrasing of rabbinic sources quoted in medieval literature. He illuminates the crucial principle of distinguishing between a literal quotation and a paraphrasing of a rabbinic teaching, clarifying that not every alteration signifies a variant reading in the original source. Abramson’s conservative approach to medieval sources, as discussed earlier, warrants appreciation. His exhaustive examination (pp. 19-27) of whether the author of the *Arukh* utilized R. Nissim’s *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ* exemplifies scrupulous literary analysis, diligently examining every detail and connecting threads to reach a small, but important, conclusion.

In a comprehensive comment spanning two pages (pp. 29-30), the author delves into the phrase “They would review (*gorsim*) it [the Talmud] by heart (*ba’al peh*),” that appears in the introduction to *Sefer Hamafteaḥ*. He dismisses the notion “that according to R. Nissim, they learned the Talmud by heart even after it had been committed to writing.” To support his interpretation, he references numerous sources that either corroborate or challenge his viewpoint. Among these citations is Maimonides’ letter to his student R. Joseph, where Maimonides advises, “And with this, you shall persevere in studying the composition by heart (*ba’al peh*)” (*Iggerot Harambam*, Baneth, p. 68). The author comments “It appears to me to be a misreading that the Rambam would instruct his student to memorize his composition.” Consequently, he questions the accuracy of Baneth’s translation. While I am reluctant to argue, I firmly believe that Maimonides meant exactly this. In the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, he states: “Each chapter shall be divided into succinct laws, facilitating memorization (*al peh*).” Moreover, in the introduction to his *Sefer Hamitzvot*, he emphasizes this point with even greater fervor, asserting, “to ensure its effortless retention by heart (*al peh*).” The very appellation *Mishneh Torah* evokes the rabbinic teaching (*Sifrei, Shoftim*, and see Lieberman in his *Tosefta Kefshuta*, Shabbat, p. 202): “*Mishneh Torah* – that is destined to be studied by heart (*ba’al peh*) in times to come.” Maimonides regarded oral traditions as “extreme wisdom on the part of the Law” (*Guide* I:71), surely concurring wholeheartedly with Rabbi Yehuda Halevi’s assertion (*Kuzari* II:72) that “spoken words are superior to written ones.”

R. Nissim’s teachings on the topic of repentance have significant breadth and importance, with indications that Maimonides drew upon them in his discussions of the subject. Notably, Maimonides elucidates (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:4) the Rabbinic dictum, “In the place where penitents stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand,” explaining: “for they overcome their [evil] inclination more.” Maimonides asserts that the penitent’s reward surpasses that of the completely righteous, “for he has tasted sin and yet, separated himself from it, conquering his evil inclination.” It is almost certain that these insights stem from R. Nissim’s *Ḥibbur Yafeh Min HaYeshu‘ah* (Hirschberg edition, p. 84): “For the truly righteous individual never sinned habitually, so he finds that honesty and innocence are inherent to him, and he knows nothing other than that. But the penitent reveled in sin and was accustomed to it, so if he abandons it, he is deserving of great reward.” Furthermore, parallels between Maimonides’ *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:2 and R. Nissim’s words (Hirschberg, p. 81) have been observed, as noted by commentators on *Sefer Mada* in the Mossad HaRav Kook edition.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In *Megillat Setarim* (p. 278), R. Nissim asserts, “And those who have a tradition to partake in their final meal on the eve of Tishah B’av with a stew of lentils, this tradition has a reliable source.” Abramson delves into the origins, parallels, and historical development of this custom. It is noteworthy that this custom is explicitly referenced in Pirkei R. Eliezer, chapter 35: “And Israel eats a dish of lentils in mourning and tribulation over the mourning of the Temple” (Professor Saul Lieberman drew my attention to this some time ago). This statement by R. Nissim offers insight into a law presented in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* that requires elucidation. In *Hilkhot Ta‘aniyot* (5:9), Maimonides concludes the regulations concerning the final meal on the eve of Tishah Be’av with a personal reference: “And we never consume cooked food, not even lentils, on the day preceding Tishah Be’av…” Maimonides, known for his concise and deliberate language, never expands without a polemical or emphatic purpose; this is also true when he inserts autobiographical material (see, for example, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 8:4, 9:10; *Hilkhot Sheḥitah* 11:10; *Hilkhot Matanot Le’evyonim* 9:3). Maimonides’s mention of it indicates that the practice described by R. Nissim was well-known, and Maimonides sought to emphasize that he abstained from this custom and ate no cooked food, even lentil stew that symbolizes grief and distress.[[9]](#footnote-9)

On page 43, R. Nissim’s slightly idiosyncratic explanation of *H.z.y.v le.kh.a* – the division of the readings of *Parashat Ha’azinu* – is cited from the *Maḥzor Vitri* in the name of R. Saadia Gaon, with each letter of the acrostic symbolizing a different number: “Why is *Parashat Ha’azinu* divided according to the acrostic *heh-zayin-yod-vav lamed-kof*? *Heh* represents the five people who are called to the Torah on Rosh Hashanah …when it falls on a weekday. *Zayin* represents the seven people called to the Torah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when they fall on Shabbat. *Yod* represents the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Vav* represents the six people called to the Torah on Yom Kippur when it falls on a weekday. *Lamed* represents the thirty shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah. *Kaf* represents the twenty days that individuals fast.” It is worth comparing this interpretation with Maimonides’ simple explanation, found in *Hilkhot Tefillah* (13:5) “Why is the Torah reading interrupted at these points? Because these are verses of rebuke, whose purpose is to motivate the people to repent.”

In *Ḥibbur Yafeh Min HaYeshu‘ah* (Hirschberg, p. 11), R. Nissim writes: “And the wicked will never cease to regret the past in which they did not merit to perform good deeds.” Abramson, in his commentary (p. 412), identifies this as the early iteration of the well-known proverb, “The wicked are full of regrets.” He draws attention to the sermons of Ibn Shem Tov and Abarbanel, as quoted in Davidson’s *Otzar Hameshalim Ve’hapitgamim.* It should be noted that the origin of this statement is Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and it appears in the Hebrew translation of Aristotle’s *Sefer Hamiddot*, compiled at the beginning of the 15th century. Professor Harry Wolfson pointed this out in his great work on Philo, volume 2, p. 253. Additionally, this statement is referenced in *Sefer Hatanya* as a rabbinic teaching.

For the story, *Etrogim Leterufah* (*Ḥibbur Yafeh Min HaYeshu‘ah*, pp. 86-87), see Yehudah Ratzhaby’s comment, in his edition of the *Sefer Hamussar Lerav Zechariah al-Dhahiri*, p. 20, n. 4.

In conclusion, Prof. Abramson’s significant contribution in this impressive book deserves commendation. Through this work, the verse, “How humble will your beginnings seem when in the end you are flourishing” (Job 8:7) finds fulfillment. The genesis of the book can be traced back to an article published in *Tarbiz* 26 (1957), and its culmination not only signifies flourishing but also leaves us pondering what future endeavors lie ahead, as the author’s hand “remains outstretched.”

1. This is the heading that appears in *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, in B.M. Lewin’s edition, p. 2, n. 1. For suggestions as to the meaning of the name “Shahin,” see Hirschberg’s introduction to *Ḥibbur Yafeh Min Hayeshu‘ah,* p. 23, n. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See S. D. Goitein’s important article, “Iggeret Labrat ben Moshe ben Sagmar Dayyan Ha‘ir al-Mahdia al Rabbenu Nissim ‘Meḥadesh Hadat’” *Tarbiz* 36 (1967) pp. 59-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Dov Yarden’s edition of the poetry of R. Shmuel Hanagid, p. 198, available online at <https://www.dov.jarden.co.il/duan_shmuel_hanagid_1.html>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dov Yarden’s incomplete note on p. 197 of his new edition is entirely unsatisfactory, and it is a shame that he did not check Abramson’s notes and commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See my comments on this problem in my *Rabad of Posquières*, pp. 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Margaliot, in his *Sefer Hilkhot Hanagid*, does not accept this viewpoint and suggests, instead, that the encouragement to make use of the Jerusalem Talmud came from R. Ḥanokh, his influence being clear as is evidenced by R. Samuel Hanagid’s approach to the Jerusalem Talmud (see p. 21; but see also pp. 18-19 which appear to negate this). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See my comments on this matter with regard to the Raavad, who wrote glosses on Maimonides, in my above-mentioned book, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also examples brought by Lieberman, *Hilkhot Yerushalmi LaRambam*, p. 15, n. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Abramson notes (p. 39) that he intended to write a chapter on “Maimonides and *Megillat Setarim*,” but a personal tragedy prevented him from completing it. This loss is lamentable in every sense. Perhaps in the future there will be an opportunity for him to develop the outline he initiated (p. 233). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)