**Light and darkness as reflected in the poetry of Rambam and Rihal**

The poetry of R. Moshe Ibn Ezra (also known as the Rambam, 1055-1140) and R. Yehuda Halevi (a.k.a. Rihal, 1075-1141) reflect their personal experiences, upheavals during their lives, and changes that occurred between the early and later periods of these poets’ lives. The poetry that the Rambam and Rihal wrote in the early periods of their lives, express an elevated mood of vivacity, light, the joy of life, stability, happiness, and wealth. In contrast, the poetry written in the later, more difficult periods of their lives show a dark, despondent mood, reflecting hardship, instability, wandering, alienation, and loss of their homeland.

Study of the Rambam’s life history indicates that there were few poets like him in the Sephardic world of his time. He was a rare and special person in all ways, with special talent expressed in his work and his life. The strange and intriguing events in the life of Moshe Ibn Ezra have always attracted the attention of poets – his contemporaries as well as those who studied his life and work long after his death.

Significantly, Moshe Ibn Ezra helped establish a circle of educated young poets. One of the young poets whose talents Rambam discovered was Yehuda Halevi. Halevi received great support and encouragement from the Rambam and became one of the most prominent Jewish-Spanish poets of the time.

Among the most interesting aspect of the lives of both these poets is the division in each of their lives between two vastly different, even opposite, phases. Both were privileged to experience the beauty of the world and to live happy lives of wealth, pleasure and joy. Following this, both were forced to taste the bitterness of the world, causing them suffering and loneliness until the end of their days.

Clearly, people are affected by the environment and atmosphere in which they live. People who perceive the time and place in which they live as positive, will live a pleasant life. A person who is not suited to the time, place, and environment may suffer throughout life. These factors affect people’s personality and mood, which are then reflected in their behavior or work.

Both of these poets were influenced by the conditions they experienced, the good and the bad. The changing conditions they experienced brought about a fundamental shift in their mood and psyche, which was reflected in many of the poems they wrote. Happiness and an uplifting mood can be seen in the poems they wrote during times of calm and tranquility, while it is easy to recognize their suffering and despondent mood in the poems they wrote in the difficult and bitter days. To illustrate the impact of life histories and crossroads in the poets’ lives, I will cite examples of poems and the fateful events that caused a reversal in the design of their poetry, which reflected their unstable lives.

**Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra (1055 -1140)**

This poet, bard, and philosopher in the golden age of Spanish Jewry is considered one of the greatest Jewish poets of all time. He was born in Granada, into a respectable and well-established Jewish family. He received a comprehensive education in both Judaism and Arab science and culture. According to Rabbi Saadia Ibn Danan, one of the Rambam’s teachers was Rabbi Yitzchak Ibn Giat. His three brothers, Yitzchak, Yosef, and Zarhiya, were also described as “wise and educated in all wisdom.”

Then, when the Rambam was about 35 years old, a radical Muslim movement (the Murabitun) invaded Muslim Spain and conquered Granada. Most of the city’s Jews fled. Moshe Ibn Ezra fled north, to Christian Spain, and never again had the privilege of seeing his children, who died while he was still alive. The Rambam is considered one of the greatest poets of his generation. He composed poetry, piyyutim and studies of poetry, and supported young poets, including Rabbi Yehuda Halevi.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to the sources, the history of Rambam's life can be divided into two important stages in his life: The Granada period and the

**The Granada period - happiness and wealth.** This first period (1055-1090) had a specific impact on the psyche of Moshe Ibn Ezra. During this time, the city of Granada in southern Spain was one of the most important cities for the Jews in Andalusia. But the assassination of Joseph the Great Governor of the Kingdom of Granada caused an abrupt change in the lives of Jews. Despite this difficult situation, the Granada Jewish community prospered and again became rich people who could occupy important positions in the government.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Ibn Ezra family was one of the most respected, privileged and wealthy families. They held important roles in the government. There were four sons in the family: the eldest son Yitzhak, followed by Moshe, Yehuda and Yosef. Of these four brothers, Moshe Ibn Ezra was the most prominent. He gained high status in Granada, served in various positions in the royal court and was the chief of police (Zahab al-Sharta).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In his youth, Rambam studied at a famous yeshiva in the city of Alissana near Granada. At that yeshiva, was of one of the greatest sages in Spain, Yitzhak ben Giat, who wrote a book of Jewish law, commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, and was also a great poet. Moshe learned from him in depth and was greatly influenced by him in the field of sacred poetry. In addition to Rambam’s comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the Hebrew language, he studied and became proficient in written and spoken Arabic, as well as becoming well-versed in Greek philosophy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Moshe Ibn Ezra was highly educated and made a great contribution to establishing a circle of educated and young poets. One of the young people whose talents he discovered was Yehuda Halevi, who he supported and encouraged to a great extent.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During this period in his life, Moshe Ibn Ezra authored a massive book comprised of closely related poems. In this book, Moshe addressed issues typical of secular poetry, such as the beauty of youth, decency, love, and separation. In addition, Moshe had special sections on old age, asceticism, and lamentations.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, he addressed these latter issues only briefly, without devoting much space to them in his book. From this it can be seen that the poet’s mental state was positive and optimistic, expressing a strong desire to enjoy life. He emphasized this in his works. He wrote many poems describing the pleasures and beauty of the world, songs of praise, wine, and love, which also reflect his positive mood, the joy and pleasures of this period in his life.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is important to note that Moshe Ibn Ezra was the only Jewish composer in the Middle Ages to author a comprehensive poetics book on the theory and of Hebrew poetry. His *Book of Studies and Discussions (Katab al-Muhachara and al-Mu'dakra*) was originally written in Arabic with Hebrew transliteration. This book is intended to guide young poets and to educate an audience that did not recognize the value and seriousness of the field of poetry. It was written, allegedly, after one of the poet's acquaintances presented him with eight questions about the history, essence, and teachings of poetry.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Moshe Ibn Ezra's poetry faithfully represents the norms described in this book. His anthology of secular poems contains all the genres that were widespread in Spain at the time: poems of praise and friendship, poems of wine and love, poems of complaint, contemplation, asceticism, lamentation, refinement, and wit.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As I mentioned above, the Rambam acquired, alongside a Jewish and Torah education, a comprehensive Arabic education. He learned the Arabic language and was proficient in spoken Arabic. Diverse peoples lived together in the Iberian Peninsula at that time: Muslims, Christians, and Jews, each group with its own language. The rulers of this island were Muslims, so many of the inhabitants learned Arabic, as did the Jews of Spain who lived within and absorbed Arab culture. In particular, Spanish poets saw Arabic poetry as a high art. Their admiration of Arabic poetry caused them to seek similar means of expression. The strong and comprehensive influence of Arabic poetry can be seen in their poems. This influence is prominent in the forms and content, motifs, and images that characterize them.

Until the blossoming of Hebrew poetry in Spain in the 10th century, Hebrew poetry had been almost entirely sacred poetry. Medieval Jews composed mainly piyyutim that dealt with religious issues, Torah observance, and religious commandments. They served as public messengers, speaking for the people as the voice of the congregation. However, Arabic poetry ushered in a fundamental change and renewal in Hebrew poetry. Many poets began to incorporate personal reflections and characteristics into their poetry. That is, they wrote poetry about themselves. At the core of their poems is the individual recounting personal experiences, pleasures and enjoyment. Only in a few cases did they make any reference to the religious system.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. Schirmann, 1996, p. 385. (*History of Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain*) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schirmann, 1996, p. 385; Staal, 1990, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schirmann, 1996, p. 385 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schirmann, 1996, p. 382 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schirmann, 1997, p. 362 (*History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schirmann, 1997, p. 363 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schirmann, 1996, p. 391 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schirmann, 1996, p. 383 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yishai, 2010, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elitzur, 2004, pp. 70-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)