A Poem by Joseph Sarfati
in Honor of Daniel Bomberg’s *Biblia Rabbinica*, Venice 1525

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I

The *Biblia Rabbinica* printed by Daniel Bomberg in Venice, 1525, is without question one of the milestones of printing history: the *editio princeps* of the Rabbinic Bible which preserved for all time the ancient legacy of the *massorah*, the ‘grand critico-exegetical apparatus of the Old Testament’, as C. D. Ginsburg puts it, ‘bequeathed to us by the Jews of olden times’. Needless to say, so important an edition of the Bible has come in for its fair share of scholarly attention, and together with the masterly introduction written by its editor, Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah, has even been reproduced in a sumptuous facsimile edition. Curiously enough, however, one aspect of this work has gone practically unnoticed, and that is the lengthy Hebrew poem enshrined on the second page of the first volume, just after the ornate title-page and directly before Ibn Adonijah’s introduction. Ginsburg, for example, merely notes the existence of a ‘rhythmic eulogy of this stupendous work’, while another scholar of the printed Bible ignores the poem.

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1 Our poet’s name has been transcribed from the Hebrew in almost every possible way: Zarfati, Zarefati, Sarfatti. The spelling adopted here is that of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (14: 878).
3 The facsimile edition has been reprinted as *Biblia Rabbinica: A Reprint of the 1525 Venice Edition*, ed. and intro. by M. Goshen-Gottstein, Jerusalem 1972. In his introduction Goshen-Gottstein calls this edition ‘the prototype of all later Rabbinic Bibles. The text as fixed for this edition has been adopted as the *textus receptus* by Jews and Gentiles alike’.
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Biblia Rabbinica 1523
Photograph courtesy of the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem
altogether. But as its conspicuous place in the Bomberg edition surely indicates, the poem is deserving of attention in its own right. It was written by Joseph Sarfati, one of the greatest Hebrew poets of Renaissance Italy and arguably one of the most fascinating personalities of the day. This article, therefore, is an attempt to bring Sarfati’s poem for the Biblia Rabbinica into the limelight of modern scholarship, and to show its place in the world of Hebrew printing in sixteenth-century Venice.

II
The Biblia Rabbinica of 1525 is also known as the Second Rabbinic Bible, for as the name indicates it was not the first Rabbinic Bible ever published; this was achieved by Bomberg himself nearly ten years earlier, in 1517. But the First Rabbinic Bible, the one of 1517, was problematic from the start. It was edited, for one thing, by a Jewish convert to Christianity, Felix Pratensis (Felice da Prato), a fact which did little to recommend the edition to the Jewish book-buying public. Nor did the Latin dedication to Pope Leo X do much to improve matters. More important, the marginal notes prepared by Pratensis were deemed wholly inadequate; one contemporary authority, the renowned Elias Levita, sniffed that ‘the author [i.e. Pratensis] did not know his right hand from his left’ and sternly bade his readers to pay


no attention to ‘the false remarks printed in the margin’. Thus when Daniel Bomberg encountered Ibn Adonijah, a scholarly refugee from Tunis who explained to him the importance of the massorah and the need to publish it entire, Bomberg was ripe for a new edition. Ibn Adonijah describes the enormous scope of the work which he now undertook, and which only Bomberg’s generous funding made possible: the search for manuscripts, the collation of fragments, the ceaseless scrutiny of commentaries and traditions. The result of this ambitious collaboration between scholar and printer was the magnificent Biblia Rabbirnica of 1525: the prototype of all Rabbinic Bibles to come.

In his well-known study of Hebrew printing in Italy, David W. Amram sketches a typical day at the printing press of Daniel Bomberg in Venice 1525, in an enticing scene worth bringing in detail:

We may easily picture the scene in Bomberg’s press room, busy with workmen of half a dozen nationalities, typical of the cosmopolitan character of Venice and the universality of the press. As the press is unscrewed, a skillful hand pulls the sheet and passes it still moist under the eye of the critical foreman of the shop, Cornelio the son of Barukh Adelkind, late of Padua. Scholars and noblemen crowd around, looking over his shoulder to inspect some new typographical effect and express their criticism or admiration in the lively and spirited manner of the Venetian. In one corner a group of grave scholars is handling some books and discussing fine points of scholarship, in another, Moses del Castellazo, illustrator of the Bible, is discussing wood engraving with some dilettanti … Among them all moves the master of the shop, the stately Bomberg, in his broidered robe and high cap, with the dignity of the successful man and the urbanity of the cosmopolite.

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Amram’s vibrant panorama of Renaissance life takes us into the heart of the Venetian workshop. We can easily picture the skillful Cornelio with his hand at the press, the eagerly chatting scholars and nobles, the renowned illustrator discussing his woodcuts, even Bomberg himself in his ‘broidered robe and high cap’. Perfect as this picture is, however, we might add yet one other figure to this bustling scene of work, and that is the figure of a Hebrew poet deeply intent on his poem, perhaps off in a corner somewhere, out of the hustle-and-bustle of the workroom, tapping syllables with his fingers and counting out vowels. Whether he was wearing the yellow badge of the Venetian Jew or had availed himself of Bomberg’s measures to free his Jewish craftsmen from this public sign of obloquy we will have to leave to the imagination of our readers. But to such a poet we can give a name, and thereby introduce the author of the poem to whom we now turn our attention: Joseph ben Samuel Sarfati.

III

Except to the cognoscenti, the name of Joseph Sarfati means very little to us today. But in the early decades of sixteenth-century Italy, Joseph Sarfati was a well-known figure; the respected physician of Pope Clement VII and the scion to a highly connected Jewish family from Rome. Samuel Sarfati, Joseph’s father, had himself been the renowned physician to two popes, Alexander VI and Julius II, while a third pope, Leon X, confirmed the special privileges granted the Jewish physician by his two papal predecessors. In 1515 Samuel Sarfati was summoned to Florence to treat the son of Lorenzo de’ Medici, and as Cassuto suggests, it appears that his son, Joseph, accompanied his father. For it is in Florence that we find Joseph Sarfati flourishing among the ranks of what may be called a circle of Hebrew poets, exchanging poems

with such local poets as Moses ben Joab da Rieti and Solomon da Poggibonsi and expressing himself in verse on subjects ranging from panegyric and card-playing to riddles and gluttony.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to being a poet, Joseph Sarfati was also the Hebrew translator of \textit{Malibea and Calisto}, the Renaissance’s own version of a Broadway block-buster complete with clandestine lovers and midnight trysts. The Hebrew version of this play takes its title \textit{Celestina} from the bawd who plays a central role in the plot, but apart from the sixty-two line poem with which Sarfati introduced his translation the Hebrew \textit{Celestina} has not come down to us.\textsuperscript{12}

The death of his father sometime before 1524 brought a dramatic change in the tenor of Joseph’s life. To quote Cassuto:

An unscrupulous servant seized all the wealth in his [father’s] coffers and fled to Constantinople. Unfortunately for Joseph himself, he decided to go after the thief, and the latter, in order to save his own skin, handed Joseph over to the authorities claiming that he was a spy for the Pope. Agents of the Turkish police attacked Joseph and wounded him, and he just barely managed to escape and return to Italy, without any hope of ever recovering his possessions.\textsuperscript{13}

Upon returning to Italy Joseph applied to Clement VII (in 1524) for the special privileges enjoyed by his father, and receiving them without mishap settled down to a prosperous existence in Rome. There he


\textsuperscript{12} The Spanish play was written by Fernando de Rojas (d. 1541). It was first printed in Burgos, 1499, but the standard text, often reprinted throughout the sixteenth century, is based on the first complete edition of 1502. For a recent edition see E. de Miguel Martinez ed., \textit{La Celestina de Rojas}, Madrid 1996. The play was first translated into English by James Mabbe in 1631, and again by Phyllis Hartnoll as \textit{Celestina}, London 1959. As noted, Sarfati’s Hebrew translation has not come down to us, but the poem introducing the translation was published by M. D. Cassuto, ‘Mi-Shirei Yosef Shmuel Sarfati: ha-Komedia ha-Rishona be-‘Ivrit’, in: \textit{Studies in Honor of Alexander Kohut}, New York 1936, pp. 124-128 (Hebrew section).

\textsuperscript{13} Cassuto, \textit{Ha-Yehudim be-Firenze} (above, n. 10), p. 270 (translation mine).
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played a role in the curious events involving David Reubeni, the self-proclaimed emissary of an independent Jewish kingdom supposedly ruled by his brother and populated by descendants of the lost Ten Tribes. Joseph Sarfati’s short but productive life came to a tragic end in 1527 when the soldiers of Charles V pillaged Rome, and he found himself stripped of all his possessions yet again. Thrown into prison and held for ransom, Sarfati escaped his captors as they lay in a drunken stupor and fled to a village on the outskirts of Rome. There he fell ill from the plague, was banished from town, and took to living in a miserable hut out in the fields where he died, as Cassuto writes, ‘more from starvation than from illness’.

The fate of Sarfati’s poems has in many ways been almost as unfortunate as that of their author. Up to the present time his poems have been published only sporadically in various articles and newspapers, and his collected poems have yet to receive the critical edition they surely deserve. And however well-known his poetry may have been in his own day, only three of Sarfati’s poems, so far as we know, were published during his life-time: two poems for the *Biblia Rabbínica* of 1525, and a third, short poem of six lines for a prayer book issued by Daniel Bomberg in 1524. True, there are a number of short poems by Sarfati which appear to have been written

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14 Sarfati hosted Reubeni during his stay in Rome in 1524-1525; in his diary, Reubeni notes a visit by Sarfati to Florence. Reubeni’s diary was preserved in a unique MS in the Bodleian Library, and has been translated by E. N. Adler in *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages*, New York 1987, pp. 251-328. For references to Sarfati see pp. 273-276.

15 Cassuto, *Ha-Yehudim be-Firenze*, p. 270, citing the account by Giampietro Valeriano Bolzani, *De infelicitate literatorum*, Venetis 1620, pp. 20-21, with later editions noted by Almagor, ‘Bibliografia Mu’eret’ (above, n.10), no. 5. In this book on ‘unfortunate scholars’ Sarfati is called Giuseppe Gallo.

16 Dan Almagor has done a great service in publishing his extensive bibliography concerning the poetry of Joseph Sarfati, which also includes all articles and books mentioning the poet published up till 1996. For full details, see above, note 10. For a good selection of Sarfati’s poems, see Schirmann, *Miḥbar ha-Shirah ha-Ḥivrit be-Italia* (above, n. 11), pp. 223-235.

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for the printing of specific Hebrew works, but whether these poems ever appeared in the editions in question, or whether these editions were even published at all is beyond our ability to say.\(^{18}\) Be this as it may, the poem printed in the Second Rabbinic Bible is not only the longest of these poems written in praise of books but also by far the finest.

That Bomberg chose to grace the opening of his Biblia Rabbinica with a laudatory poem should come as no surprise. The writing of poems in praise of books can be traced back to the earliest of the Renaissance humanists; Italian humanists, as Konrad Haebler informs us, ‘began very early to add accompanying verses to issues edited by themselves or their friends, or to their own productions. With the German classical scholars it became the fashion to place such verses on the title page’.\(^{19}\) For these early humanists, needless to say, Latin was the language of choice,\(^{20}\) but contributions in Hebrew for Hebrew-language books were not far behind. Already in 1475 we find a poem praising the new art of printing at the end of the first dated Hebrew book, the *Arba\’a Turim* (Four Rows) by R. Jacob b. Asher.\(^{21}\) Two years later the first printed Hebrew Psalter also concludes with a brief poem of praise for printing, and the list goes steadily on.\(^{22}\)

This writing of poems for printed volumes began modestly enough but by the seventeenth century the ‘art of puffing’, as the phenomenon became known, developed into a full-fledge craze. In England, for

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21 Printed by Meshullam Cusi and Sons in Piove di Sacco, 1475 (Goff Heb 47; Thes A.2; S-T.C. 11). The poem is transcribed and translated in Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition* (above, n. 4), pp. 779-780.
22 These Hebrew books include the first printed Psalter, Bologna 1477 (Goff Heb 28; Thes A.13; S-T. C. 24); the third edition of the Pentateuch, Hijar 1490, with three poems at the end (Goff Heb 19; Thes B11; S-T.C. 228); the fourth edition of the Pentateuch, Lisbon 1491 (Goff Heb 20; Thes B. 20; S-T.C. 240); the Book of Proverbs, Leiria 1492 (Goff Heb 33; Thes B. 26; S-T.C. 252); the third edition of the entire Bible, Brescia 1494 (Goff Heb 10; Thes A. 81; S-T.C. 89); the fourth edition of the Bible (Pesaro 1511-1517); and an edition of Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Daniel (Salonica, 1515).
example, 32 commendatory poems for 22 books were printed from 1478-1520, while the decade stretching from 1631-1640 saw the publication of no fewer than 1100 such poems for 293 books. But it was during the 1520s that the phenomenon truly ‘caught on among the humanists’, and in printing Sarfati’s poem at the beginning of his edition Bomberg thus proves that in this matter, as in so many other aspects of his work, he had his hand well on the pulse of contemporary publishing trends.

IV

Sarfati’s poem in praise of the *Biblia Rabbinica* of 1525 is preceded by his introduction of ten lines written in rhymed Hebrew prose, and followed by a short poem of six lines (apparently also by Sarfati), again in praise of this Bomberg edition. These three pieces come just after the ornate title-page for all four volumes and directly before the scholarly introduction by Ibn Adonijah, the editor of the entire edition. Let us now take a look at Sarfati’s Hebrew introduction to the poem praising the *Biblia Rabbinica* (the original as vocalized by Professor Shlomo Elkayam of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, followed by my translation and notes):

אֲלֵיכֶם גָּלוֹת יְהוָּה חֲרֵב / מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעַד קְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם

טּוֹת יְהוָּה אֲלֵיכֶם / בְּשָׂרוֹת אָרוֹן / אֶקְרָא בְגָרוֹן / כִּי אֶרְאֶה הַסֵּפֶר / הַנּוֹתֵן אִמְרֵי שֶׁפֶר / אוֹתוֹ מֵעַרְפִּלֵּי חֲתֻוֹלָתוֹ / כְּחָתָן מֵחֻופָּתוֹ

גְּדוֹלִים חִקְקֵי לֵב הַוּצִּיא / פִּים / בִּים רְצִים / כְּתִים לוֹ / וְשָׁלִישִּים עַל כֻּלּוֹ / תּוֹרָה נְבִיאִים

וְכַעֲלוֹתוֹ בְּמַסְלֵפִים / הוֹלְכִים שְׂדֵה צוֹפִים / עֶבֶד לֶחֶם רַב / לְכָל קִים מִדְּבָשׁ וְנוֹפֶת צַל / מְתַלְמִיד וָרַב / מִמִּזְרָח לְמַעֲרָב / לֶחֶם מִשְׁנֶה לְפִי אָכְלָם / סָעֲדִים לָעַד לְעוֹלָם / מִקְרָא וְתַרְגּוֹרִים / בְּבֵיאוֹת תְּצַפֵּם / בְּבֵי מִחָבָּה מִבַּיִת יֹאמַר חֲזַק / הַמִּשְׂרָה כְּזֵר זָהָב סָבִיב תְּיַפֵּם.

23 F. B. Williams, ‘Commendatory Verses: The Rise of the Art of Puffing’, *Studies in Bibliography* 19 (1966), p. 3. Williams provides his readers with a table conveniently listing the numbers of books and poems (many books had more than one poem commending it) decade by decade from 1478 to 1640, reaching a grand total of 4748 poems for 1472 different books.

24 Williams, ‘Commendatory Verses’, p. 3.
Unto thee, the Exile of Judah and Ephraim, / from the ends of Heaven rim to rim / may my good tidings be heard / for I have seen The Book which gives goodly words. / The greatest of printers arose / and from the mists of its swaddling clothes / brought it forth like a bridegroom / who goes forth from his room / to hold the heavens in thrall, / captains over one and all. / Torah, Prophets and Writings together / sweeter than honey and flowing nectar. / 'Tis a goodly feast / for rabbi and student from west to east; / a double portion to those who eat / for all eternity a meal complete. / The Bible and Targum blaze forth with light, / the skies / they cause no blight, / but brave men say 'Be strong!' at the sight. / Majesty surrounds them like a golden rim / adding to their beauty outside and in / gilding them with commentaries more bright than the skies / with the words of exegetes ancient and wise. / And when its letters appeared in the Exile of Rome like signs written across the sky, / a pleasure to the heart and a desire to the eye, / then I, your brother Joseph, said to my lips, 'Be not still, / but go forth like a stream to rush where it will! / Sound the timbrel and raise thy voice / and you too, my thoughts, praise the Lord and rejoice'.

Scarcely had I uttered this final word / when all I commanded indeed occurred / and lo! a band of Arab meters came trooping forth / from the entrance to my lips and stood hence-forth / each one seeking my best favor / jostling each and every neighbor / this one praising his holy meter / and that one claiming his honey's sweeter / and all of them saying: 'Upon me shall the righteous one lay his head!' / till between this and that there fell a great dread. /
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And all at once my thoughts did troop / and settled down ‘pon my
tongue in a group / and composed a poem of forty-two lines /
seven-fold purified and refined. / At the beginning of each line my
full name is revealed / and on the margins of the book written and
sealed. / He who would know my name / or ask whence I came /
will find me at the entrance to my home: / He who seeks speech
with me – let him come! / The words of the poem are as though
the Torah did raise / her own hymns of praise / and make a song
to be heard / by the guardian of her words. / And upon seeing that
her authority waxed great / and that her power is held in state / I
raised a prayer, as I here relate:

1 Unto thee … Ephraim, i.e. to all Jews, wherever they may be. The poet
gives his exordium a prophetic ring for greater emphasis. 1-2 ends of Heaven
rim to rim (Deuteronomy 4: 32). In the Bible the phrase comes in connection
with the question: ‘has there ever been anything such as this great thing?’ – a
fitting subtext for the following lavish praise of Bomberg’s edition. 3 gives
goodly words (Genesis 49: 21). 4 from the mists of its swaddling clothes
(Job 38: 9). 5 like a bridegroom … room (Psalms 19: 6), where the
‘bridegroom’ is the sun. captains over one and all (Exodus 14: 7). 7 sweeter
… nectar (Psalms 19: 11), in the Bible the subject is the Lord’s judgments.
9 a double portion (Exodus 16: 22), where the subject is the manna from
Heaven. 12 golden rim … outside and in (Exodus 25: 11), in the Bible
referring to the ‘Ark of shittim wood’. 15 Exile of Rome in a para-biblical
style. Apparently Sarfati was in Rome at the time. signs … sky (Jeremiah 10:
2). 16 pleasure … to the eye (Genesis 3: 6), where it refers, significantly
enough here, to the ‘Tree of Knowledge’. 18-19 sound the timbrel … voice
(Psalms 81: 3). 19 praise the Lord and rejoice (Psalms 95:1). 21 Arab
meters – the quantitative meters used by the Hebrew poets of Muslim Spain.
22 entrance … stood (Exodus 33: 8). In the Bible the phrase alludes to a
highly dramatic meeting between Moses and the Divine Presence, and hence
in the poem adds to the sense of divine inspiration which follows. 24 holy
meter – in Hebrew sheqel ha-qodesh, the Temple tribute. A wonderful pun,
since the word sheqel is related to the Hebrew word for meter: mishqal.
25-26 Upon me … head (Yalqut Shimoni, Va-yeţe 247: 118). Quotation
from a rabbinic midrash referring to the stones which argued amongst
themselves for the privilege of pillowing Jacob’s weary head during his journey
from home. 29 **seven-fold purified** (Psalms 12: 7), where it refers to ‘the Lord’s words’. 30 **my full name** – lit. ‘my name and that of my father’s’. On the acrostic, see below. 32 **entrance to my home** – a delightful pun, since the word ‘home’ is also the Hebrew word for a line of verse (**bayyit**), and indeed the acrostic places him at the entrance!

With a deft use of rhymed Hebrew prose, Joseph Sarfati creates a delightful introduction that both praises this Bomberg edition of the Bible and sets the stage for the poem to come. Rhymed-prose was a well-established form in Hebrew literature long before Sarfati took up his pen, and the passage here is written in an elegant mixture of biblical and rabbinic phrases, lightly seasoned with humor. But though the poem mingles the ancient layers of the Hebrew tongue it is eminently up to date, for Sarfati was careful to use the latest professional ‘lingo’. Now past its first half-century of printing, Hebrew had already devised suitable terms for the new art and we thus find Sarfati referring to Bomberg the printer as a **מחוקק** (l. 3), a biblical word denoting ‘engraving’ but already used by early printers in reference to their craft. The language used to describe the art of printing in line 4 draws on primeval scenes of creation (Job 38: 9), evoking both the awe which the art of printing still inspired in the early sixteenth century and also, perhaps, the Latin terminology used to describe printing in its earliest stages,

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25 We could cite Hebrew examples of rhymed-prose ranging from epistles sent by the sages of medieval Baghdad to the more literary endeavors composed by the great Hebrew poets of Muslim Spain. Closer to home, Sarfati would certainly have been well-acquainted with Immanuel of Rome’s **Maḥḥarot**, a collection of rhymed-prose stories interspersed with metrical poems from early fourteenth-century Italy (D. Yarden ed., Jerusalem 1957). Rhymed-prose is characterized by sporadic use of rhyme and by the absence of meter. Words are grouped in short phrases ending in a given sound. Sometimes only two phrases rhyme together before the author moves on to a new rhyme-sound and new group of phrases, but such rhyming phrases can also come in groups of three or considerably more. There is no rule, and no pattern; the author simply switches to a new rhyme-sound whenever he pleases (or perhaps runs out of rhymes!). For examples and bibliography on this form in Hebrew and Arabic, see A. Brener, *Judah Halevi and His Circle of Hebrew Poets in Granada*, Leiden 2005, pp. 29-30.

with the swaddling clothes (חתולתו) of line 4 certainly reminiscent of the Latin ‘incunabula’. In his images relating to light, moreover, Sarfati appears to be alluding to Hebrew phrases already used to denote ‘publication’—and indeed used up to this day—at namely, the phrases ‘to see the light’ or ‘to go out into the light’ (cf. below, line 38 of the poem).\(^\text{27}\) And Bomberg’s edition ‘goes out into the light’ with a vengeance! For with a humorous reference to Psalms 19: 6, Sarfati has the Biblia Rabbinica sallying forth from Bomberg’s press with all the dazzling light of the rising sun, which goes out in full glory ‘like a bridegroom’ to begin its daily orbit. Equally humorous is the brief narrative sketched in lines 10-11, where brave men quake at the blazing ‘light’ of this new edition, and encourage each other with a biblical ‘Be strong!’ at the sight.

Up until line 20 the introduction comes in Sarfati’s own name and is spoken in his own voice. It is in prose—rhymed-prose to be sure—but prose nonetheless, without meter, and hence without the prestige of true poetry. So in order to produce an offering that will be worthy of its subject, Sarfati creates a charming fiction of a poem that takes shape on its own, without his will and almost without his intention; forged, as it were, out of the crucible of passionate need (ll. 20-29). The ‘Arab meters’ that come ‘trooping’ out of the speaker’s mouth nolens volens (l. 21) are the most prestigious meters of all: the quantitative meters hallowed centuries earlier by the great Hebrew poets of Islamic Spain, such as Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi. In lines 23-26 the meters jostle one and other in their bid to serve the poet in his hour of need (‘Upon me shall the righteous one lay his head!’), just like the stones in rabbinic midrash who quarrel with each other at one point over the privilege of serving as the pillow for the weary head of the Patriarch Jacob.\(^\text{28}\) The choice is taken out of the poet’s hands, however, for there falls ‘a great dread’

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27 The biblical prooftext for the phrase ‘to go out into the light’ in the sense of publishing is Hosea 6:7. The phrase appears in Soncino’s introduction to the same edition of Berakhot mentioned above (note 26), but not in any of the nine books printed in the press of Abraham Conat. For the text of Soncino’s introduction see A. M. Haberman, Peraqim be-Toldot ha-Madpisim ha-Yevanim, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 23-24.

28 Yalqut Shimoni, Vayeze 247: 118.
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(l. 26), and with language that evokes various awe-inspiring scenes in the Bible, and that invests the incipient poem with the authority of prophecy, the poem takes shape on its own. This point is echoed in the choice of words describing the poem as ‘seven-fold purified’ (l. 29) – a biblical phrase referring in its original context (Psalms 12: 7) to ‘the words of the Lord’.

Out of these lofty origins Sarfati creates a poem in the grand manner, ‘seven-fold purified’ indeed. It is a classic ode with all the trimmings: running end-rhyme, lines of two hemistichs, and strict quantitative meter; a tribute to the enduring model of Muslim Spain. The poem is also beautifully structured in ways that go beyond the formal requirements of the ode-form in this tradition. For one thing, it begins and ends with the same line, envelope-fashion. The envelope-device is not unknown to Hebrew odes from Muslim Spain, but here it seems particularly effective since it is mimetic of the book itself, which is by nature cyclical and non-ending. For another, there is an elaborate acrostic proclaiming the poet’s full name, as Sarfati himself was careful to point out in his introduction (ll. 29-33):

At the beginning of each line my full name is revealed / and on the margins of the book written and sealed. / He who would know my name / or ask whence I came / will find me at the entrance to my home: / He who seeks speech with me – let him come!

The acrostic is created in the Hebrew by joining the first letter of each line to the one after it, yielding: ‘I am Joseph the son of the rabbi Rabbi Samuel Sarfati, may his righteous memory be blessed. Be strong!’ Such acrostics are by no means rare in Hebrew, but these

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29 To be more specific, the ‘winning’ meter is the shalem ha-meqazar, a common variation of the shalem in which the second hemistich is slightly shortened. In a metrical consideration that goes back to Immanuel of Rome, this meter also conforms to the requirements of Italian poetry, which is syllabic in nature, thus yielding the eleven-syllable line of the Italian endecasillabo even as it creates the quantitative meters demanded of classic Hebrew poetry from Spain. On the metrical innovations wrought by Immanuel of Rome see D. Bregman, The Golden Way: The Hebrew Sonnet during the Renaissance and the Baroque, Tempe, Arizona 2006, pp. 31-41.

30 In Hebrew: אני יוסף בן הרב רבי שמואל צרפתי זצ”ל חזק
were almost always reserved for religious poetry. With the advent of printing, however, we frequently find acrostics in poems belonging to the genre we are discussing now: namely, poems in praise of books. So, for example, in the three poems printed at the end of the Pentateuch published in Hijar 1490 we find a host of different acrostics, including the name of the generous ‘Solomon’ who financed the printing, and the name of the book’s editor, ‘Abraham ben Isaac ben David’. A long poem at the end of the Pentateuch printed in Lisbon 1491 yields the acrostic ‘David bar Joseph ibn Yachia’, apparently the editor of the volume. One wonders how this innovation came about and is tempted, perhaps, to link it to a phenomenon discussed in the scholarship concerning non-Hebrew printing of the sixteenth century, and that is an increasing interest in preserving the literary rights of authors in an age that did not recognize literary property. This may not only explain why acrostics suddenly begin to appear in non-religious Hebrew poems, but why Sarfati, for example, is so insistent in pointing out the presence of the acrostic in his introduction.

V

That ‘the Torah speaks in the language of human beings’ is an adage of old (Berakhot 31b) that here becomes true in the most literal sense. For the speaker of our poem, as we learn from the rhymed introduction (ll. 33-34), is none other than the Torah herself, whose words we here print in full (Hebrew vocalized by Professor Shlomo Elkayam, followed by my translation and notes below):

אָן תִּצְעֲדִי מִזֶּה לְבַקֵּשׁ דָּעַתאָן תִּצְעֲדִי עֵדָה בְּאֵל נוֹשַׁעַת
לִי עַד שְׁמֵי הַמַּעֲלוֹת נוֹגָעַתנָבוֹן בְּכִלְיוֹתַי מְעוֹן בִּינוֹת וְיָד

גִּבֹּלָה בְכִלְיוֹתַי מְעוֹן מָעַרְשָׁה נָבָה
לִי דָּעַת אֶלַּעַד נוֹשַׁעַת אָן

32 Ginsburg, pp. 842-843. And there are quite a few other examples, including the poem published at the end of Soncino’s introduction to the book mentioned above (n. 26). The acrostic there reads ‘Joshua Solomon’ – the name of the publisher himself.
33 See for example C. Brown, Poets, Patrons and Printers: Crisis of Authority in Late Medieval France, Ithaca 1995. Brown notices a shift in the relations between author, printer and audience in the early sixteenth century, and points out that with the advent of printing authors sought greater control over their literary property.
ואזו צוצרו עלילתי נ住房和ו.
ור ישב על שלושה גבלות.
ור אחרים יאדו את צורה.
ﻢ יותר במחשבתיו את צורה.
ור אחרים יאדו את צורה.
ור במחשבתיו את צורה.
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A Poem by Joseph Sarfati

Note: Line 17: the first hemistich is problematic in terms of meter (short by one tenu’s) and in the vocalization of the final word. Line 19: את Micha is vocalized here as in the Bible (Song of Songs 6: 4, 10), but against the meter.

Whither wilt thou march, O people of the Lord’s salvation?
Whither wilt thou march from here to seek knowledge?

Wise in my reins, the seat of wisdom, mine is
the power to touch the very heavens on high

My Creator created me the crown of splendor and placed
in me a gushing well from the Fountain of Life

His abundant power formed me with every perfection,
with neither too much nor too little

Day after day I was a nursling within the secret of His lap
laughing and playful

His secret He placed in my lap before the sky
made its orbit and the earth first sank down

He redeemed in His pity His Congregation who was
then in Egypt subjugated unto Pharoah

Through the merits of her fathers, she approached Sinai:
He responding with His voice, and she hearing.

Ever since, for all eternity, the Rock has made me like a Tree
of Knowledge planted over their heart

My branches provides shade, and my fruit revives
the soul that wanders dying in ignorance

My head is in the utmost heights, and my hand will pull
out of She’ol the body of he who sinks in the mire

Through me my lovers sit in a divine assembly,
for out of the abyss their soul will journey on high

Many people in the world are like unto an ass:
O cast off the harness and saddle-clothes!
Through me they wrap themselves in piety, as though I spoke
unto them – but the time of retribution is determined by me.

They raise unto me a golden plate, a nose-ring, a necklace,
an earring, bracelets and a ring.
There is peace in my dwelling – with the just I deal justly
and with the wicked I deal wickedly
He who spurns my delights, his soul shall I tear asunder
as a lion tears a kid apart
To those who love folly I will unsheathe my sword
for their soul is as though struck with unworthiness
He who stands in awe of me and desires My delights will stand;
He who flouts my laws will be lost

20 Mine is the power to foil the foe, for every pain I have a balm;
I establish every soul that establishes itself in me
Go forth with God and gaze upon me the day I
shed glory and splendor upon all creation
A quarrel have I with my children, for every people and nation
kneels unto me and bows down
But the children of my bowels abandoned me
like a mother who holds back her teats from her offspring
I teach the Torah to make sin white, though
it be as red as rubies and scarlet.

25 A man of great heart founded the secret of my foundation
and made me known unto the ends of the universe
There arose a soul in the House of Bomberg – Daniel by name -
whose adherents are pierced to him alone
His hands work the righteousness of God and for this
shall I ever give thanks to God
He is powerful in the Holy Tongue; almost every other tongue
but his limps within the circle of speech.
Hurry, acquire life, O sons of the living God, give heart
to those who cling to me and open thy hand

30 Remember that the miserly soul is always like a sin to God
and like unto one who errs
The purchase of my goodly traits, O my people, go purchase,
if you seek merit from God
The twenty-four books were printed together
in types slender and square
Letters newly cut with an iron pen:
there is no rebel amongst them nor reprobate
Every one of them translated and enfolded within the massorah
on each page, like a hammered rim

280
Every one with vowel points and cantillation marks whose sweetness of melody pierces the heavens
Rashi and Ibn Ezra explicate through them: does their hand not split the target of truth within a hair?
Gersonides below, and Kimhi on top:
the linguist the mitre upon the turban.
1525 is the year I went forth into the light in Venice,
the city made serenissima by land and sea
Awake, O my congregation, and run after me,
ye who go limping after vanity and evil
Will you not see, that those of my children who abandoned me have drunk the poisoned chalice to the full?
How long will you be devoid of knowledge, and in false teachings put your daily hope, like one without sense?
If you hurry not, to march towards me,
whither wilt thou march, O people of the Lord’s salvation?

3 Fountain of Life (Psalms 36: 10). 5 nursling … laughing and playful (Proverbs 8: 30), in which the speaker is Wisdom. 6 before the sky (Isaiah 40: 22). 12 divine assembly (Ezekiel 28: 2). 13 Many are … unto an ass – a phrase from a well-known liturgical poem “et sha’arei ratzon” by Judah ben Samuel ibn Abbas (12th century). 15 They raise … ring – an allusion to the Golden Calf (Exodus 32: 3-5) and hence in the poem a complaint against those Jews who engage in false worship. 17 tears a kid (Judges 14: 5). 18 unsheathe my sword (Exodus 15: 9). 19 He who stands in awe – lit. ‘the awesome one’ from Song of Songs (6: 4), where it refers to the [feminine] beloved, and because of the allegorical meaning traditionally given the Song of Songs, functions here in the poem as a metaphor for the individuals of the Jewish community. 24 to make sins white … rubies (Isaiah 1: 18). 25 man of great heart – occurs twice in Bible (Exodus 35: 22; 2 Chronicles 29: 31), both times alluding to one who freely brings an offering to the Lord. 26 pierced to him – the mark of a slave (Exodus 21: 6); here a reference to the devotion which Bomberg inspired in those around him. 33 an iron pen (Job 19: 24) – a phrase used for the art of printing already in the incunabula period. no rebel … nor reprobate (Ezekiel 20: 38), where the words come in an entirely different context. 36-37 Rashi and [Abraham] ibn Ezra … Gersonides [Levi ben Gershon] and [David] Kimhi – major commentators of the Bible.
To anyone familiar with the Book of Proverbs, the parallels with Sarfati’s poem are clear and unmistakeable. Just as Wisdom ‘stands at the top of the high places’ and ‘cries out as the gates’ (Proverbs 8: 1-2), so does the Torah ‘raise / her own hymns of praise’ and serve as the speaker throughout our poem (intro., ll. 33-34). And both Wisdom and the Torah are feminine in persona, thanks to the gendered nouns of the Hebrew language. In Proverbs, Wisdom alternately rebukes and holds out promises of reward (Proverbs 8: 32-36), and the Torah follows suit in the poem, alternately threatening those who scorn her (ll. 14, 16b, 17-18, 19b) and promising reward to those who follow her path (16a, 19a, 20-21). Wisdom traces her ancient beginnings through primeval scenes of creation (Proverbs 8: 22-31); the Torah prides herself on having been created ‘before the sky made its orbit / and the earth first sank down’ (l. 6). Both Wisdom and Torah reminisce over their days as ‘a nursling in the secret of [God’s] lap, laughing and playful’, in order to emphasize the antiquity of their origins and their intimacy with the Creator (cf. poem, l. 5 and Proverbs 8: 30). Wisdom and Torah thus coalesce beautifully in Sarfati’s poem, though it was not Sarfati who created the identity between them. Already the rabbis of ancient times saw the two figures as one, noting quite simply in the commentary on Proverbs: ‘Wisdom – this is the Torah’. The personification of the Torah creates both pathos and authority in Sarfati’s poem, investing each of its utterances with the aura of absolute truth: both praise (ll. 10-12) and rebuke (ll. 13-24) somehow ring truer when it is the Torah who speaks. And certainly the command to run out and purchase the Bomberg edition rings with a special insistence when it is the Torah herself who urges people on! (ll. 29-31):

Hurry, acquire life, O sons of the living God, give heart
to those who cling to me and open thy hand
Remember that the miserly soul is always like a sin to God
and like unto one who errs
The purchase of my goodly traits, O my people, go purchase,
if you seek merit from God

Sarfati praises the beautiful type of this new edition, and indeed Bomberg

34 Midrash Mishlei 9: 1, 10.
was famed for the quality of his letters to the point of being known as ‘the Aldine of the Hebrew press’. Here Sarfati draws special attention to the specially-cut types so evenly spaced that, as he mischievously puts it, ‘there is no rebel amongst them nor reprobate’ (ll. 32-33):

The twenty-four books were printed together
in types slender and square
Letters newly cut with an iron pen:
there is no rebel amongst them nor reprobate

But the highest praise is reserved for the massorah, the crown jewel of this Bomberg edition (ll. 34-37). As in the rhymed-prose introduction (ll. 11-13), Sarfati uses the language of artifacts to describe the beauty of the book it praises. The massorah is ‘a hammered rim’ (l. 34) and even the layout of the page is described in terms of a precious or holy artifact, with the commentaries of David Kimhi and Levi ben Gershon depicted as the symbols of sacred office (l. 37):

Every one of them translated and enfolded within the massorah
on each page, like a hammered rim
Every one with vowel points and cantillation marks whose
sweetness of melody pierces the heavens
Rashi and Ibn Ezra explicate through them: does their hand not
split the target of truth within a hair?
Gersonides below, and Kimhi on top:
the linguist the mitre upon the turban.

Like other Hebrew poems written in honor of printed books, Sarfati’s poem includes specific details relating to the book’s publication. In lines 25-28 Daniel Bomberg comes in for special praise:

A man of great heart founded the secret of my foundation
and made me known unto the ends of the universe
There arose a soul in the House of Bomberg – Daniel by name –
whose adherents are pierced to him alone
His hands work the righteousness of God and for this
shall I ever give thanks to God

---

He is powerful in the Holy Tongue; almost every other tongue
but his limbs within the circle of speech

These lines are effusive, but hardly the only tribute to Daniel Bomberg in Hebrew letters. Hebrew authors seem to have vied with one and other in lauding the great publisher. Recalling the efforts to recover lost manuscripts, Ibn Adonijah humbly thanked ‘the highly distinguished and pious Christian’ for his unqualified generosity and financial support,36 while Elias Levita referred to Bomberg as ‘the master printer, a craftsmen whose like is unknown in Israel … learned in the Law of God’.37 Sarfati was not even the only one to praise Daniel Bomberg in rhyme: Abraham de Balmes, author of the Hebrew grammar *Miqneh Avraham*, expressed his admiration in the rhymed introduction to his work, referring to him as ‘Daniel Bomberg, the man of charming attribute / long held in great repute’. De Balmes stressed Bomberg’s devotion to Hebrew as well as his Christian religion, noting that ‘the feet of his forefathers did not draw nigh / to Mount Sinai’.38

And like other poems for books from the period,39 Sarfati’s poem is also specific about the date and place of publication (l. 38):

1525 is the year I went forth into the light in Venice,
the city made *serenissima* by land and sea

The Hebrew word here translated as *serenissima* is רוגעת; ‘to make tranquil’. Perhaps this translation is somewhat fanciful, but Venice was in fact known as *La Serenissima* even in Sarfati’s day and age.

VI

We have seen that Sarfati’s poem belongs to a genre that had come into its own by the time the *Biblia Rabbinica* was published in 1525. Like other poets of Hebrew poems in praise of books, Sarfati gave the
name of the publisher, specified the date and place of printing, and lauded the physical beauty of the edition. And like several poets before him he spelled his name in an acrostic composed of the first letters in each line of his poem. To be sure, we find some of these same techniques in other poems that Sarfati wrote for books: two of these poems begin and end with the same line, envelope-fashion, and five of them allow the poem to speak for itself in the first-person. But these other poems are miniatures, and in no way approach the artistry of Sarfati’s poem for the *Biblia Rabbinica* of 1525.

A genre that probably began as a complimentary gesture in the early years of publishing was eventually to become a commercial tool; Franklin B. Williams reminds us of Swift’s comments about commendatory poems ‘meerly writ at first for filling / To raise the Volume’s Price a Shilling’. But no one could ever accuse Joseph Sarfati of having produced this commendatory poem merely ‘for filling’ or to raise the price by however many shillings. Sarfati’s poem in honor of the *Biblia Rabbinica* of 1525 may be regarded as one of the finest Hebrew poems of its genre, and perhaps even one of the best poems to have come down to us from a highly talented, but sadly neglected poet.

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40 One of these poems introduces his translation of *Celestina*; the other is in praise of the prayer-book printed by Daniel Bomberg in 1524 (see above, n. 17).

41 The five poems: (1) a three-line poem for a book by Ibn Sina (MS Mich 353, f. 113v, no. 40 and also on f. 129v, no. 145); (2) a five-line poem for *Sefer ha-Baḥūr* by Elias Levita (MS Mich 353, f. 132v, no. 162); (3) another poem of four lines for *Sefer ha-Baḥūr* (MS Mich 353, f. 132v, no. 163); (4) a four-line poem for a prayer book (see above, n. 17); (5) a five-line poem apparently for an edition of the Book of Chronicles (MS Mich 353, f. 108r, no. 202)

42 Williams, ‘Commentary Verses’ (above, n. 23), p. 8.