*Bi-N’ot Deshe* by Rabbi Shlomo Adahan: Ethical-Practical Literature in 18th-century North Africa

A.

Rabbi Shlomo Adahan, who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century, was born in Tafilalt in southeastern Morocco, and at some point, he settled in Tetouan in the north of the country. He also spent some time in Amsterdam.

Adahan was the author of *Bi-N’ot Deshe* (Amsterdam 1735), which can be characterized as belonging to the genre of ספרי הנהגות, ethical-practical treatises delineating recommended practices and ethical behavior. In contrast to other contemporary Jewish communities, this type of ethical-practical literature was not widespread in the Jewish communities in the Maghreb in the eighteenth century. The importance of Adahan’s work derives from its role as a conduit between the North African and Western European spaces and its contribution to the transfer of knowledge between cultures.

B.

Jewish ethical literature flowered during the Middle Ages, including the later part of that period. The last third of the sixteenth century was a turning point that saw the flourishing of Kabbalistic literature of practical and ethical instruction in Safed.

According to Weinstein, this ethical-practical literature focuses on daily activities, personal and social morality, and the ritual innovations of the Safed Kabbalists. These ethical-spiritual guidebooks covered many aspects of the individual’s life and set out what they considered to be correct behavior for weekdays, Sabbaths, and special occasions.

The ethical-practical literature that took shape in Safed at the end of the sixteenth century spread to other Jewish communities in the following centuries. Abbreviated editions of longer books expanded the circle of readers beyond the narrow circle of the scholarly elite to wider and less-educated audiences.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this type of literature was written in Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and Germany. Most of these books were written in Hebrew, but they were also composed in other Jewish languages, especially Yiddish.

According to Bar-Levav, this ethical-practical literature reflects the trend towards the ritualization of Jewish life in the early modern period.

Ethical-practical literature was also widely circulated in the Jewish communities of North Africa and was cited and discussed by its rabbis. Some encouraged their students to study it regularly and compiled recommended reading lists. However, unlike the other diasporas mentioned, the rabbis of the Maghreb almost never wrote original ethical literature or even abridged versions of existing works.

Adahan’s decision to compose an ethical-practical treatise thus fits well with the extensive writing in the genre of the Jewish communities in the various diasporas and with the lively printing activity that took place in Amsterdam, where he lived for some time. However, at least according to our knowledge at the moment, Adahan’s decision to contribute to this genre was unusual in relation to the geographical context he came from.

C.

The North African Adahan’s spending time in eighteenth-century Amsterdam was not unusual. Close trade and diplomatic relations existed between Morocco and the Netherlands in the early modern period, the most famous representative of these relations being Shmuel Palache. These close ties extended also to the relationship between the Jewish communities of Morocco and Amsterdam. For example, Yitzhak Uziel and Yaakov Sasportas served as rabbis in the Sephardic community in Amsterdam. Also, in the absence of a printing press in North Africa, the writings of Moroccan rabbis were printed in Amsterdam, which was then the world center of printing Jewish books.

During his stay in the city, Adahan became involved in printing activities related to his North African origin. He participated in the printing of the writings of Rabbis Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (Rashbatz), Moshe ben Yehuda Moeti, and Vidal Tzarfati. During his stay in Amsterdam, Adahan used print technology to preserve the North African tradition.

Adahan’s North African identity and his self-perception as an expatriate temporarily staying in Amsterdam emerge from his self-description on the book title pages mentioned above, which also indicate that he intended to return to Morocco.

D.

In his introduction to *Bi-N’ot Deshe,* Adahan detailed the book’s purpose, structure, and importance, along with its target audience: “matters of morality and the proper behavior [...] in a pleasant order suitable for the whole year.”

Looking at the first part of the book, chapters 1-19, it is evident that it can be characterized as part of the genre of ethical-practical literature. Chapters 1-14 focus on a person’s daily routines, such as: “waking up” and “meals of the day.” Some chapters deal with the virtues expressed in everyday life, especially regarding interpersonal matters such as “business dealings” and “visiting the sick.”

The following five chapters focus on practices relevant to the Jewish cycle of the year, such as Rosh Chodesh, the Days of Awe, and the three pilgrimage festivals.

In presenting practices for weekdays, Shabbat, and holidays, Adahan took part in the early modern trend toward the ritualization of Jewish life mentioned above.

The second half of the book is ethical literature, called Mussar literature in the Jewish tradition. The book’s chapters address topics such as the Torah and mystical wisdom, performing acts of lovingkindness, repentance, and the like. For lack of time, I will not discuss this part and focus on the book’s first part.

Adahan explains that his book’s virtue lies in its concise concentration of accessible ethical and practical guidance in one place. He therefore includes only brief quotations while referring the reader to his sources. This policy of abbreviated quotations combined with reference to the literature from which he is drawing gives us a sense of the book’s target audience, which ranges from complete laymen to those with some literacy and education.

In his preface, Adahan writes that the book is intended to guide “everyone from Israel,” “man and woman, young and small.” Like many other ethical-practical books, the book’s target audience is the general public. This policy reflects the expansion of the circle of readers, one of the significant effects of printing technology. Accordingly, several practices recommended in the work are clearly directed at the mass of people with limited education. Likewise, the standards he sets take into account the limited education and literacy of a mass readership. The appeal to the general public is also embodied in a few guidelines intended for women. Adahan did not expect women to read the book and learn these practices directly, but rather that a man should transmit the relevant practices to them.

Further examination of the work reveals that Adahan also appealed to a more educated stratum. Thus, for example, he distinguished between instructions for repentance intended for simple people and instructions directed at a “Baal Torah,” literally, a possessor of Torah, or a Torah scholar.

Another indication that Adahan expected at least some of his readership to be Torah scholars is the inclusion in the book of guidance on how to store the holy books at home. While it is true that, thanks to printing technology, the early modern period saw an increase in the number and size of private libraries, the general public who were not among the scholarly elite or the community’s lower intelligentsia did not own even non-canonical halakhic literature, so this guidance was not relevant to the vast majority of the public, but only for the small minority of scholars. These guidelines seem to reflect a situation where small private libraries have begun to develop, but a clear concept of how books should be stored has not yet been formed.

E.

The subject of the first part of the book is, as mentioned, guidance for the days of the week and the festivals. These practices include the ritual laws from the *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* section of the *Shulḥan Arukh*, as was customary in practical-ethical literature. Among other rituals, Adahan details, how to wash one’s hands in the morning, wearing a four-cornered garment with *tzitzit* (ritual fringes), lighting Hanukkah candles, and checking for *ḥametz* on the evening before Passover.

Along with halakhic-normative guidelines, the first part of the book also includes recommendations for adopting non-halachic guidelines. For example, Adahan recommends adopting the custom of Moroccan Jews to use willow wood that had been set aside on Hoshana Rabba (the seventh day of Sukkot) for matzah baking before Passover. In recommending the adoption of a custom of Moroccan Jews, Adahan realized the opportunity of immigrants to mediate between the culture of their homeland and the culture of the host country. In this case, he sought to expand a local custom into the practice of the entire Jewish community, as will become clear later.

Another of Adahan’s recommendations was to adopt the practice of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam of chanting every word of the prayers aloud. For similar reasons, he also recommended adopting their clear and precise way of reading the Torah. He also sought to assimilate some Sephardic customs, such as kashering (ritually cleansing) glassware for Passover just by washing them, the recitation of *seliḥot* (prayers in preparation for the Days of Awe) beginning on the first day of Elul, and the recitation of 13 *midot* (attributes of God) in *shaḥarit* (the morning prayer), *musaf* (the prayer that follows *shaḥarit*) and *minḥa* (the afternoon prayer) on Yom Kippur.

Adahan’s recommendation to adopt the customs of the Sephardic community in Amsterdam is a case of what Peter Burke calls “liberation from provincialism” – the broadening of horizons that expatriates and immigrants experience in the transition from one culture to another, from their original culture to a host one.

Adahan recommended adopting some Ashkenazi customs as well, such as wearing a *kitel* (white gown) on Yom Kippur; standing during the recitation of the Kaddish; and not performing weddings during the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. We do not know if Adahan visited Ashkenazi communities. Most likely, he was exposed to Ashkenazi customs through ethical-practical literature or, more directly, through the Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam. According to Burke, knowledge is distributed more effectively through direct encounters: “The movement of people was and still is a more effective factor in imparting knowledge than the movement of books.”

Adahan also instructed his readers to avoid certain customs that prevailed in the various Jewish communities. For example, he banned the practice of women scratching themselves as an expression of mourning, a practice that was accepted in the Jewish communities in North Africa. He forbade slaughtering animals on Tisha Be-Av, as some do according to the Sephardic custom. At the same time, he instructed his readers to avoid the many fasts and other ascetic practices that were prevalent in the Ashkenazi community at that time.

Adahan’s movement between different geographical areas allowed him to become familiar with North African, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi customs. In his book, he collected the laws and practices that he approved of, i.e., those that passed the self-selection mechanism he used, and sought to have other communities assimilate them. He also warned against customs that prevailed in these communities that he considered inappropriate. In this way, Adahan took part in the transition of knowledge between cultures in Jewish society in the early modern period. According to Neuman, immigrants and expatriates use one of three strategies in their new home: assimilation into the culture of the host country; opposition to it; or a synthesis of the elements of the two cultures. According to Park, immigration enables the growth of a “cultural hybrid” that participates in the cultural life of two different peoples. Burke claims that this in-between strategy is the most productive and that the unique contributions of exiles and immigrants to the creation of knowledge and its dissemination are mainly credited to those scholars who adopted it.

Adahan’s recommendations to adopt a mixture of North African, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi customs indicate that he did not regard his book’s target audience as exclusively one of those communities, but all three. He did not address his book only to his original community, namely the North African one, nor to his current community, i.e., Amsterdam with its Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. *Bi-Ne’ot Deshe* is addressed to all three Jewish communities: North African, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi. The fact that Adahan wrote his book in Hebrew, the *lingua franca* of the Jews in all three communities, and not in a vernacular language is further evidence that Adahan wrote for all of them and thus served as a mediator between three cultures.

In one case, Adahan combined the Sephardic and Ashkenazi customs: According to Sephardic custom, *birkot ha-shaḥar*, the blessing upon rising, are recited at home, before going to the synagogue. According to Ashkenazi custom, *birkot ha-shaḥar* are recited aloud in the synagogue by the prayer leader, enabling the other worshipers to answer “Amen,” Adahan recommended reciting *birkot ha-shaḥar* as per the Sephardic custom, but if for some reason one did not, then one must recite them in the synagogue, according to the Ashkenazi custom. When that occurs, the other worshipers must answer “Amen” according to the Ashkenazi custom, as well as “Blessed be he and blessed be his name” according to the Sephardic custom.

According to Bar-Levav, the first stirrings of a Jewish literary republic can already be identified in the Jewish printing center of Amsterdam in the eighteenth century. He points out that despite the cultural differences between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities in the city, they were united to an extent in a literary republic of traditional literature. Alongside the literary republic, he claims, there was also a republic of customs and practices made up of those who took upon themselves the new customs that appeared in the ethical-practical literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

I want to suggest that by writing a book that recommends the adoption of a mixture of North African, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi customs, even combining them in one case, Adahan made a unique contribution both to the formation of the literary republic of traditional literature and to the formation of the republic of customs and practices in the early modern era. I suggest that one of the overarching goals of the book is the creation of an “imagined community” that unites Sephardic, North African, and Ashkenazi customs.

However, I must emphasize that we do not find in Adahan’s book an open and explicit statement regarding the need for the unification of the customs of the Jewish communities, nor do we find any trace of an overarching reason for doing so. This stands in contrast, for example, to Rabbi Yosef Karo’s description of his codification project. The recommendations to adopt the various customs proposed in the book are thus due to each custom’s intrinsic individual value. In any case, Adahan’s unique contribution remained only in potential since *Bi-N’ot Deshe* was not well received and was printed only once.

F.

In conclusion*, Bi-N’ot Deshe* by Shlomo Adahan belongs to the category of ethical-practical literature, or more precisely, is an example of an abridged and popular form of this literature as was customary in its time. The writing of this kind of literature was widespread in the Jewish communities of the eighteenth century. However, no other known North African authors participated in this genre, even though they were familiar with it, and in this uniqueness lies the importance of the book which is the focus of the current research. It is likely that Adahan was familiar with ethical-practical literature already in North Africa and that he was inspired to try his hand at it in his new place of residence, Amsterdam. A perusal of the book shows that it appeals to multiple target audiences, from the general public with minimal education to the more literate who own a small library and could serve in various roles in the community.

Adahan, as was customary in ethical-practical literature, sought to offer the public normative laws for various aspects of life and publicize and inculcate multiple customs. Adhaan’s uniqueness is that his direct acquaintance with North African, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi communities exposed him to their diverse customs, and he did not hesitate to select the customs of the various communities and recommend them to the other communities through his book while expressing his objection to customs that he deemed inappropriate. In doing so, Adahan made a unique contribution to the formation of the republic of practices and customs. It can be said that one of the book’s goals is an attempt to create an “imagined community” that unites Sephardic, North African, and Ashkenazi customs, but we do not find an explicit statement of this goal in the book.