Eager to Belong: An Eastern Jew Attempts to Integrate into the Literary Milieu of Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam [עריכת הכותרת: לאישורכם]

In the first half of the 1760s, a Jew from Hebron in his twenties reached Amsterdam clutching the manuscript of a work that his late grandfather had written some twenty years earlier in Jerusalem. The traveler’s name was Mordecai Tama; the manuscript was *Midrash Eliezer,*[[1]](#footnote-1) a commentary on Midrash Mekhilta. The author of this work, Eliezer Nachum, was born in Adrianople (Ederne) and spent his last decade in Jerusalem as chief rabbi until his death in 1745 at the age of eighty.[[2]](#footnote-2) Tama failed in his mission; his grandfather’s book was not published until the late twentieth century.[[3]](#footnote-3) This mishap, however, did not mark the end of Tama’s literary activity in Amsterdam. In 1765, he published two other works: the Responsa of Maimonides, which he personally translated from Arabic into Hebrew and called *Pe’er Hador,* and a glossary of homonyms titled *Maskiyot Kessef,* by Solomon b. Meshullam Dapiera, a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholar in Spain.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this article, I examine Tama’s attempts to integrate into the literary milieu of Amsterdam by internalizing the literary world that he targeted and tailoring his literary choices and modus operandi to it.

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Having arrived in Amsterdam to publish the 190-page *Midrash Eliezer,* Tama tried to progress toward this goal in two parallel ways: printing up a specimen page of the full work and issuing a solicitation for funding of the project, specifying the readers he had in mind and proposing that they subscribe to the book and pay for it in advance in the sum of five florins.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The words of Mordecai are addressed to you exceptionally fine gentlemen, clutchers of the Torah and supporters of its students. Let it be known that some days ago I set out from my abode, our bastion the city of Hebron, may it be speedily built, to publish a book written by my master and grandfather, the marvelous prominent sage of the Sanhedrin, chief rabbi and head of yeshiva in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be speedily built, our esteemed teacher and mentor Eliezer Nachum of sainted and blessed memory, author of the widely reputed [commentary] *Hazon Nachum* on the Orders Kedoshim and Taharot. You have all seen how this man negotiates in a place where the flames of our holy rabbis in each and every generation flare. Rabbi Eliezer’s teachings are concise in quantity but high in quality […] The task, however, is too vast and lengthy to carry out in Eretz [Israel] and the expenses of publishing are so great that, in fact, I cannot afford to do the work without aid and assistance from our impeccable brethren whose hearts prompt them to subscribe. Anyone who, with God’s abundant help, signs herewith will remit the sum of five florins for this work of Torah and read it all the days of his life so that his days may be long.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus, Tama appeals to the “clutchers of Torah” and “support[ers of] its students” for help in publishing the manuscript in a way he imagines as acceptable in this cultural world. Since they are “exceptionally fine gentlemen, clutchers of the Torah and supporters of its students,” he markets the work by describing its Torah virtues in the language of classical traditional literary conventions. The author “negotiates in a place where the flames of our holy rabbis in each and every generation flare”; the work “abounds with profound argumentation […] plunges into mighty waters, [and] circles and proceeds on the sea of the Talmud […] the endless waters.”

Apart from printing this specimen page and its accompanying marketing appeal—asking readers to fund the book by paying for it before publication—Tama turned to Rabbi Benjamin ACohen of Jerusalem, who, in Amsterdam at the time, agreed to proof the manuscript and ready it for printing.[[7]](#footnote-7) Immediately after presenting the sales pitch, Tama adds:

So it happened that I set out from my abode, left my home and a large community, may God protect it, to travel by sea and by land and reach our surviving brethren who have been called by God. As I circulated in this mother-city **Amsterdam**, may God establish it, I found what my soul and my wise, full, and all-embracing spirit had sought: an offspring of saints and a man of priestly lineage, our esteemed teacher Benjamin Moshe son of Meheli ACohen, may the Merciful One preserve and redeem him, one of the sages of the great **Etz Hayyim** beit midrash in this city, may God protect it. My heart rejoiced. I said to him, O my brother, I have come in the matter of this great and dear book and the way is far from me. See, I have prepared a page on which the Jews may be privileged to affix their signatures; then I will leave because I cannot delay. May you go in peace, Benjamin said. So I shall until I place his righteousness before the public like a bright star and I will spare no effort in both printing and in proofing. Then I said, blessed be God who has guided me down the path of truth; may God remunerate him for what he has done.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This description, too, abounds with rabbinical literary conventions that are intended for a deeply religious readership. Tama expected his readers to be impressed with the proofreader’s credentials as a rabbinical scholar—“an offspring of saints and a man of priestly lineage”—and, accordingly, to order the book even before it is printed. Tama stresses not only Benjamin Meheli’s erudition and his affiliation with the famed Etz Hayyim Yeshiva of Amsterdam,[[9]](#footnote-9) but also his rabbinical descent. This is an important point to add because Benjamin Meheli was a young and, presumably, unknown scholar at the time; thus, his lineage was his main virtue in the eyes of the public that Tama wished to reach.[[10]](#footnote-10) Tama concludes by making another pitch, using similar terminology, to the imagined target readership of his book:

And you Jews, may your branch bear fruit[[11]](#footnote-11) to amplify and glorify Torah. It is a tree of life for those who support it. May it protect you so that you may live and multiply many times over in years, in abundant food, and in all manner of wealth, and may your offspring be as eternal as kings on the throne, amen, may God bring it about, each commensurate with the exaltedness of his soul and his piety. As a young person akin to nothingness, Mordecai Tama.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The specimen page that Tama printed is also meant to persuade a specific readership. He did not choose the first page of his grandfather’s work, which begins with an explanation of the following Midrashic passage:

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt.” [From this] I hear that the word came to Moses and Aaron. But it [also] says, “And it was on the day God spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt,” [meaning that] the word came to Moses and not to Aaron.

Indeed, this is the opening passage of Midrash Mekhilta, attributed to Rabbi Ishmael, Section 1:1.[[13]](#footnote-13) As the specimen page, however, Tama chose a passage from Section 2:2, which appears in the manuscript on page 6a and begins by quoting the midrash: “This month is to you the first of the months; it says that Nisan is the first of the months,” and then explains it.[[14]](#footnote-14) The reason is clear. The quotation “This month is to you the first of the months” clearly evokes in any reader a connotation to the famous words with which Rashi begins his commentary on the Torah:

Rabbi Yitzhak said, should not the Torah have begun with “This month is unto you,” this being the first commandment given to the Jews? Wherefore does it start with “In the beginning”? It is because “[God] has shown his people the power of His works, giving them the lands of other nations” [Ps. 111:6].[[15]](#footnote-15)

By offering this passage as a specimen that represents the entire book, Tama appeals to a readership that acknowledges and appreciates Torah study and is committed to the world of the halakha. (After all, the head of the month is the first commandment given to the Israelites.) Thus, it should evoke an emotional associative response among the intended readers in favor of the book that they are asked to finance and purchase.

As stated, Tama’s efforts failed. We have no information about the number of subscribers that he managed to recruit, but it is a fact that R. Eliezer Nachum’s work had to wait almost 240 years to be published. For Tama himself, in contrast, it did not mark the end of his literary activity in the Netherlands. He must have been bitterly disappointed over having failed to raise funds for the cause that had, he said, prompted him to leave his country and city and migrate westward. Nevertheless, Tama made successful inroads in the Amsterdam literary milieu. By studying the two works that Tama published in Amsterdam in 1765—*Pe’er Hador* and *Maskiyot Kessef*—and, above all, noting the way he chosetopresent them to his intended readers, we find that during the interval from his failure to publish *Midrash Eliezer* and his successful publication of the two aforementioned works, Tama internalized the complexity of the Judeo-Spanish culture that he had encountered in Amsterdam and acted in accordance with its values.

In the course of 1765, as stated, Tama published two works in which he specified the year of publication on the title page, per convention. Thus, *Pe’er Hador* was published in “the year of *Kol* ***ma’asesehu be-emuna*** *le-pirqa qama*,” the boldfaced words denoting the year 1765 in Hebrew numerology. Tama also emphasizes on the title page that he had gone to Amsterdam to publish his grandfather’s book and, incidental to his stay there, had the opportunity to publish Maimonides’ responsa after having translated them from Arabic into Hebrew: “Not for faith and for glory and wonders did I come to this country, but to publish a book written by my esteemed grandfather of saintly and blessed memory.”[[16]](#footnote-16) But once the manuscript of Maimonides’ responsa came into his possession, he undertook to translate and publish it: “And God privileged me to copy [translate] it, which I did into my language, a facile language.[[17]](#footnote-17) In signing his name, he also traces his lineage to his grandfather:

Is it not so that the words of this young man, akin to dust, Mordecai the son of my master, my father, the complete and absolute sage, the esteemed teacher and mentor Eliezer Nachum of sainted and blessed memory, and the maternal grandson of the marvelous prominent sage of the Sanhedrin, the mentor and teacher Eliezer Nachum of sainted and blessed memory, author of *Hazon Nachum*, who was head of the [rabbinical] court and head of the yeshiva in Adrianopolis, may God protect it, and in his last days went up to live in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be speedily built, and was received there as head of the [rabbinical] court, head of yeshiva, and teacher of justice.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Indeed, Tama presents himself on the title page in the context of his grandfather and his religious mission to publish the latter’s *Midrash Eliezer.* He also introduces Maimonides’ responsa on the title page and in his two-page “Translator’s Introduction” using classical traditional literary conventions. Thus, he uses the rabbinical expressions *hemda genuza,* a hidden delight,[[19]](#footnote-19) to describe the book, and *amon mekhuse*, a hidden educator, to depict its author[[20]](#footnote-20) Maimonides, "our great and lustrous rabbi"[[21]](#footnote-21) "sits and interprets"[[22]](#footnote-22) and "executes our judgment.[[23]](#footnote-23) Tama uses the term *ha-ish Moshe,* “the man Moses”—an expression taken from the Book of Numbers—in reference to Moses Maimonides, thereby likening Maimonides to the biblical Moses.[[24]](#footnote-24) He depicts Jacob Sasportas—the owner of the manuscript—as a "righteous"and "mild man"[[25]](#footnote-25) who "has a wise heart"[[26]](#footnote-26) "filled with the spirit of wisdom and Torah for its own sake" (*Torah li-shma*) and "one of the descendants of Hobab."[[27]](#footnote-27) Tama likens Sasportas' home to Jerusalem by saying “For there God sent forth the blessing like dew from Mount Hermon.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This is an allusion to Psalm 133:3: “[It is like the dew](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2919.htm%22%20%5Co%20%222919%3A%20ketal%20%28Prep-k%20%3A%3A%20N-msc%29%20--%20Night%20mist%2C%20dew) [of Hermon](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2768.htm%22%20%5Co%20%222768%3A%20cherMon%20%28N-proper-fs%29%20--%20Hermon%20--%20%27sacred%27%2C%20a%20mountain%20in%20southern%20Aram%20%28Syria%29%20and%20Northern%20Israel) [falling](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3381.htm%22%20%5Co%20%223381%3A%20sheiyoRed%20%28Pro-r%20%3A%3A%20V-Qal-Prtcpl-ms%29%20--%20To%20come%20or%20go%20down%2C%20descend) [on](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5921.htm%22%20%5Co%20%225921%3A%20al%20%28Prep%29%20--%20Above%2C%20over%2C%20upon%2C%20against) [of Zion](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6726.htm%22%20%5Co%20%226726%3A%20tziYon%20%28N-proper-fs%29%20--%20Zion%20--%20a%20mountain%20in%20Jerusalem%2C%20also%20a%20name%20for%20Jerusalem), the place where God [bestowed](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6680.htm%22%20%5Co%20%226680%3A%20tzivVah%20%28V-Piel-Perf-3ms%29%20--%20To%20lay%20charge%20%28upon%29%2C%20give%20charge%20%28to%29%2C%20command%2C%20order) [the blessing](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1293.htm%22%20%5Co%20%221293%3A%20habberaChah%20%28Art%20%3A%3A%20N-fs%29%20--%20Benediction%2C%20prosperity) [of life](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2416.htm%22%20%5Co%20%222416%3A%20chaiYim%20%28N-mp%29%20--%20Alive%2C%20raw%2C%20fresh%2C%20strong%2C%20life) eternally."[.](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5704.htm%22%20%5Co%20%225704%3A%20ad%20%28Prep%29%20--%20As%20far%20as%2C%20even%20to%2C%20up%20to%2C%20until%2C%20while)[[29]](#footnote-29) Tama also invokes classical literary conventions in the preface when he thanks those who helped him with his work, e.g., “May the Lord remunerate him for his deed"[[30]](#footnote-30) and “May God bestow blessing upon him.”[[31]](#footnote-31) He then lists their virtues, including "righteous […]with all good characteristic features,"[[32]](#footnote-32) "trustful in God,"[[33]](#footnote-33) "guilelessly righteous,"[[34]](#footnote-34) "as well expounded as Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias,"[[35]](#footnote-35) and so on. Tama concludes his preface with a prayer:

Oh Lord! please give the order to bring your livestock and your children shall return to their country. May the city be rebuilt on its mound and may Israel be triumphant and the great light dominate. And may the temple, our holy temple, our pride, the secure homestead, a tent not to be transported, be built and perfected. And may we, Your people and Your inheritance, ascend the holy mountain, Zion the perfect.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Maimonides' book of halakha, however, is not presented in the monotonous way in which Tama displayed *Midrash Eliezer*. The title page is immediately followed by six pages in Spanish, constituting public correspondence between the owner of the manuscript (Jacob Sasportas) and Tama. In the text dedicated to Tama that describes the translator’s and editor’s virtues under the title *"Devidos Elogios con que se expressa una pequeña parte de los muchos que merece el Traductor desta obra"* (Words of praise and glory that express a tiny fraction of the many praises that this translator deserves),[[37]](#footnote-37) Sasportas presents Tama as someone whose skills and talent sand to his credit in translating Maimonides' responsa. Tama's response, dedicated to Sasportas, follows: *"Epistola dedicatoria del Traductor el illustrisimo y magnifico señor Jacob Sasportas"* (Translator's epistle to the illustrious and magnificent señor). [[38]](#footnote-38)

On the next three pages, Tama introduces the book and mentions those who helped him with his work. Like the Hebrew introduction of the book on the title page and in the Hebrew preface, the text dedicated to Sasportas presents the work to the readers. However, whereas in Hebrew Tama uses classical rabbinical literary conventions, as in his earlier attempts to market his grandfather's book to the Jews of Amsterdam, in the Spanish text he tailors his words and the nature of the description to a different cultural milieu, one that includes Jewish families of Spanish-Portuguese origin who had undergone major acculturation, immersed themselves in the Christian majority society to various degrees, and are no strangers to the values of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Therefore, in these dedicatory remarks, the terminology is less typically Jewish and more universal. Instead of stressing his assistants’ religious virtues and closeness to God, Tama emphasizes the author’s “*lustre de la nobleza y el resplandor del ilustre de los merecimientos propios*” (luster of nobility and personal virtues).[[40]](#footnote-40) Instead of showering the author with traditional rabbinical accolades, Tama calls him “*ilustrísimo y magnifico señor*” (illustrious and magnificent).[[41]](#footnote-41) In the Hebrew introduction, the work is described as important because it is a rabbinical treatise; rabbinical terms such “a hidden delight” and "hidden educator" are used to drive the point home. In the Spanish, the halakhic work is described as “*cientificas consultas y repuestas*” (scientific questions and answers).[[42]](#footnote-42) It deserves to be translated and published, Tama writes, not because it spreads the luster of Torah among the Jewish people but "*para que el mundo lograrse los refulgentes rayos del Sol escondido debaxo de las antipodas de una lengua estranja*" (because it will privilege the **world** with “the splendor of beams from a hidden sun in the mystery of a foreign language”(.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Maimonides, too, after being described in the Hebrew text as a giant in Torah, is depicted differently in Spanish. Now he is “*el mas famozo heroe*” (the most renowned hero), *el doctor*, and “*los más esclarecidos en la antigüedad en España*” (the offspring of the most enlightened and noble of ancient Spain).[[44]](#footnote-44)

These differences reflect Tama’s awareness that the Amsterdam Jewish society is culturally diverse and that alongside classical traditional Jews are many others, affiliated with the Western Sephardi diaspora, who have undergone significant acculturation and take interest in the ideas of the Enlightenment. Both, he realizes, are potential readers of the works that he publishes.

This insight, which evidently inspired Tama to expand the goal of his inclusion to the new cultural circle that he had encountered in Amsterdam, left its imprints in the second work that he published in Amsterdam in 1765, *Maskiyot Kessef*.[[45]](#footnote-45) Here Tama resorts to a genre outside the epitomic sphere of Torah and does so without knowing the author’s identity. That is, he chooses to redact and publish the work not due to its author’s virtues but through an understanding its literary value—either in his own eyes or, perhaps, in those the eyes of the Ibero-Jewish cultural circle in Amsterdam.[[46]](#footnote-46)

On the title page, Tama already acknowledges the author’s anonymity: “This book was found among the rabbinical collection and no one knows which of those holy men he was.”[[47]](#footnote-47) The strengths of the book lie in its contents: “It is a river emanating from Eden that waters all of those who thirst; golden waters emerge from its song of wisdom.” The glossary allows any aspiring writer to enrich and fine-tune his diction and to distinguish among the various meanings of the homonyms that the lexicographer interprets:

For he whose spirit moves him to write, his hand will write a mighty, indefatigable, inexhaustible flow and his superb wording will go before him. For all dicta, a thing and its opposite were taught in the desert; there [God] placed it before him and interpreted its difficult essence.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Apart from being a litterateur’s aid, however, the work derives literary value from an added text that Tama attached to it and emphasized on the title page: The last six pages of the book comprise poetic correspondence between Avraham Badrashi and Todros ben Judah Halevi Abulafia.[[49]](#footnote-49) Again, Tama chooses to present these pages and states on the title page, with emphasis:

Furthermore, ancient words will follow as were written by one of the early ones, first among the speakers: our esteemed teacher and mentor **Avraham** Badrashi of sainted and blessed memory, to the great rabbi, chieftain of the chieftains of the Levites, our esteemed teacher and mentor **Todros** Halevi of sainted and blessed memory, a high official in the kingdom of **Castille,** to show the peoples and the mighty its beauty.[[50]](#footnote-50)

These sets of correspondence, and the rationale for publishing them, are introduced again in the title on the top of the page where they begin, emphasizing their cultural importance in Tama’s eyes: “I saw [fit] here to present a writing of the late Rabbi Avraham Badrashi that I consider the embodiment of crisp eloquence. I placed it here because I consider it straightforward.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Tama appears to have internalized the important place of poetry in the literary milieu of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jews and the importance of the medieval Judeo-Spanish literary oeuvre, which these Jews consider a proud national legacy.[[52]](#footnote-52) Therefore, although the two books that Tama published in Amsterdam in 1765 are different in genre, both Maimonides’ halakhic tome and Solomon Dapiera’s philological treatise, to which Tama attached poetic correspondence from medieval Spain, may be included as part of the trend that Irene Zwiep calls “literary archaeology.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

In his edition of *Maskiyot Kessef,* which he intended to be an aid for “he whose spirit moves him to write,” to which he appended texts that may serve those in this milieu as models for writing, Tama tailored his literary activity to the cultural circle that he apparently wished to join. However, the clearest and most epitomic expression of Tama’s wish to belong to the constellation of the Amsterdam literary culture appears on the last three pages of *Maskiyot Kessef.* On these pages, which track the poetic correspondence between Avraham Badrashi and Todros ben Judah Halevi Abulafia, Tama describes in verse, under the title *Divrei Emet* (*Emet* punctuated in the form of an acronym, probably of *Anokhi Mordecai Tama*—I am Mordecai Tama) his first encounter with Amsterdam. Tama describes this city as “altogether handsome and demure,” “the mother of countries, for it is the source of the bread of knowledge and the path of reason.” Then Tama switches to a description of Solomon Salem, rabbi of Amsterdam’s Sephardi community, using expressions that denote sanctity[[54]](#footnote-54):

As I looked on, I beheld a flame taking hold and spreading and a man standing within it: Rikha bar Rikha [a king and son of a king, cf. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 4a], his features like an angel of God, immensely awesome, and there was a mighty scepter [cf. Jer. 47?17] and I was shocked and I flinched. […] Then I turned to the right and saw the chieftains of the community calling me, and I pleaded with them and spoke to them, saying, If I have pleased you, you are all standing together today, please tell me the name of the man who is king unto me, whose legs run from every town and region, and [tell me] if he is part of a dream-spectacle and if he is one of the seraphim seated in the highest realm. Then all the people answered in unison and said, long live Solomon the king.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Continuing, Tama’s imagined interlocutors glorify R. Solomon Salem and his works and Tama, stricken with feelings of inferiority in view of their rhetorical capability, is afraid to join the chorus of praise: “I fell speechless, unable to answer.”[[56]](#footnote-56) To Tama’s aid appears a wondrous figure who encourages him to dare to attempt to integrate into the local literary milieu:

A spirit cast me aloft and hurled me under one of the bushes, it was the offspring of brethren, he found me and I wondered as he saw me in silent amazement. He replied, asking me why I had gone into hiding to flee from them—Have you not seen that they were offering [sacrifices] and gift-offerings and libations? Wherever the wise cast their eyes, you, too, should do as they did. […] Now you, blessed one of God, rise and take for yourself a galley.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Tama is convinced: “And I said, it is taught that the bashful do not learn. I, too, will not fear the masses and the fruit of their hands and my hands, like theirs, will write of controversy.” Immediately he presents a poem of his own in honor of Solomon Salem, in which the words *ahuda azamer / a’orer tehina / hayyim ve-shalom / le-ha-rav mana* arerepeatedineach line in varying order.[[58]](#footnote-58) After having urged Tama to write, the angel now frowns on this poetic writing and reproaches the poet:

You have added pain to pain, he said, because I had thought of you as one who knows and here I see that you are a deceiver, because I saw neither title nor grandeur in your words because they repeat themselves as does a year in which [the month of] Adar is doubled, and you defiled roots and circumvented them, and made rough ground level, and said, I will come into them.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Continuing, the angel places worthy poetic utterances in Tama’s mouth, whereupon the land opens its mouth and responds with poetry of its own. After this, he reproves Tama again:

He said, had I not told you before that you know nothing? You will let your hand tug at a quill that is obstructed [i.e., you will clutch only blocked-up quill pens that are unfit for writing]. All these words are far from Tama; what prompts you to resort to song and praise that will cause the trees of the forest to sing, to befriend the entire community and the elders at the gate so that they will sing? This way is so far from you; your tongue should cleave to the pen of a fast scribe [i.e., you should say only words produced by a scribe who writes quickly, i.e., a skilled one]. [Then] will the opening of your message spread light.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Nevertheless, Tama states in response: “So I said, I will then sing the songs and praises of Solomon, may God be with him.”[[61]](#footnote-61) He concludes with a seventeen-line poem in R. Solomon Salem’s honor, of which the last lines are “May Solomon be as long-lived as the land / a chieftain and a pioneer in our midst.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

In *Divrei Emet*, Tama portrays himself as ostensibly unfit to join the Amsterdam community of poets, who are more verbally adroit than he is. An angel of God appears before him, encouraging him to write, but is disappointed by his ineptitude as a poet in comparison with these imagined "chieftains of the community.” Tama’s self-depiction, however, is but ostensible because he is also the author of the plaudits of the imagined scribes of Amsterdam whose writings he fails to equal, of the angel’s remarks, and of the song of the land, the mouth of which “speaks with wisdom [cf. Prov. 31:26], fair as the moon, bright as the sun” [cf. Song of Songs 6:10]. Although his wish on these pages is to praise R. Solomon Salem as a rabbinical personality, Tama immediately presents his own image as someone who, upon reaching Amsterdam, finds its culture impressive and wishes to join it. His crafty use of the convention of *soi disant* humility, however, does not stop Tama from concluding his remarks with a paean to R. Solomon Salem, even after the angel dismisses him as an ignoramus. Indeed, Tama succeeds in his self-defined task: “My mouth is like theirs and my hand is like theirs.” By lauding the local rabbi in poetry, in effect he praises himself as a poet who is fit to join the literary milieu of the Jews of Amsterdam.[[63]](#footnote-63) The poetic remarks with which Tama concludes the book converge with the six-line poem that he wrote and chose to present on the title page. The literary endeavor, including medieval Sephardi poetry, that Tama redeems from oblivion is therefore printed in a book that begins and ends with poetry produced by Tama himself.

Indeed, the man who set out from Hebron to publish a Midrashic work quickly learned how to fit into the cultural circle that he encountered and master its literary taste by invoking appropriate terminologies and literary devices. Tama’s subsequent doings in Western Europe, including marrying into an Amsterdam Sephardi family[[64]](#footnote-64) and settling in the Sephardi community of Bordeaux—to be discussed separately—attest to his success in the cultural integration to which he aspired.

1. According to Tama's marriage license in Amsterdam (1775), he was born in 1740. See Dave Verdooner and Harmen Snel (eds.), *Trouwen in Mokum, 1598–1811: Jewish Marriage in Amsterdam*, Vol. I, The Hague, 1991, p. 212. In the approbation by R. Solomon Salem, chief rabbi of the Sephardi community of Amsterdam, to *Pe'er Hador—* a collection of Maimonides’ responsa published by Tama in Amsterdam in 1765, Salem refers to Tama by the Aramaic term *yaniq ve-hakim,* “young and clever,” and describes his arrival to Amsterdam with the biblical words *akh yatso yatsa*, “was yet scarce gone out” (cf. Genesis 27:30—“Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting”). It therefore seems that Tama arrived in Amsterdam at an early age (probably in his early twenties) and not long before 1765. See Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* Amsterdam 1765, p. 6a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See R. Haim Yosef David Azulai in the manuscript of his bio-bibliographic book *Shem ha-Gedolim:* “When he [R. Eliezer Nachum] was old, in the year 5495 (1735) he came to the holy city Jerusalem and was accepted as a chief rabbi and a head of a yeshiva. And he died old and full of days in the year 5505 (1745).” Azulai, *Shem ha-Gedolim* A, JTS Ms. 5387, p. 5a. Most of these details were omitted from the printed edition of the book. See Azulai, *Shem Ha-Gedolim* A, Livorno 1774, p. 10a. On R. Eliezer Nachum, see Yaakov S. Spiegel, Introduction to: R. Eliezer Nachum, *Hazon Nachum* (The Vision of Nahum), Jerusalem 1986 (Hebrew); Meir Benayahu, “R. Eliezer Nachum, His History, His Status among the Sages of Turkey, and His Compositions,” in R. Eliezer Nachum, *Commentary on Sifre,* Jerusalem 1993, pp. 5–64 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the title page of *Pe'er Hador,* Tama mentions his attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer* as the purpose of his trip to Amsterdam. Clearly, then, the attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer* preceded the publishing projects of 1765. It also stands to reason that if *Pe'er Hador* had been published before his attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer,* Tama would have mentioned it as part of his marketing efforts. This is also the chronology described in R. Solomon Salem’s approbation for *Pe'er Hador:* Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* Amsterdam 1765, p. 6a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Eliezer Nachum, *Commentary on Mekhilta,* Jerusalem, 1999 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Financing of publishing projects by subscribers was a well-known phenomenon in the eighteenth century, especially in publishing literary works in serial form, volume after volume, over a period of several years. See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie, 1775-1800*, Cambridge 1979, pp .287-294, and, in the Jewish world, Zeev Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World,* 1700–1900, Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007, pp. 2223, 144; Avriel Bar-Levav, “Between Library Awareness and the Jewish Republic of Letters,” in Yosef Kaplan and Moshe Sluhovsky (eds.), *Libraries and Book Collections,* Jerusalem: Shazar, 2006, pp. 217–218 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eliezer Nachum, Midrash Eliezer, JTS, Ms. 5535, [I]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Benjamin Moshe son of Haim Shalom Meheli ACohen left Jerusalem and traveled to Western Europe as an emissary of the city of Tiberias. During the 1770s and 1780s, he published several books in Hamburg, The Hague, and Amsterdam. See Abraham Yaari, *Emissaries from the Land of Israel*, Jerusalem 1951, pp. 517, 852 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eliezer Nachum, *Midrash Eliezer,* JTS, Ms. 5535, [I]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Benjamin is mentioned in the 'Vesitiaria dos Talmidim', a charity that collected money for the students of Etz Hayyim, who received allowances from these funds for the purpose of buying clothing: SAA (Stadsarchief Amsterdam) 334, PJC 1190, p.30. I thank Heide Warncke of the Etz Hayyim library and Ton Tielen for their help. On the Etz Hayyim students’ support system, see Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare among the Portuguese Jews in Early Modern Amsterdam*, Oxford 2012, pp. 98–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. According to his marriage license (Amsterdam, 1772), Benjamin was born in 1743. Thus, when Tama wrote these words, he was approximately twenty years of age. In the license, it is stated that Benjamin ACohen, born in Jerusalem, married Simcha Calo in 1772. Dave Verdooner and Harmen Snel (eds.), *Trouwen in Mokum, 1598–1811: Jewish Marriage in Amsterdam*, Vol I, The Hague, 1991, p. 205. Benjamin's ketuba confirms that the groom is indeed Benjamin Meheli ACohen in that it identifies him by his full name: CAA 334, PJC 396, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Ezekiel 36:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Eliezer Nachum, *Midrash Eliezer,* JTS, Ms. 5535, [I]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 1b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 6b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rashi on Genesis 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* title page. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Yalkut Shimoni,* Numbers 16:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Genesis Rabba 1, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* title page. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, p. 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., “The Man Moses,” Numbers, 12: 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. By using this term (*ish tam*), he likens the owner of the manuscript, Jacob Sasportas, to the biblical Jacob, who is reported as being “a mild man” (Genesis 25:27). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Maimonides, Pe'er Hador, title page. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 13b. The expression “one of the descendants of Hobab” denotes a person who is fond of the Torah, according to the Midrashic interpretation of the seven names of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. See Midrash Tanhuma, Yitro, 4, and elsewhere. Another interpretation of the name Hobab is “he who is beloved [*haviv*] by the Lord.” Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro, 1, and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* title page. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., Preface by the copyist and proofreader, p. 14a. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. “Like Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias,” according to Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 29a, is an intellectually sharp person. See Rashi ad loc: “I am ready to sharply answer anyone who asks me, like Ben Azzai who expounded the markets of Tiberias and no one in his time uprooted mountains as he did.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., preface by copyist and proofreader, p. 14b. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., p. III. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., p. VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See, for example, on this topic: José Faur, *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity*, New York 1992; Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*; idem., *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro*, Oxford 1989; Jonathan Israel, “Philosophy, Deism, and Early Jewish Enlightenment (1655-1740),” in Yosef Kaplan (ed.), *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, Leiden 2008, pp. 173–201. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador,* p. VII. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., p. VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., p. VII. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., pp. VII–VIII. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. It seems that *Pe'er Hador* was published before *Maskiyot Kessef* because in the approbation to *Maskiyot Kessef,* written by the poet Abraham Bashan Tama, the following is mentioned: “His hands established the copy of *Pe'er Hador,* which is the responsa of the great eagle Maimonides […] and all the people at the gate and the elders praised it.” Solomon Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kessef*, Amsterdam 1765, p. 2a. As for the year of publication of *Maskiyot Kessef,* see Meijer Marcus Roest, *Catalog der Hebraica und Judaica aus der L. Rosenthal'schen Bibliothek*, Amsterdam 1875, p. 1119. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. On the book and on Tama's edition, which is only part of Dapiera's manuscript, see Aharon Maman, *Otzrot Lashon: The Hebrew Philology Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America,* New York and Jerusalem, 2006, pp. 213–214, 224–225. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Jefim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France,* Jerusalem 1997, pp. 377–379, 469–484. On the correspondence between them, see ibid, pp. 472–473 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Solomon Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kessef*, title page. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 23b. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Irene Zwiep, “Jewish Enlightenment Reconsidered: The Dutch Eighteenth Century,” in Resianne Fontaine, Andrea Schatz, and Irene Zwiep (eds.), *Sepharad in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and Eighteenth-Century Enlightened Jewish Discourse*, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 291–293; A. Van Der Heide, “Dutch Hebrew Poetry of the 17th Century,” in Jozeph Michman (ed.), *Dutch Jewish History*, II, Maastricht 1989, pp. 137–152. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Zwiep, "Jewish Enlightenment Reconsidered: The Dutch Eighteenth Century", pp. 291–292. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. On R. Solomon Salem, a student of Tama's grandfather, see Zvi Loker, “Rabbi Shlomo (Solomon) Salem—from Salonika to Amsterdam,” *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry*, V, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 113–133. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Solomon Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kessef*, p. 26b. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., pp. 26b–27a. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., p. 27a. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., pp. 27a–27b. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Apart from the words of the imaginary “chieftains of the community,” the book includes, on its first pages, two poetic approbations by real local poets—Abraham Bashan and Moses Raphael Hisquia da Vega; ibid., pp. 2a–2b. Poetic approbations from this kind were common in the Amsterdam literary milieu; Tama himself uses this method in a poem of his own that appears, among other local poems, on the first pages of David Franco Mendes' play *Gemul Atalya—*giving further indication of Tama's integration into the local cultural circle. See David Franco Mendes, *Gemul Atalya* (Amsterdam, 1770). On the poetic approbations, see Jozeph Michman, “On 'Gemul Atalya' by David Franco Mendes,” in idem, *Mikhmanei Yosef: Studies in the History and Literature of the Dutch Jews*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 465 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Tama's marriage registration to Clara del Sotto (1775) appears in the community records; see note 1 above. On the del Sotto family in Amsterdam, see Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*, London 2000, pp. 252–258. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)