

Poets and Rhymesters as Cultural Heroes in the Jewish Society of the Mediterranean Basin During the Middle Ages

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This research aims to check the assumption that the cultural icons of Jewish communities in Islamic countries, in the Mediterranean Basin during the early Middle-Ages, were Jewish poets, or at least rhyming experts and poetry “technicians”. Through vast study of Genizah documents, in the purpose of outlining the shape of the leadership of Jewish communities in these Islamic countries, I realized that all leaders whose portraits I have studied, out of hundreds of letters and documents—were poem writers. Some of them were real poets, who created poems and liturgics of rare poetic qualities, and some were mere “technicians” who joined rhymes according to accepted rules of their time. By looking at those “technicians” poems, it seems that the writing has cost them a considerable mental effort, and yet they continued with the poem writing. The assumption is that in order to become a role model or a cultural hero, as we call it today, the leaders had to write poems and use them as a means for political and social advancement.

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This research aims to check the assumption, that the cultural icons of Jewish communities in Islamic countries, in the Mediterranean Basin, during the early Middle-Ages, were Jewish poets, or at least rhyming experts and poetry “technicians.” My extensive research of Genizah documents, which has focused on describing the leadership of the Jewish communities in the above mentioned era, led me to conclude that every one of the leaders—whose lives I have portrayed on the basis of Genizah dozens of letters and documents—wrote poetry. Some of them were true poets, who wrote poems and *piyyutim* of rare lyrical value, while others were more like technicians, who created rhymes according to the standard rules of their era. A close examination reveals that an enormous mental effort was required to write these “technical” poems, yet this did not evidently deter the would-be poets. This finding aroused my interest, and I decided to investigate the reasons behind it.

The term “cultural hero” is to a great extent a product of modern, present-day culture. We must then ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to transfer a term, which present-day anthropologists attribute exclusively to the modern era—the era of mass communication—to another epoch and a different social perspective, such as in our case, the Jewish society of the Mediterranean Basin in the Early Middle Ages. Is this an attempt to glamorize an anachronism or are we simply trying to hitch a ride on the back of modern symbols that arouse curiosity in order to draw attention to another topic, distant and different, which would otherwise be of no

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interest to the audience?

Although the dictionary defines a hero as someone who is strong, powerful, noble, brave, courageous, the term itself usually arouses associations from the military context, symbols from the field of combat. When we use the term cultural hero, we are transferring this symbol from one context to another in order to stress something specific or convey certain messages. So what we need to ask is: How are cultural heroes created and beginning? In what period can we say with certainty that such symbols serve a social need? The basic assumption made by anthropologists and scholars of contemporary culture is that a cultural hero is a classic invention of bourgeois society.

In order to decide if this transfer contributes to our understanding, we must examine whether the social-cultural consumers in the society we are dealing with were capable of producing cultural heroes, and if so, did these figures meet the criteria for cultural heroes as we define them today? At this point, we must investigate the principles used to classify or determine the status of a cultural hero; in other words: Who is a cultural hero? Why does one society pay tribute to members of the military, whereas another glorifies the landed gentry? According to philosophers of our time there are several possible answers, but the one which suits the present discussion is the assertion that a group is likely to acquire status if it makes an impression on others by its good-heartedness, physical prowess, artistic abilities, or wisdom (De Botton 2006, 175-6). It stands to reason that fame, rank, and status are the results of achievement. Successful people inspire others to follow their example. In other words, a cultural hero is a model to be emulated (Gamson 1994, 40).

Did the Jewish society of the Mediterranean adopt cultural heroes, as we call them today, or models that they sought to imitate? And if so, what qualities did they possess? Who were they and how did the modeling, the admiration, or perhaps even the worship of these cultural heroes manifest itself? What was the nature of the society that gave birth to and nurtured this poetry and gave it such a prominent place in their cultural world?

Eli ben Amram, Sahlan ben Avraham, Efrayim ben Shmariya, Yefet ben David are only a few of the Jewish community leaders in 11th-century Fustat, who tried their hand at the writing of poetry, composing poems as well as *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry). Poetry was mainly an attraction within the elite group because they were also the educated stratum. Poetry was the cultural language of this group. The wealthy merchants and public figures would gather to hear their best loved poets; this provided an opportunity for them to meet and mingle. In this way, they strengthened the connections within the group, increased the frequency of their informal get-togethers, and continued to develop their shared culture (Frenkel 2007, 231). It is seemingly not surprising therefore, that every leader tried his hand at writing poetry.

Of course not all of them were real poets, but all those about whom we have information, such as Eli ben Amram (the leader of Fustat in the second half of the 11th century), did the best they could and would at least copy with great frequency the work of other poets, who had already been published and become famous. The authors would sign their work by incorporating their initials at the beginning of each line of poetry (acrostic); in this way they would guarantee their "rights." Some of them, unskilled at poetry, would often steal the works of their predecessors either by rubbing out these signatures or replacing them with their own names.

Part of the work produced by Eli ben Amram is of a practical nature, such as poems that praise leaders and philanthropists, eulogies for prominent individuals, or poems that honor these important people on special occasions such as a *brit milah* (circumcision ceremony) or wedding. Again, this seems to confirm the social function of writing poetry, a kind of indispensable obligation for anyone holding a leadership position. Furthermore, when a leader of the stature of Eli ben Amram corresponded with his counterparts, who were

poets in their own right such as Yehoseph HaNagid of Spain, it was customary, in fact almost obligatory for him to demonstrate his own poetic abilities. No letter could be written without having a poem attached to it. The degree to which the necessity of writing these types of poems required a great mental and intellectual effort on the part of Eli ben Amram can be seen in the mundane fact that he would often simply copy poems written by others, changing only the relevant names and a few pertinent facts. The most outstanding example is the use he made of the poem written by an anonymous author in the 8th decade of the 10th century in honor of Adaya ben Menashe Ibn alKazaz, the senior Jewish-Karaite official in the service of the Fatimids. In about 1065, Eli ben Amram inserted, in the spaces between the lines of this poem, a song of praise [panegyric] that paid homage to Prahya, the son-in-law of Yehuda HaNagid ben Sa'adiya of Egypt. Eli used parts of the original poem and adapted them to his needs (Mann 1970, 2, 11-13; Be'eri 2003, poem 11). In other instances, he would use a poem which he had already written for some other important personage, change a few names and facts, and send it to the other famous individual.

Immediately after the death of Shmuel HaNagid of Spain in 1056, Eli ben Amram wrote a long letter to Shmuel's son, Yehoseph, and attached a poem of praise and glorification consisting of 36 stanzas. As was his habit, he used a poem, which he had written 13 years before in honor of Avraham HaTustari, a prominent Jew-courtier in Egypt. Many of the stanzas in these two poems are completely identical. In others, Eli changed the names of the person to whom he was addressing the tribute and a few other items (ENA 3765.8,9, Mann 1970, 2, 460-1; Abramson 1989, 16-19; Be'eri 2003, poem 2, 292-5).

These facts raise a straight forward question: What came first? What has motivated what? Did community heads and leaders write poems as a testimony for being cultured and belonging to the elite society, or is it the other way around: the fact that the leaders wrote poems made this act a trademark of the cultural hero, and thus, during the 10th, 11th, and especially 12th centuries, became a trade of those who were not necessarily community leaders, and became cultural heroes by only being poets.

In the 9th and 10th centuries, a new Jewish class of businessmen and professionals arose, which had wealth and leisure time, as well as a broad range of spiritual needs and refined tastes. This Arabic-speaking society, which was similar to that of the Muslims and Christians of that era, considered poetry the height of leisure time activity. A gap evolved between this secular type of pastime and the traditional pursuit of non-working hours—Torah studies—which could have led to a deterioration in the unity within Jewish society. Yet the new Hebrew poetry played an important social function, acting as a kind of mediator between these two types of diversion. For the Arabic-speaking society, poetry was far more than entertainment per se; it was their most powerful means of public communication. Muslims and Jews alike publicized important events in their lives by means of poems commissioned especially for particular events. Business people or those employed by the regime, financiers, and merchants, needed public exposure and publicity. A song of praise written by a well-known poet was an extremely valuable advertising tool. Due to poetry's vast readership and the public's great love of this genre, leaders utilized it as a means of promoting themselves and their prominence in the world (Klar 1914, 106).

The Genizah preserved many of these poems of praise. The Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages served a primary social need, and for our purposes, it is a mirror that reflects the culture of that society (Goitein 1974, 156-63). The life of the Jewish noble, his customs and practices, became normative in 10th-century society, and secular poetry, even though it was produced by the aristocracy, spoke on its behalf, and was written for it—did not remain confined within the walls of their courtyards alone. It was enjoyed by the educated classes

who were not part of the aristocracy, and became study material for young people seeking to educate themselves. Although molded according to the esthetic tastes of its aristocratic and enlightened audience, it also enhanced the esthetic education of ordinary people (Fleischer 1995, 334-5).

Matters changed significantly in 11th-century society. Jews began to take part in the life of the court and conduct themselves according to the norms of the Muslim aristocracy. At this time, too, Hebrew poets began to play major roles in the social life of the Jews, as was the practice in Muslim society. They also started to use techniques and deal with themes that inspired Arab poets. All the outstanding poets also served as models who were emulated for in their social conduct and Torah scholarship; consequently everything they wrote was well-received. Copies of their poems, made in their lifetimes, found their way into the Genizah. Other copies made later on were circulated among the general public. The importance of this literature was recognized in Spain and in the East as well. Anyone who wanted to be a *hazan* (cantor) prepared for himself divans of contemporary known poets. The enthusiastic congregation demanded that they also create similar poems. The Genizah contains proof that they fulfilled, or at least attempted to fulfill, these demands (Goitein 1967, V, 424).

Following the publication of the seminal article by Joseph Weiss "Court Culture and Court Poetry," the opinion took root among scholars of medieval secular Hebrew poetry that Jewish court poetry of Spain was inspired by Arabic court poetry and that there was nothing unique about it. Similarly, the notion took root that this literature laid the groundwork for all secular Jewish poetry. Since then much has been said about the unique qualities of secular Jewish poetry, mainly the poems of praise, which actually originated in the East, under the influence of Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate (Tubi 2008, 50). Weiss' distinction regarding the exclusive role of the patron in the shaping and prominence of Jewish secular poetry (Weiss 1952, 398-9) is not born out when discussing the poets of the East, of Palestine, Babylonia, and Egypt.

The main role of poems writing was played by the head of the community (*kehilla*) and not necessarily by the rich philanthropist, the patron of the arts. The patron can definitely not be thought of as a cultural hero. To be considered a cultural hero, the poet must fulfill other criteria: He must enjoy widespread public adulation and be model that is imitated.

The admiration of poets reached new heights in the 12th century. The wealthy and famous merchant, Halfon ben Netanel, is an excellent example of this. A few months after his return from Spain to Egypt, he wrote a short poem in the draft of a letter he wanted to send to Matsliach Gaon, the head of the Palestinian Yeshivah (which was located in Egypt at that time). This brief poem consists of only two stanzas, but its meter and rhyme are properly executed, demonstrating that the author was capable of writing poetry when this was required of him. Matsliach Gaon was a connoisseur of poetry. Several of Egypt's poets during this period sang his praises, some of them following the style of the much admired Spanish poets. Halfon undoubtedly knew this and therefore sought to flatter him in this way. He may even have composed other poems on special occasions. Halfon's love of poetry was probably well-known in his circle. The esteem in which he was held because of his erudition can be seen in the obvious effort made by some of those who corresponded with him to embellish their writing with rhetoric and ornamental turns of phrase, often in rhyme. A great many of the letter writers and the recipients that populate the world of the Genizah were educated individuals, and in the Muslim empire, education required expertise in poetry. People of high rank learned many poems by heart and just as they quoted from the Bible, in both their speech and in their writing, they also cited the verses of relevant poems (Gil & Fleisher 2001, 68-69).

Poetic criticism also developed during this period. The very fact that this existed shows how widespread poetry was in the community and how popular some of the poets had become. The patrons in this case were not cultural heroes, but those who spread culture. They disseminated poems written about them in order to aggrandize themselves. This is how the poems reached distant regions and far-off lands. Shmuel HaNagid boasted that his poems were published among various Jewish communities. The young Solomon Ibn Gabirol claimed that his poems were published in Palestine and in Babylonia. In this era the poets began to draw attention to their own personalities in their work (in contrast to the style of biblical and Talmudic times). The readers were interested in acquiring complete collections of the poems of famous authors (*divans*) (Schirmann 1996, 77-80).

The personality cult of cultural heroes reached a peak, an event with which we are familiar, with Yehuda HaLevi's arrival in Alexandria in 1141. The entire city was already excited about the pending arrival of the poet and his entourage when they reached Egypt. This was the result of a social need, which was already deeply rooted in this elitist society. Local contemporary poets, such as Elazar HaCohen ben Halfon (in the second half of the 12th century) imitated the works of Yehuda HaLevi and attempted to create similar "hit songs," not always with great success.

Not everyone in Alexandria had the good fortune to host the poet, who had become a cultural hero. Those who did, continued to make political and social hay from this privilege. The Alexandrian dayan (judge), Aharon alAmani, a senior public figure, sought to reap the greatest possible profit from the honor of hosting the great Yehuda HaLevi. He collected all of the poems that HaLevi had written in his honor and in honor of his sons while the famous poet was staying in the city, attaching to each one the poetic reply he himself had written, and distributed a sort of Alexandrian *divan* of Yehuda HaLevi. In the manner of the *divan* editors of those days, he introduced the poems by affixing them with Arabic titles which described the circumstances in which the various poems were composed. The dayan and his associates were not satisfied with this, adding explicit verbal propaganda to their indirect, written propaganda. One member of his circle was heard to say: "(Yehuda HaLevi) was invited by the best people to eat in their homes, and but he did not eat there; whereas he came to us all the time and wrote poems of praise to us." This boasting annoyed a great many people (Gil & Fleisher 2001, 202-17) and it seems to me that what I am describing here is familiar to us all today. Naturally, the means of communication were different, but not the principle of the thing.

To sum up: Cultural heroes serve as models that are imitated. According to all the findings reviewed in the survey of the phenomenon of the 11th- and 12th- century poets and rhymesters in Palestine, Babylonia, Spain, and Egypt, it appears that we can apply the modern-day term "cultural hero" to the Jewish society living in the Muslim regions of the Mediterranean Basin in these centuries. The writing of poetry was a status symbol, a symbol of membership in the social elite, a symbol of influence, leadership, of being at the top of the social pyramid. Almost everyone who considered himself a member of this exclusive stratum tried his hand at writing poetry, with varying degrees of success. Composing poems was a social necessity if one wished to "belong."

It seems that what we have here is an interesting process of a closed circle, and of a phenomenon that carries side-effects behind it: Poetry was the cultural language in the Arab society. Starting from the 10th century, the Jewish society, influenced by the Arabs, has adopted this norm. In order to belong to the elite, a person had to write poems to prove his skills in the cultural language. This is especially true in the case of community leaders, who needed to make extra efforts in order to prove themselves worthy of the leadership in any way—not just economical, social, and political, but also cultural. During the 11th and 12th centuries poetry

became a trade among people of other society levels, not only the elite. The norms that started among the rich and influential, have trickled down to the common people. It is in light of this phenomenon, that during the 12th century we see poets who are not leaders, but cultural heroes by their poetry alone.

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