Shraga Abramson's "Rav Nissim Gaon"

*Nissim Gaon: Ḥamisha Sefarim, Seridim Meḥiburav*

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*Rav Nissim Gaon: Ḥamisha Sefarim, Seridim Meḥiburav*

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A

Amidst the arduous journey of the Torah, shuffled from dwelling to dwelling, and from one home to another, North Africa, particularly the revered district of Kairouan – “the great metropolis of Africa” – stands as a humble yet pivotal sanctuary. It became both a custodian of wisdom and a crucible where new wisdom was forged. In the hushed moments of twilight, or, perhaps, in the veiled hours between dusk and dawn, North Africa emerged as a pivotal crossroads, where the legacy of the *ge’onim* of Babylon flowed forth like streams from a fountain. Here lay profound significance in the role of preserving, disseminating, and kindling the fading embers of knowledge – echoing the adage, “While the wine belongs to its owner, the gratitude is given to the one who pours it.” Moreover, it uniquely contributed, imprinting its essence upon interpretations of the Torah, the Talmud, and modestly delving even into the realms of Jewish philosophy through the nurturing of philosophical concepts and unraveling the enigmatic *aggadot* enshrined in the words of the Sages.

In this setting – one that bridged the Torah of the early sages (the great *ge’onim* of Babylon) with the burgeoning wisdom of the later luminaries (the great sages of Spain) – the figure of Rabbenu Nissim ben R. “Jacob ben R. Nissim ben R. Isaiah ibn Shahin”[[1]](#footnote-1) emerges as a beacon in the heart of Kairouan. A prolific writer, he remained steadfast within the tents of Torah, his pen ever poised, even amidst the weighty responsibilities of leadership, grappling with the most intricate questions of Jewish law, his hands, stained with menstrual blood, bearing witness to his devotion to Jewish law and to his people. Such dedication earned him profound admiration during his lifetime, both at home and abroad, where he was hailed as *rosh bei-rabbanan* and *rosh haseder va’aluf hayeshivah* (“the head of the rabbinic house” and “the head of the order and the yeshiva chief”). Revered as one who rejuvenated the religion and “in whose shadow the Jews lived amongst the nations,”[[2]](#footnote-2) he was enshrined in his rightful place by his contemporaries. If we recall that R. Nissim was the distinguished disciple of R. Ḥushiel and his son R. Ḥananel (d. 1056), the great admirer of R. Hai, Ga’on of Pumbedita (d. 1038), and a close peer of R. Samuel Hanagid (d. 1056), R. Nissim's significant place in the annals of Jewish religious and societal evolution is clear.

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

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

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

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

Overall, while historical analysis, panoramic synthesis, and comprehensive biographical reconstruction are components of significance, it becomes evident that the interpretive thrust takes precedence within this scholarly endeavor.

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

*The people of your city grant you rule,*

*As they did your parents, a trust imbued.*

*A God-fearing elder, advocate of Torah and morals,*

*An elder of Talmud, remnant of sages past.

Among fringe-makers acknowledged,*

*In prayer shawls esteemed,*

*His honor extends to Africa,*

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

Sought by men for Torah inquiries*

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

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

1. Regarding the historical timeline of R. Nissim’s life, Professor Abramson establishes his birth in 990 and his passing in 1062. The date of his demise finds confirmation in a record published by Goitein (*Zion* 27, p. 11). However, historical uncertainties persist, as noted by Hirschberg in his introduction to R. Nissim’s essay *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu’ah* (p. 21), where he notes, “we do not know where and when R. Nissim died.” The determination of his birth year appears to be rooted in the biblical adage, “the days of our years are seventy years,” although the exact basis for this calculation remains unclear. R. Nissim was blessed with a son and a daughter, tragically losing his son at a young age. A poignant poem of consolation composed by R. Samuel Hanagid commemorates this heartbreaking event.

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

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

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

*God’s hand could shatter every tie,*

*Save the bond between you and I.*

Abramson demonstrates an astute interpretation of the poetic lines (p. 20, n. 41), evoking the transient nature of friendships and companionships: “If it is so that friendship is revealed only once *(pa’am)* and after which *(pa’amayim)* it is *(tzerura be’amtaḥat)*, God will bring their friendship and companionship down to the dust – except for his friendship and companionship.”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, he encounters challenges in his analysis of the lines: “For you a position, for you, a crown of priesthood (*keter kehuna*) / And glory, indeed, forever.” To support the understanding that this poem was indeed dedicated to R. Nissim, Abramson is forced to take issue with Sasson’s simple interpretation in his preface to the Diwan of Samuel Ha-Nagid, diverging from the literal meaning of “a crown of priesthood,” as we are entirely unaware that R. Nissim was a *kohen*. Instead, Abramson ingeniously interprets “priesthood” as symbolizing an esteemed position, akin to “and the sons of David were priests,” as interpreted by the Sages in the *Mekhilta* at the beginning of *Parashat Yitro*. However, this scholarly erudition appears to be unnecessary when considering an alternative version of the poem published by Dov Yarden (p. 198), which reads “For you is the crown of glory (*keter tehilla*) and honor.” This rendition harmonizes seamlessly with the overall context and eliminates the need for complex interpretive maneuvers.

Abramson’s interpretations and corrections of R. Joseph Hanagid’s epistle to R. Nissim (p. 23) deserve attention. In order to establish a comprehensive perspective, it is worth noting the frequent close ties between R. Samuel Hanagid and the sages of Kairouan, as evidenced by his efforts to foster connections with them. This is underscored by the poem he penned in honor of R. Ḥushiel and the letter of condolence he sent to R. Ḥananel after R. Ḥushiel’s passing. The exchange of poems between R. Nissim and R. Samuel Hanagid further reinforces this bond, shedding light on the multifaceted persona of R. Samuel Halevi – not only a governor of Jewish congregations and the king’s supreme minister (vizier), but also a scholar and prolific writer, keen on engaging with the sages and their disciples. Abramson posits that R. Nissim may have indirectly sought the support of Samuel Hanagid, whose influence extended beyond Spain, with wise and good people heeding his words and recommendations. According to the testimony of the author of *Sefer HaKabbalah*, Hanagid “greatly assisted R. Nissim financially, recognizing his lack of wealth,” and treated him with sensitivity and kindness. This testimony offers valuable insight for those seeking to comprehend the dynamics of the time and R. Nissim’s position, motivations, and responses. To be clear: In contrast with the independent Jews of Spain in subsequent generations, R. Nissim did not enjoy such financial autonomy. He relied on the support and sympathy of others, thereby aligning with the spirit of the *ge’onim*, whose lives were wholly dedicated to Torah, who “diligently collected funds on behalf of esteemed yeshivot and Torah scholars… for the heads of the diaspora, their judges, and the Torah preachers,” (as notes by Maimonides in his Commentary to Avot 4:5). Understanding this context is vital for unraveling the complexities of R. Nissim’s life and legacy.

In examining R. Solomon ibn Gabirol’s connections with R. Nissim, Abramson diverges from scholars like Hirschberg (*Ḥibbur Yafeh*, p. 32) and places greater emphasis on Saadia Ibn Danan’s assertion that R. Nissim “came to the state of Granda... and taught there students, and one of his students was R. Shlomo ben Judah ibn Gabirolthe poet.” However, unlike Jacob Naftali Simḥoni and Poznański, who interpret Ibn Gabirol’s relationship with R. Nissim literally, Abramson posits that Ibn Gabirol may have only encountered R. Nissim sporadically, absorbing Torah teachings from him on occasion. Nevertheless, Abramson maintains that Ibn Gabirol held R. Nissim in high regard, honoring him with respect. Consequently, in Ibn Gabirol's poem *Veyikaḥ na berakha me’ḥanikho*, the term *ḥanikh*, often interpreted as “student,” is viewed by Abramson as a humble expression of reverence rather than a direct indication of formal discipleship.

1. R. Nissim “poured water on the hands of” (i.e., personally attended) his father R. Jacob, R. Ḥushiel, and R. Ḥananel. R. Nissim’s profound reverence for R. Ḥananel transcends mere outward expressions, as Abramson tirelessly emphasizes and substantiates throughout his work (see, for instance, pp. 24, 35). According to Abramson, R. Nissim’s connection with R. Ḥananel transcends surface appearances, delving into a depth far beyond what is readily observable. It is therefore unsurprising to discover interpretations in works such as *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ* or *Megillat Setarim* where R. Nissim confidently claims credit for insights that are elsewhere attributed to R. Ḥananel. For instance, R. Nissim proudly asserts: “And this approach that offers an answer to this issue, was very hidden and the Almighty helped me to discover and interpret it and I did not see anyone before me who suggested this approach...” (p. 11). However, this same interpretation appears in *Teshuvot Hage’onim* in the name of R. Ḥananel (see also p. 23).[[5]](#footnote-5)

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

Throughout his teachings, R. Nissim drew deeply from the rich traditions passed down to him by R. Hai Gaon. Their relationship was so intimate that later historians, including R. Saadia Ibn Danan, concluded that R. Nissim had directly received Torah wisdom from R. Hai. While the Me’iri (*Beit Habeḥira*, Introduction to Avot, p. 64) acknowledges “R. Nissim who received from the late R. Hai,” it remains unclear whether this refers to direct tutelage as a student or knowledge gained indirectly through hearsay and *responsa*.

The author consistently highlights the profound influence of R. Hai on R. Nissim, and even after the publication of this book, continued to uncover compelling examples of this influence, as seen in “Three matters concerning R. Jacob and R. Nissim of Kairouan” (*Sinai*, vol. 60, 1967, p. 4-16). R. Nissim’s immersion in the Torah of the *ge’onim* is evident in his painstaking efforts to copy and disseminate their writings, serving as a conduit through which their teachings – and especially those of Rav Hai – reached R. Samuel Hanagid. The esteem accorded to R. Nissim by his contemporaries and successors is a testament to his profound wisdom and scholarly contributions. R. Joseph Hanagid lauds R. Nissim, writing “Heads of the yeshivot and the *ge’onim* of Babylon (may they rest in peace) recognized his broad wisdom… and praised his greatness and his Torah (p. 23). Furthermore, R. Samuel Hanagid himself pays tribute to R. Jacob, father of R. Nissim, writing “*His honor extends to Africa / where he is viewed as one of the Ge’onim.* (p. 20). The *rishonim* were resolute in bestowing upon R. Nissim the esteemed title of Gaon (see p. 33 and p. 275 n. 207).

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

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

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

*And from him I quench the thirsty and speak sources to Israel.*

This transformation is indicative of a broader reconciliation between R. Hai and R. Ḥanokh, whose tensions had permeated Spanish intellectual circles – Ibn Daoud records that R. Hai “hated R. Ḥanokh.” However, these animosities gradually dissipated, likely due in part to the efforts of R. Nissim, who fostered relationships of appreciation and respect while maintaining a critical and independent stance characteristic of the sages of Spain.

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

1. Among his disciples, Ibn Gassum stands out, meriting special attention as he is mentioned by Maimonides (*Teshuvot*, Freeman, 81; Blau, p. 682). Abramson provides a succinct summary of the bibliographic information regarding him (p. 25). Overall, R. Nissim fostered an environment where his students encouraged him to explore and innovate new interpretations. His study hall served as the focal point of his spiritual growth; numerous inquiries “emanated from the Beit Midrash of R. Nissim” (see, for example, Tosafot Megilla 31b, s.v. *kelalot* and many other examples brought by Abramson). This continuous intellectual exchange permeates all of R. Nissim’s works, embodying Maimonides’ assertion that “Students increase their teacher’s wisdom and broaden his horizons... Just as a small branch is used to light a large bough, so a small student sharpens his teacher’s thinking processes, until, through his questions, he brings forth brilliant wisdom” (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:13). *Sefer Hamafte’aḥ* frequently references instances where students encountered difficulty with certain matters and sought R. Nissim’s interpretation. This sentiment is echoed in the introduction, where R. Nissim states: “Having observed that many contemporary students struggled to grasp its intricacies and sought its elusive meaning in vain, I resolved to compile these insights into a book akin to a key for those who find themselves blocked. My aim is to provide swift access to these teachings for students in need, ensuring they can navigate through them effortlessly whenever required” (p. 3). For our purposes, whether he is referring to his own students or students in a broader sense, the essence remains the same.[[7]](#footnote-7) R. Nissim held in high regard the “magnificent wisdom” that emerged from his study hall and the numerous innovative interpretations that originated therein, often emphasizing his originality and precedence with certain ideas (see p. 11, 17, etc.). It is somewhat surprising that Abramson did not delve into the assertions made by the author of the *Sefer HaKabbalah*, who portrays R. Alfasi as a disciple of R. Nissim (see pp. 213-222, discussion of passages in R. Alfasi’s *Halakhot* that evidently draw from R. Nissim’s *Megillat Setarim*, or R. Alfasi’s inclination to juxtapose passages from the Jerusalem Talmud, in comparison to R. Nissim’s practice).

I am fairly certain that in the above paragraph a line was misplaced in the original text, as below (the two lines end with the word שראיתי, which may have led to a “scribal error”).



1. The introduction concludes with a brief inventory of R. Nissim’s literary output, although Abramson subsequently provides in-depth examinations of each work. However, Abramson inserts several key details into this initial overview that are more suited to detailed discussions. Notably, he offers an intriguing interpretation of the name *Megillat Setarim* (see p. 37), suggesting it should be understood as: “*Megillat Setarim*, that is, places that are hidden from human understanding that our master reveals and interprets.” Such a compilation of interpretations on weighty subjects reflects a literary tradition common in that era, akin to works found in Maimonides’ oeuvre.

Abramson, following the lead of Poznański, refutes claims about Torah commentaries and a prayer book attributed to R. Nissim, as proposed by Shir (Solomon Judah Rapoport in his study, n. 22). He argues convincingly that all quotations attributed to these alleged works are found within *Megillat Setarim*, a compendium covering diverse topics such as biblical commentary, prayer laws, and aggadic interpretations. Thus, attributing specific books or commentaries to R. Nissim based on isolated quotes is unreliable, warranting caution in such assumptions. Regarding the existence of a *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Abramson leaves it as an open question (p. 3), emphasizing that “we are not allowed to doubt any source without foundation” (see also p. 360 d).

1. In this broad introduction and the detailed comments interspersed within it, Abramson attempts to outline the spiritual and intellectual character of R. Nissim and the historical context of his era. However, the depiction provided feels incomplete and somewhat unbalanced, leaving significant events and challenges of the period merely touched upon or implied.

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

Based on this, the “digressions” found in his works, which may appear superficially as such, are revealed upon closer examination to be well-considered. In his *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu’ah*, R. Nissim explicitly justifies these digressions, stating, “I seek to explain what the sages of blessed memory said on the matter, so that this book will not be of no use” (see p. 394, and also in Hirschberg, p. 89, and in the introduction, p. 52). One prominent theme that captures R. Nissim’s attention is the problem of reward and punishment, a topic of significant concern in both the Jewish and Muslim worlds, a theme that occupies a central place in his writings (e.g., pp. 93, 281, 332).

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

B

Most of the book – the vast majority of it – is dedicated to the publication of the “fragments of essays” written by R. Nissim. Prof. Abramson explains (p. 47) that he used this modest name because “the entire Torah of our Rabbi has not been revealed, only fragments and fragments of it.” Yet, credit is due to Abramson for his relentless dedication to uncovering these fragments, even venturing into new territories like legal rulings (chapter 3). By establishing a literary framework for future discoveries, he sets a standard against which all subsequent identifications of R. Nissim’s writings will be measured. However, it is regrettable that Abramson stopped short of compiling a comprehensive edition of the accumulated material, bringing many fragments of sources – some longer, some shorter and some in-between – but he did not put brick-upon-brick erect a complete and established edifice. While he meticulously annotates each section, providing invaluable insights, the lack of a complete structure diminishes the utility of his work. Students seeking to engage with R. Nissim’s writings still must rely on earlier editions, albeit with the added task of cross-referencing Abramson’s contributions, although, indeed, the detailed index will help with this. He undermined the reliability of Goldenthal’s edition and proved its incompleteness and inaccuracy but did not reward us in the end. It is a shame that he did not reprint the complete Hebrew translation (the book was written entirely in Arabic, while *Megillat Seterim* was written partly in Hebrew and partly in Arabic) in order to (a) gather all the fragments into one convenient place, (b) correct the many mistakes that were made in the translation, (c) and add all his comments *in situ*. As it stands, Abramson’s work serves as an introduction and commentary rather than a definitive compilation, failing to realize its full potential in assembling and consolidating R. Nissim’s legacy.

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

C

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

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

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

In *Megillat Setarim* (p. 278), R. Nissim asserts, “And those who have a tradition to partake in their final meal on the eve of Tisha bAv with a stew of lentils, this tradition has a reliable source.” Abramson delves into the origins, parallels, and complexities of this custom. It is noteworthy to mention that this custom is explicitly referenced in Pirkei R. Eliezer, chapter 35: “And Israel eats a dish of lentils in mourning and tribulation over the mourning of the Temple” (Professor Saul Lieberman drew my attention to this some time ago). This statement by R. Nissim offers insight into a law presented in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* that requires elucidation. In *Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* (5:9), Maimonides concludes the regulations concerning the final meal on the eve of Tisha bAv with a personal reference: “And we never consume cooked food, not even lentils, on the day preceding Tishah bAv…” Maimonides, known for his concise and deliberate language, never waxes lengthy without a polemical or emphatic purpose; this is also true when he inserts autobiographical material. Hence, it appears that the practice articulated by R. Nissim was well-known, and Maimonides, by emphasizing his own abstention from this custom – even from consuming lentil stew that symbolizes grief and distress – was likely engaging in a deliberate discourse against it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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

In *Ḥibur Yafeh Min Hayeshu’a* (Hirschberg, p. 11), R. Nissim pens the insightful observation: “And the wicked will never cease to regret the past without the merit of performing good deeds.” Abramson, in his commentary (p. 412), identifies this as the early iteration of the well-known proverb, “the wicked are full of regrets.” He draws attention to the sermons of Ibn Shem Tov and Abarbanel, as quoted in Davidson’s *Otzar Hameshalim Ve’hapitgamim.* It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the origin of this statement can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and it appears in the Hebrew translation of Aristotle’s *Sefer Hamidot*, compiled at the beginning of the 15th century. This insight was established by Professor Harry Wolfson in his significant work on Philo, volume 2, p. 253. Additionally, this statement is referenced in *Sefer Hatanya* as a rabbinic teaching.

For the story *Etrogim Lerefuah* (*Ḥibur Yafeh Min Hayeshu’a*, p. 86-87), see Yehudah Ratzaby’s comment, in his edition of the *Sefer Hamussar Lerav Zechariah al-Dhahiri*, p. 20, n. 4.

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

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

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