**The Status of Hebrew: Maimonides, R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi and R. Abraham Abulafia**

Religious texts share/often share their sanctity with the languages in which they are written. Already in talmudic literature, Hebrew – the language of the Bible – was referred to as the “Holy Language.” Likewise, Islam sanctified the language of the Quran, Arabic, codifying as a principle of faith that it is a sublime language, beyond translation. One Jewish philosopher sought to explain why the Vulgate translation of the Old Testament was not equivalent to the Hebrew original. This man was Joseph Ibn Kaspi, Gersonides’ Provencal contemporary. His major literary endeavor, one out of almost twenty works, was his commentary on Scripture, written in the spirit of Maimonidean philosophy, and based on principles of logic and linguistics. He also composed a book on the principles of the Hebrew language, soon to be published by Dr. Moshe Kahan, which he entitled *Retuqot Kesef*,as well as a composition on Hebrew verb roots entitled *Sharshot Kesef*.

Abraham Abulafia and Ibn Kaspi both authored commentaries on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. As already demonstrated by Moshe Idel, it is quite likely that the radical rationalist Joseph Ibn Kaspi was familiar with the works of his predecessor, the mystic Rabbi Abraham Abulafia – even if he never mentions him by name. In the present discussion/lecture I wish to point to a further point of contact between these two figures – their respective understandings of Hebrew and its sanctity.

In order to place the emphasis on the approach to Hebrew espoused by R. Abraham’s Abulafia, the subject of today’s conference, we will deviate from chronological order: we will begin by presenting Maimonides’ position on Hebrew and Ibn Kaspi’s response. We will then conclude by discussing the uniqueness of Abulafia’s approach, demonstrating how it differs from the positions taken by his predecessor and his successor.

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**Maimonides:**

To present Maimonides’ position, we will begin by contrasting it to the position of another Jewish philosopher – Judah Halevi – who articulates an approach to Hebrew in his *Kuzari*, a book with which Maimonides may have been familiar. Halevi writes:

The language created by God, which He taught Adam and placed on his tongue and in his heart, is without any doubt the most perfect and most fitted to express the things specified, as it is written: “And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (Gen. 2:19). This means that it deserved such name which fitted and characterized it. This shows the excellence of the “holy tongue” as well as the reason why the angels employed it in preference to any other. Writing is judged from a similar point of view. The shapes of the letters are not the result of accident, but of a device which is in harmony with the character of each letter.

According to Judah Halevi, Hebrew is not a conventional language; it is divine, the language spoken by God Himself (as discussed in midrashic traditions). It is also a natural language, as defined by Plato in *Cratylus* – that is, its words have an intrinsic relationship with the objects which they signify.

Maimonides, however, thought otherwise. According to Maimonides, neither God (nor, it seems, the angels) speak with “letters and a voice” (*Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 65; II, 12). Commenting on the verse “and the man gave names” (Gen. 2:20), Maimonides explains that “[this] informs us that languages are conventional not natural, as has sometimes been thought” (*Guide* II, 51).

Thus, while Maimonides does characterize Adam’s language as Hebrew, he does not envision it as a natural language in which words correspond to the objects which they signify. Like other languages, Hebrew is conventional. Nevertheless, Maimonides extolled Hebrew and even justified the appellation given to it by the Sages – the Holy Language.

According to Maimonides, the sounds of Hebrew are excellent, although in this it is no different than other languages spoken by the inhabitants of temperate climates such as the Arabs and Greeks:

In his Book of Elements, Abu Nasser Alfarabi mentioned that people living in temperate climates are more perfect in their intelligence and, in general, have more pleasant forms, that is their shape is more orderly, the composition of their organs is better and their constitution is better proportioned than people living in the far northern or southern climates. So too the pronunciation of letters by people from temperate climates and the movement of their organs of articulation during speech is more even. They are closer to the human language, and the enunciation of letters and the movement of their speech organs is clearer than that of the people of distant climates and their language, just as Galen asserted. Galen did not mean the Greek vernacular alone, but it and similar ones, such as the Greek language, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian and Aramaic. These are the languages of (people in) temperate climates and are natural to them, according to the different places and their proximity (or distance from one another). (The Medical Aphorisms of Moses Maimonides)

Hebrew’s script (*Ashuri*) is also excellent, according to Maimonides. As he writes in his commentary on the Mishnah (Yadayim 4:5):

And this script with which we write the Torah is *Ashuri*, with which the Exalted One wrote the Pentateuch. And *Ashuri* denotes greatness and honor […] as the Sages stated “[it is called] *Ashuri* [because] it is a beautiful [*meushar*] script (JT Megila 71b), for its letters are not interchangeable, and it has no cases of doubt, for no letter is similar to another and no letter connects to the one beside it; other forms of script are not like this.

Maimonides contrasts Hebrew to the language with which he was familiar, Arabic, its cursive script inimical, in his opinion, to proper reading. Since the primary purpose of a language is to facilitate human communication, its sound should be sweet to the ears, and its script clear and easy to read.

These qualities notwithstanding, Hebrew’s sanctity lies, according to Maimonides, elsewhere. It seems that Maimonides, like his predecessors (R. Judah Halevi for example), was forced to respond to the accusation that Hebrew lacks a rich vocabulary. While Maimonides seems to have assumed that the language had once been different – when it was spoken in the Land of Israel in the Mishnaic period (Terumot 1:1) – he nevertheless rose to the challenge. Paradoxically, Maimonides praises Hebrew precisely because of its limitations, lauding what it lacks, contrasting it in this regard to Arabic.

In his commentary on *Avot* (1:17), Maimonides divides speech into different categories based on value. On the one hand, there are forms of speech which should be eschewed: (1) forbidden speech, and (2) dirty/detestable speech. On the other hand, there is (3) mandated speech for the purposes of studying and teaching Torah, and (4) speech with exalted content intended to impart ethical lessons, that is, “Derekh Erets.” Maimonides refers here to the “excellence” of Hebrew. He explains “that it should be only be used for excellent things [...] and the law has forbidden the use of the language of prophecy [i.e. biblical expressions] for lowly and indecent types of song.”

In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides characterizes language in general as man’s essential attribute, his proprium. He maintains that it reflects divine grace/kindness bestowed upon man to allow him to “learn and teach” (*Guide* III, 8). The task of teaching raises the question of language in general. Sanctity, according to Maimonides, is an intellectual category: according to him, becoming “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” is achieved “through knowledge of Him” (*Guide* III, 32). Here and elsewhere, Maimonides proposes a binary opposition between sanctity and impurity. This opposition corresponds to another binary opposition in Maimonides’ thought, described by Professor Stern, between the intellectual form and lowly matter, the latter pertaining to such base matters as the sense of touch, sex and impurity. In other words, Maimonides awards the Holy Language the highest qualitative score not because other languages are non-sacred (belonging to the empty set, as it were) but rather because they lie on the opposite extreme of the spectrum; they are impure (Guide III, 8):

Multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they used for Baal. I can also give the reason why this our language is called the Holy Language. It should not be thought that this is, on our part, an empty appellation or a mistake; in fact it is indicative of true reality. For in this holy language no word at all has been laid down in order to designate either the male or the female organ of copulation, nor are there words designating the act itself that brings about generation, the sperm, the urine, or the excrements. No word at all designating, according to its first meaning, any of these things has been laid down in the Hebrew language, they being signified by terms used in a figurative sense and by allusions. It was intended thereby to indicate that these things ought not to be mentioned and consequently that no terms designating them should be coined. For these are things about which one ought to be silent; however, when necessity impels mentioning them, a device should be found to do it by means of expressions deriving from other words, just as the most diligent endeavor should be made to be hidden when necessity impels doing these things. The male organ they have called gid [sinew], which is used because of the likeness; for they have said: And thy neck is an iron sinew. They have also called it shaphkha [instrument for pouring-out] because of its function. The female organ has been called qebatha [her stomach], qeba being the term designating the stomach. As for rehem [vulva] it is the term designating the part of the entrails in which the fetus is formed. The term designating excrements is so°a, deriving from yaṣoc *[to* go out]. The term designating urine is meme raglayim [waters of the feet]. The term designating sperm is shikhbath zerac [layer of seed]. The act itself that brings about generation has no name at all, the following expressions signifying it: yishkab [he lies], yibcal [he marries], yiqaḥ [he takes], yegalleh cervah [he uncovers the nakedness], and no others. The verb yishgal should not lead you into error so that you think that it is the term designating this action, for shegal is merely the term designating a female slave prepared for copulation. Thus: At thy right hand doth stand the female slave. And its saying, yishgalenah, in the text that is written, means he shall take her as a slave girl for this purpose.

Nahmanides criticized Maimonides’ approach, and proposed an alternative:

I hold that this is the same reason why our Rabbis call the language of the Torah “the Holy Language” because the words of the Torah and the prophecies, and all words of holiness were expressed in that language. It is thus the language in which the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke with his prophets, and with his congregation [...] and in that tongue He is called by his sacred name [...] and in that tongue he created the world, and called the names *shamayim* [heavens], and *aretz* [earth] [...].

Now the Rabbi has written in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 8) “Do not think that our language is called the Holy Language just as a matter of pride, or it be an error on our part, but it is perfectly justified; for this holy language has no special names for the organs of generation [...]”

And the reason he mentioned is in my opinion not correct. The mere fact that the word *yishgalenah* is read as *yishkavenah* shows that the word *mishgal* is a noun referring to sexual intercourse. [...] Now there is no need for this reason, for it is clear that the Hebrew language is holy of holies, as I have explained. And if the reason were indeed as the Rabbi has said, they would not have called it the “Holy Language” but rather “the clean language” [...]

Nachmanides distinguished between two terms used by the Sages “The Holy Language” and “a clean/pure language”. The Holy Language is the tongue of the sacred: whether it be the speech used in the heavens (as maintained by Judah Halevi) or the language of Scripture. “Clean/Pure language,” however, possesses those characteristics which Maimonides attributes to Hebrew: it is the language of the *Qeri* (*yishkavenah* – to lie with) which is used to replace the *Ketiv* (*yishgalenah* – to copulate with).

It should be noted that Maimonides’ characterization of Hebrew as a clean language was already articulated by Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra who writes:

The modesty of our language and the purity of our idiom mean that they do not naturally include abusive, insolent or frivolous expressions, nor mockery or obscenity, to the point where even the private parts of the sex organs and things that we do not speak that when there is necessity, they are evoked only in the form of allusions, euphemisms or metonyms.

**Ibn Kaspi**

Abulafia’s and Ibn Kaspi’s respective commentaries on the *Guide* do not address Maimonides’ approach to Hebrew. However, Ibn Kaspi’s view of the Maimonidean position appears in his commentary on the Pentateuch, *Matzref la-Kesef*. Explaining the verse “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:2).

Indeed, the Teacher in his book spoke at great length about the superiority of our language, which designates no terms, that is, nouns, [to describe] ugly matters. See in his book (III, 88). But I say, without detracting from his honor, the following:

Those who created the Hebrew language were not careful about this matter [...] for there is nothing in all the [Hebrew] language which does not derive from that which it signifies [...] [for example,] the organ known as *kelayot* [kidneys] is called thus because it is the final cause [*takhliti*] of the blood and its essence [...] [and although] the significations of many words elude us [...] [this is because] the use [of the language] has been discontinued in the Diaspora [...] and regarding this matter there is no doubt.

In my opinion, this is the case with Arabic as well. Averroes has spoken about this at length at the beginning of his Epitome on the Organon; see there. And in truth, I have not found this honorable virtue – that words reflect the nature of things [they signify] – in the language of the Romans/Latin. For that language is less virtuous than our own. And this is because [it lacks] that virtue which we have mentioned. For I have not found that the Roman/Latin word for kidney signifies anything about its nature or its accidents [...] and in general, I have not found any rationale for the names they apply to things, [and no connection] to the essence or accidents of objects. All I have found is random and arbitrary permutations of letters, and God forfend, [if] such a thing [be said of] Hebrew. [...]

And if they [=those who created the Hebrew language] gave names to other things, which do not indicate their nature or any of its accidents [attributes] as is the case in Roman/Latin, then they did so when they [applied names] to ugly things as well, for the masters of language are no fools, that the mention of such words would be a matter of jest and ridicule. But everything has a name -- a necessity if it is to be signified.

Ibn Kaspi claims that language labels all objects equally. Were Hebrew not a language in which all the names of signifiers are derived from qualities of the object signified, those who created Hebrew would not have refrained from labelling ugly objects with names not derived from them. To them, discussing such matters would not devolve into jest. Words in Hebrew, however, (and apparently in Arabic as well), signify the characteristics of signified objects. This is unlike the inferior Latin in which words are nothing but arbitrary combinations of characters and phonemes.

The language of Hebrew writer Ibn Kaspi’s Christian environment was different than that of Moses Ibn Ezra and Maimonides who lived in Arabic speaking lands and wrote in the Arabic language. It should be noted that Ibn Kaspi recounts a dispute he once had with a member of the Christian clergy regarding the status of the Hebrew Bible as opposed to the Latin “Old Testament.” Ibn Kaspi emphasized the inherent superiority of the text in its original language, citing as an example the impossibility of translating God’s names. It is also impossible, according to Ibn Kaspi, to properly translate letter permutations which exist only in Hebrew and which are subject to anagrammatic rereading or innovative re-divisions, such as those mentioned in the *Guide of the Perplexed* II, 43: “*habol - bahol*, *egel - ga’al*, *hashmal*” and others. To these Capsi added further examples “*Lemech* - *melekh*” and “*kerubim* - *rekhubim*.”

According to Ibn Kaspi all words in Hebrew have an informative meaning. This even includes the names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet which, when read in order, can be understood as a sentence: “*Alef* – learn what he says to you; and that is that you should build/prepare for yourself: a *Beit* – house” and so on. In this sense Hebrew is entirely unlike the language of “the Christians [who] simply say A, B, C etc. and do not link letters to each other by giving them names” (*Retuqot Kesef* 1). Ibn Kaspi explains:

The creators of the language saw this and understood, and were wise in the true sciences, meaning the sciences of nature and the divine [=physics and metaphysics]. They, therefore, sought to avail us by teaching us the nature of each and every thing through the names they applied to them (*Sharsherot Kesef*, “Lehem”).

[...] For the creators of our holy language afforded each root one shared, inclusive meaning, whatever that may be. [...] And He who gave us the Torah/Pentateuch revealed this to us by stating the word *adam* [=man] is derived from the word *adamah* [=ground] (*Matzref Lakesef*, Gen. 2:5).

Ibn Kaspi here uses the expression “the creators of our holy language,” implying that the language is both holy and the product of multiple creators. This may denote that the first, lone human, Adam – who according to the Biblical tradition was entrusted with giving all animals their Hebrew names – “did not exist and is simply an allegory.” Such a claim accords with Ibn Kaspi’s theological views on the preexistence of the world, which lie beyond the scope of the current lecture. According to Ibn Kaspi, the creators of Hebrew were philosophers, well-versed in physics and metaphysics. Thus, they decided, for example, to use the Hebrew word “*eretz*” to signify “land” because “Its verbal root is *ratzaz* (with the *Aleph* added as is customary), to demonstrate its cold and dry nature, which leads it to break [*mitrotzetz*] and crack.” (*Matzref Kesef* Gen. 1:1). This being the case, it is impossible to offer a good Latin translation for a text written in Hebrew:

Therefore, the precise Latin translation of the word Adam is not “Humi,” but rather an adjective [derived from] *adamah*. And look at the difference between the language spoken by God and of a translated language [...] and most troubling is that the previous/earlier interpreters wished to unite the languages and to couple Hebrew with foreign languages, Latin and others, the opposite of God’s wish to divide languages. (Gen. 2:5).

While Ibn Kaspi does say here “the language spoken by God,” this must be understood in light of his theological views: Hebrew is attributed to God because He is the ultimate, first cause, an approach Ibn Kaspi frequently adopts based on Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 48). Ibn Kaspi does not specify the identities of the interpreters who sought to unify languages and couple Hebrew with other languages such as Latin, and simply demonstrates the concept by noting the Latin word for man – *humi*. Regardless, he states that attempts to unify languages stand in opposition to the divine will, as reflected in the biblical account of the Tower of Babylon.

**Abulafia:**

Rabbi Abraham Abulafia was one of Ibn Kaspi’s predecessors and he indeed wished to “unite the languages” as already described in detail by Moshe Idel in his book. Describing the divergence of human languages, Abulafia cites following example:

For one took three letters [...] and that is the word for human, *adam*. And then a second came and took the nature of the letters, creating a new name for *adam* calling him *anthropos* in Greek, meaning human; and then another came and called him *homo* as is Latin, and then another came and called him *Ansan* in Arabic, and another called him *ansh* in Aramaic. (*Gan Eden ha-Ganuz*, Part 9).

The scripts of Hebrew, Assyrian, Aramaic, Greek, Arabic and Latin are also different, “even though some letters in one alphabet may be similar – in terms of shape, name, general order and, in a few cases, the order of their counting – to letters in another alphabet” (Ibid.) According to Abulafia, all language have a shared origin “for they all have one source, and according to tradition, this is the Holy Language, which is the mother of all languages” (*Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 58). In this respect languages are like the diverse forms of matter which comprise the world which were all originally one: “for they also are all one matter, and that is the general speech [*ha-dibbur bi-khlal*] which is comprised of 22 letters.”

What is the “the general speech” [*ha-dibbur bi-khlal*] according to Abulafia? Maimonides maintains (*Milot ha-Higayon* and as noted by Professor Stern) that external speech reflects inner speech. Following his lead, Abulafia explains that the purpose of spoken language is to reflect the contents of the speaker’s mind: “to convey **that which is thought in the soul**, from one man’s soul to another.” (*Or ha-Sekhel*, 3) “For the main purpose of language is to transfer **intentions** from one soul to another.” (Ibid.)

Elsewhere (*Sefer Heshek* 2:4), Abulafia describes three types of relationships between thought and speech: The first is incomprehensible speech which is entirely external, reflecting nothing internal: “that which is spoken by small children who are learning Hebrew but do not yet understand what they are saying,” as well as “the speech used by ignoramuses to pray.” The special status of Hebrew is irrelevant in this context “for to them the Holy Language is like Tatar or Turkish.”

The second form of speech is that which is solely internal. This occurs when “the necessity of [a person’s] mouth does not force him to actualize his potential speech and to influence others with his wisdom.” Maimonides describes a similar case: one who has not merited an excess of divine influence and therefore does not share with others (II, 40). Abulafia identifies this person with the scholar/philosopher.

In his third category, Abulafia combines two elements of Maimonides’ philosophy: (1) the one who is compelled by his intellectual talents to share with others and (2) the need for external speech in order to teach and learn (III, 8). Such a person, according to Abulafia, is a prophet.

It should be added that “according to the Kabbalah/tradition, its **speech** [of the Active Intellect] cannot be apprehended except through the Holy Language. The **fact of its existence**, however can be apprehended in any language to any perfect kabbalist.” (*Mafteah ha-Hohkmot*, 58). The scholar/philosopher (the second type of speech) can through his intellect apprehend the existence of the Active Intellect. However, the prophetic combination of perfect speech can only be accomplished through the Holy Language. Abulafia qualifies this statement: “Not that God spoke with 22 letters: for only one with a tongue can speak; and only one with a throat can produce the sound of speech, which is impossible with spirit alone” (*Ha-Melamded* 27). Abulafia denies God “acoustic speech” and thus denies Hebrew a divine status. It is however, not an arbitrary language:

Indeed, the names of existent things, in respect to their true reality, cannot help signifying the essence of an existent thing or one of its attributes added onto its essence and which signify the existent thing. (*Otzar Gan Eden Ganuz*, *ganuz*, Part I)

Ibn Kaspi argues this to be the case for Hebrew and apparently Arabic as well, but not Latin.

As we have mentioned, Abulafia mentions that “the general speech is comprised of 22 letters” which are the source of all languages. Abulafia states that “one must learn all the names of the letters. And it is known that in our language every name for every letter begins with the letter itself” (*Mafteah ha-Raayon*). We should recall in his regard, how R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi contrasts Hebrew to Latin: “The Christians simply state A, B, C etc. and do not connect one letter to another by giving a name to each letter”.

Abulafia discusses letter permutations at length relying on Maimonides’ statements about “*egel*” and “*hevel*” and other related cases, a subject also discussed by Ibn Kaspi and deemed by him a unique feature Hebrew language. Abulafia maintains that in principle the same holds true for all languages and that one can “understand the combinations [of letters] which emerge from your mouth, regardless of content or language. For you must return all languages to their original matter.” The “original matter” here is none other than the universal Ursprache, Hebrew. Its relationship to its progeny is not one of opposition but of evolutionary resemblance.

In any case, unlike the polemical overtones which pervade Ibn Kaspi’s rationalistic discussion of Latin, Abulafia (who, it will be recalled, sought an audience with the Pope) articulates a universalistic approach, a fact emphasized by Professor Moshe Idel in his book. The Diaspora, in Abulafia’s opinion, inaugurated a new process: the reunification of Hebrew with other languages:

For due to the scattering of the unique people over the face of the Earth, it forgot its language and spoke in a language similar to that of its neighbors. This will be until Divine Providence reinstates the [Hebrew] language’s former glory when the unique nation will be gathered unto a unique place. For that ingathering will include an ingathering of all the languages of the world, causing all to speak in a single agreed-upon language, and then all languages will be made of the same stock. For the purpose of language is to transfer intentions from one soul to another. But as time passes, the masters of the [new] constructed [*murkav*] language will not be able distinguish which speech belonged to which language, so that [the new language] will not be divided in two. And this speech can be understood intuitively for even today, one who speaks to his young children in two languages, accustoms them to think that all they hear is nothing but one language.

The future “agreed upon language” will be a synthetic, universal Hebrew which will include all languages.