

*The Consolatory Letters of a Jewish Communal Scribe in Montalbán, Aragon: Political Implications and Historical Context* \*

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**Abstract:** Study and edition of four consolatory letters written in rhymed prose, contained in the Hebrew epistolographic formulary by Yom Tov Ben Hannah, scribe to the Jewish community of Montalbán. This formulary sheds light on life in a small community in the Kingdom of Aragon in the years 1389-1412. I will analyse the literary techniques and philosophical ideas in these letters in the broader context of the consolatory genre, and then, primarily, explore the socio-political aspects of the scribe's rhetoric and its implications. I will show that skilful scribes, like Ben Hannah, expertly wove political ideas and references to the burning issues of the time into their words of comfort.

**Keywords:** History of the Jews; Aragon; Hebrew Letters; Consolation; Martyrology; 1391 Riots; Montalbán; Lot's flight from Sodom.

**Resumo:** Estudo e edição de quatro cartas consolatórias escritas em prosa rimada e editadas sob as normas do formulário epistolográfico Hebraico de autoria de Yom Tov Ben Hannah, escriba (*Sofer*) da comunidade judaica de Montalbán. Esta formulação lança luz à vida cotidiana de uma pequena

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comunidade no reino de Aragão, entre os anos 1389-1412. Analisarei as técnicas literárias e as ideias filosóficas nestas cartas, no contexto mais amplo do gênero consolatório, e então explorarei aspectos sócio-políticos da retórica do escriba e suas implicações. Mostrarei que a técnica de escribas como Ben Hannah, habilmente insere ideias políticas e referências aos eventos trágicos do período entre suas palavras de conforto.

**Palavras-chave:** História dos judeus; Aragão; Cartas Hebraicas; Consolação; Martiriologia; Motins de 1391; Montalbán; Fuga de Sodoma por Ló.

The collection of Hebrew letters and poems, partially preserved in a single manuscript (Oxford, Bodl., Mich. 155, Neubauer 1984), by Yom Tov ben Hannah (Abenhanya), scribe to the Jewish community of Montalbán, sheds light on life in a small community in the Crown of Aragon, in the years preceding and following the persecution of 1391. To date, I have focused primarily on Ben Hannah's network of contacts with a group of Jewish courtiers in Saragossa; the attitudes of the scribe and Jewish community leaders in Montalbán to the reconstruction efforts of Hasdai Crescas (leader of Aragonese Jewry and courtier to the crown) in Barcelona; the development of a new Jewish consciousness with regard to the *conversos* as a group; and the genre of recommendation letters to itinerant Jews and the new role assumed by communal scribes in the aftermath of 1391 (BEN-SHALOM, 2012a; BEN-SHALOM, 2012b; BEN-SHALOM, 2013; BEN-SHALOM, 2014). Here, I will draw attention to another facet of the communal scribe's work: writing public and private letters of consolation, which played an important role in the network of inter-communal communications.

The fragmentary Montalbán Formulary includes four undated letters of consolation. The first is addressed to the Saragossan Jewish courtier Don Joseph ben Almali, on the death of his brother-in-law and son-in-law, Don Alazar Golluf (1389), who was treasurer to the queen and the most prominent Jewish courtier at the time. The second letter of consolation is addressed to the two sons of Joseph Almali, on the death of their father

(1397). The third letter is directed to Ben Hanna's two brothers, on the deaths of a son and a daughter. The fourth letter was delivered to his brother Jacob, on the death of his wife.

Yom Tov's son, Joseph, who edited the formulary, refers to these four letters, in Arabic written in Hebrew characters, as *ta'zija* – that is “comfort”. The editor's use of this term reflects the continued currency of Arabic terms among the Jews of Aragon until the fifteenth century (ASSIS, 2012) and especially poetical terms such as *marthiyya*, which is an elegy. These Hebrew letters were part of a long Jewish tradition of consolation known in Islamic Spain (Al-Andalus) at least from the tenth century (SCHIRMANN; FLEISCHER, 1995, p. 107). Some of these elegies – like other types of poetry, such as poems of praise, friendship or complaint – already had an epistolary element, and many also served as consolatory letters (PAGIS, 1970, p. 126-130, 198-199). This tradition continued in Christian Spain. A contemporary of Ben Hannah's, the Saragossan communal scribe Solomon de Piera, wrote a number of elegies for deceased Jewish leaders in Aragon and Castile, such as Hasdai Crescas (BRODY, 1893, p. 27-29), Benveniste ben Lavi de la Cavallería and Meir Alguadez (BERNSTEIN, 1942, p. 10-14, 47-48). We also know of elegies written for private individuals, such as the elegy addressed by Solomon Bonafed to a relative, on the death of his mother, Blanca (PRATS, 2006). Alongside this Andalusian elegaic tradition, however, a new epistolary genre developed, of Hebrew letters of consolation, which reflected (as in the case of the prominent scholar Profayt Duran of Perpignan, for example, or Solomon Bonafed of Sargossa) not only influences of Andalusian tradition, but also of Romance literature and Catalan humanism, as well as the Latin classics. The works that exerted a particular influence on Bonafed, in this context, included Boetheius' *De consolatio philosophiae*, and Enrique de Villena's *Tratado de la Consolación* (GUTWIRTH, 1996b, 2000; PRATS, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In light of the limited number of extant consolatory letters, the publication of a collection of four letters by the same author is a matter of considerable interest. Although little-known among scholars, Ben Hannah was by no means a

marginal figure, and would appear to have belonged to the second circle of a group of Saragossan poets known as '*Adat Nogenim* (Band of Minstrels). Beyond the socio-political issues that will be addressed in the present article, the publication of these letters in the appendix can serve future research into literary rhetoric of the period and the genre of Hebrew consolatory letters.

The consolatory letters of Ben Hannah are written in the flowery, biblical style, employed for centuries by the communal scribes in Spain. In the late twelfth century, Judah Ibn Tibbon (the “father of translators”) instructed his son Samuel in the art of epistolary composition:

My Son! If thou writest aught, read it through a second time, for no man can avoid slips. Let not any consideration of hurry prevent thee from revising a short epistle. Be punctilious as to grammatical accuracy, in conjugations and genders, for the constant use of the vernacular sometimes leads to error in this regard. A man's mistakes in writing bring him into disrepute; they are remembered against him all his days [...] Endeavor to cultivate conciseness and elegance, do not attempt to write verse unless thou canst do it perfectly. Avoid heaviness, which spoils a composition, making it disagreeable alike to reader or audience (Ibn TIBBON, 1926).

Letter-writers in Spain generally followed the rules set forth in Ibn Tibbon's “will” – naturally, with varying degrees of success. Influenced by Arab tastes, the elaborate mosaic style was considered desirable, with an ever-greater tendency to wordiness and floridity. The talent of a writer was judged by his ability to reconcile the ideas he conveyed with the biblical verses he used to express them (SCHIRMANN; FLEISCHER, 1995, p. 52-53). Despite the age-old Andalusian traditions described above, Ben Hannah's letters already reflect the experience of at least two centuries of Hebrew writing in the Christian kingdoms of Spain. The literary tastes represented by this experience differed from those of the old Andalusian traditions and were influenced, alongside their own internal development, by the rhetoric of Christian literature of the time.

## Literary consolatory rhetoric and philosophical ideas

In two of his consolatory letters, Ben Hannah employs an interesting prosodic device. He returns to a rhyme, e.g. –VIM in the fourth letter, after a sentence or two, thereby dividing the letter into paragraphs, on the one hand, while creating a girdle-like rhyme pattern, which ties the text to a larger literary unit. The technique of connecting the verses of a composition by means of a girdle-like rhyme pattern is a well-known and widespread feature of the Hebrew liturgical poetry of the Spanish School (FLEISCHER, 2007, p. 349-361). In resorting to this uncommon feature in epistolary or *maqamat*-like rhymed prose, Ben Hannah may have been relying on the literary aesthetics of liturgical poetry both to divide and to consolidate his text.<sup>2</sup>

Ben Hannah was an excellent writer with outstanding rhetorical abilities, who frequently employed dual meanings and allusions, and passed with remarkable virtuosity between the literary foundation provided by the Bible, and current Spanish reality. Thus, for example, in the opening passage of a joint letter of consolation to his brother Judah, on the death of his son (whose name is unknown), to his brother Jacob, on the death of his daughter, Soley, and to another relative, Judah ben Joseph, on the death of his daughter, Luna:<sup>3</sup>

The Sun and the Moon and the stars / and the entire  
heavenly host illuminate by their decree.

Declaring, like books / without speech or words / the  
glory of the Creator of the lights / for the earth and those  
who dwell [upon it].

Orbiting and hastening and going on their watch, /  
hastening and returning to perform their labour.

Angelic messengers and potent champions, / perfectly  
executing their [assigned] tasks, and not by might.

But acting by faith, / happily and joyously tilting, / near  
to the Lord.

And their portion is perpetual by God's will. / Their  
paths are the paths of pleasantness; they are all beloved.

And who can describe the acts of the Creator who

commands the sun [*heres*] / to become as an earthen [*heres*] pitcher, / covering it with heavy clouds that it might not shine. And He seals the fate of the stars upon the sun in Gibeon, and upon the nature of those that go and return [*sikkim*] to tell them you shall stand still.

And the sun will not quit its sheath for the broad spaces / to fulfil its destiny. And the planets, the separate intellects [*sekhelim nivdalim*], will stand idle / from their forceful and mighty acts, drawn to the service of their Creator, / blessed [*berukhim*; probably should read *keruvim*, “cherubim” – and thus “enthroned upon the cherubim”] enthroned.

Possessing the strength to flee [*yenusun*] his rebuke, to hasten [*yehafezun*] - run away [*yerusun*], / runner to meet runner, for thus is His judgement sealed upon them, to be banished / from their nest and begone, / answerable for their misdeeds (Ben Hannah: Annex, 3).

The letter's rhymed introduction is interlaced with rhetorical figures, without attempting to force a rhyme in every phrase – in keeping with Ibn Tibbon's advice to his son. The figures are drawn primarily from Scripture, as customary in the epistolary genre (unlike Halakhic responsa) and in secular Hebrew poetry in Spain, and in keeping with the recommendation of Solomon de Piera, in his didactic work on the poetic art, *Imrei no'as*, in which he cautions against the use of Talmudic vocabulary in poetry, as it lacks “rhetorical purity” (TEUBER, 1924-5; GUTWIRTH, 1996b, p. 41; SCHIRMANN-FLEISCHER, 1997, p. 83).

Ben Hannah's decision to begin the letter with references to the sun and the moon is due, first and foremost, to the names of the deceased girls: Soley (Sun) and Luna (Moon). The introduction praises all of the celestial bodies – sun, moon, stars and planets – engaged in divine service, while stressing their insignificance in relation to the greatness of God, whose complete control over the celestial bodies is epitomised in the miracle performed for Joshua at Gibeon: the interruption of the natural course of the sun and the moon. Ben Hannah also stresses divine control over the planets – the Aristotelian separate intellects – which, according to Ben Hannah, but

not recounted in the biblical text, were also compelled to interrupt their orbits and habitual courses. The disruption of the natural order and the stellar orbits at the time of an illustrious person's death is a recurrent theme in the Hebrew elegies of Al-Andalus – in the poetry of Moses Ibn Ezra, for example (PAGIS, 1970, p. 206-207) – taken up in epistolary rhymed prose as well. In the letter before us, however, the motif of disruption of the natural order is evoked to demonstrate the greatness of God, in contrast to the futility of human endeavours. In essence, Ben Hannah adopts the philosophical structure of reality, which identifies the angels with the “separate intellects”, and as intermediaries between God, the celestial bodies and the material world. Other philosophical terms and concepts, such as *ex nihilo* emanation, also appear in Ben Hannah's poem “And God said let there be light” (BEN-SHALOM, 2012, p. 210); while the philosophical concept of eternity of the world is introduced later in this letter, in a reference to the celestial bodies as “wondrous and terrible bodies, immortal and everlasting” (Annex, 3). Although the content of the formulary cannot be characterised as wholly philosophical, Ben Hannah was, as noted, a member of the second circle of poets and courtiers (some of whom were philosophers) in Saragossa and, as a disciple of the physicians Don Joseph Almali and Don Moses ben Alazar, certainly had a background in science and philosophy (BEN-SHALOM, 2012, p. 204-206, 210-211 and n. 58). In any event, his position on miracles, in this letter, is anti-Aristotelian, and may reflect the influence of Spanish Neoplatonists, who rejected the plain, *ex nihilo*, understanding of creation, in favour of emanationism combined with the idea of eternal primordial matter (SCHWARTZ, 1996, p. 63-90).<sup>4</sup> In general, the miracle at Gibeon posed an exegetical problem for mediaeval philosophers, who found it hard to explain in keeping with Aristotle's laws of motion. Some, such as Maimonides, therefore downplayed its importance, viewing it as a natural, local event, and the text in Joshua (10:12) as a metaphorical description of the longest day of summer (MAIMONIDES, p. II, 35, p. 325); or Gersonides, who explained it as a metaphor for the short duration of the battle, and the miracle as pertaining to the rapid conclusion of a task that would normally have required a much longer time to complete

(Gersonides, Joshua, 10:12). Other philosophers considered the miracle at Gibeon the greatest of all the biblical miracles. The Neoplatonist Solomon Alconstantin of Tudela, for example, in *Megalleh 'amuqqot* (c. 1352), while asserting that the miracle at Gibeon was the greatest of all miracles, expressed doubts regarding the possibility of the sun coming to a halt, as such an event would have – according to the accepted scientific knowledge of his time – caused the world itself to cease to exist. Alconstantin's astro-magical approach posited the prophet's conjunction with the Active Intellect and application of esoteric astrological knowledge as a possible explanation of miracles. In the case of the miracle at Gibeon, however, he chose not to elaborate, preferring to keep his true opinion (apparently antinomistic) to himself (SCHWARTZ, 1996, p. 270-271; SCHWARTZ, 1999, p. 157-162).<sup>5</sup> Although Ben Hannah may have been familiar with *Megalleh 'amuqqot* or other Hebrew Neoplatonic texts, he does not address the question of the prophet's ability to perform miracles or the significance of disrupting the motion of the celestial bodies, but – contrary to Alconstantin and the other members of the Neoplatonist circle (SCHWARTZ, 1996, p. 188-192) – adhered to the conservative, literalist, Rabbinic view that the sun actually stopped in its course at Gibeon, until the battle's conclusion (Bab. Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 25a).

The verdict pronounced by God against these forces of nature, the names of which recall those of the deceased offspring, also serves the author, later in the letter, as a rhetorical device to illustrate the futility of questioning God's judgement with regard to those mortal souls:

Therefore, my brothers, behold and see if these synonyms [i.e. “flee” (*yenusun*), “hasten” (*yeḥafeẓun*), “run away” (*yeruṣun*)] / were pronounced upon wondrous and terrible bodies, / immortal and everlasting, that passed under sentence [*avru bein ha-gəẓarim*], what shall be done to man covered by worms / that, like a lion, rend his hands and feet, breaching him / and creating openings in him.

The day of His commandment decrees that all who are



born must perish. / Let it suffice them that their flesh  
will be washed in living waters. /  
Wrapped in a shroud of fine linen and purple, / placed in  
beautifully-crafted cedar wood. Borne by righteous  
friends to a tomb carved after the fashion of a palace  
(Ben Hannah: Annex, 3).

The form and style of this letter, as well as the other letters in Ben Hannah's formulary, may be compared to that of the consolatory letter written by Profayt Duran in 1393, on the death of the poet En Abraham ben Isaac Halevi, one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Gerona (DURAN, 1865). Duran's letter resembles the consolatory letters found in the Montalbán and Saragossa formularies, in the flowery style commonly employed throughout Spain. It differs somewhat, however, from the letters written by communal scribes, in the abundance of Jewish philosophical sources upon which it draws, the literary discourse it conducts with Greek political traditions, and its allusions to Christian exempla (e.g. the *Gesta Romanorum*). In this sense, as Eleazar Gutwirth has demonstrated (GUTWIRTH, 1991), Duran's letter is a precursor to Isaac Abravanel's humanistic letter of consolation, and both should be seen as a new type of consolatory letter, written by members of a literary elite of refined artistic and humanistic tastes (*Epistolae virorum illustrium*) (GUTWIRTH, 1989). Ben Hannah's formulary, like the Saragossa formulary compiled and edited by the scribe Solomon Hazan (BEINART, 1998) belongs to the traditional epistolary genre practised by skilled, professional communal scribes, trained in the epistolary style and capable of applying it to the various needs of their respective communities (BEN-SHALOM, 1996, p. esp. 181). Duran's letter is marked by sharp social criticism of the community of Gerona and reflects his views regarding the *conversos* and the consciousness of martyrdom I have addressed elsewhere (BEN-SHALOM, 2001, p. 235-236).

### Consolation and the crisis of the interregnum in Aragon

One of Yom Tov Ben Hannah's consolatory letters was written to his brother Jacob, on the death of his wife. It is interesting to note the author's interweaving of personal loss and external political circumstances. Ben Hannah even engages in a certain amount of self-criticism, regarding the inability of the consolatory genre to “avail or deliver”:

And now my brother, may God preserve you, I lack the strength to dwell on empty words of consolation / that neither avail nor deliver, but only ask you to depart from the upheaval, / and that you may not be hindered / by the fact that the city is unfortified without a wall / and is readied for fury and distress / and a cohort of evil messengers [*mal'akbei ra'im*], for the killing of the bishop [*begmon*]. Do not look back, / to pity your possessions / more than your life. When the Lord is pleased with your ways / to lengthen your days, / you will live all the more (Ben Hannah: Annex, 4).

Yom Tov Ben Hannah implores his brother to marshal the strength “to depart from the upheaval”, in light of the precarious political situation in his city. The danger posed to the Jews was the result of an unusual incident – the murder of a high-ranking member of the Church. The Hebrew word *begmon*, generally refers to a bishop or an archbishop. The expression “depart from the upheaval” (Genesis 19:29) is not meant as an allusion to Jacob's personal grief, but to the state of the city in which he resides, and the demand that he leave the city, as Lot left Sodom. The expression “do not look back (Genesis 19:17) to pity your possessions” also evokes the story of Lot's flight from Sodom. The well-known interpreter of the Bible, Rashi, explains that Lot “tarried” (19:16) “in order to save his possessions” (Rashi, ad loc.). Like the angels in the story of Lot, Ben Hannah urges his brother not to tarry out of concern for his material possessions but to flee for his life. In the story of Sodom, which serves as a rhetorical device in this letter of consolation, Lot is spared for the sake of his uncle Abraham (19:29). Yom

Tov, like Abraham and the angels, acts to save his brother Jacob from the impending catastrophe he believes will befall his city.

This letter reflects, first and foremost, the characteristics of inter-communal communication in Aragon. The community – even a smaller community, like that of Montalbán – was not an isolated social unit, but was kept informed of events in other cities, and its members responded to general political events. The letter also reflects the Jews' vulnerability to external politics and events. The rhetorical intermingling of the personal and the political dimensions, while informing the recipient of events in other communities, can also be found in other letters from the same period and, for example, in the *Responsa* of Isaac b. Sheshet (*Responsum* 373: 104b [208];<sup>6</sup> GUTWIRTH, 1996a, p. 264).

Ben Hannah cites “the killing of the bishop” as the reason for his plea that Jacob leave the city – almost certainly referring to the murder of the Archbishop of Saragossa, García Fernández de Heredia (installed 1389), on the first of June 1411. It was a political assassination that shook the entire Kingdom of Aragon. Fernández de Heredia was one of the most prominent speakers at the Cortes of Calatayud, convened to choose an heir to the Aragonese crown, during the interregnum that followed the death of King Martin I, on the first of May 1410. The Archbishop of Saragossa supported the claim of the minor, Louis III of Anjou, grandson of King Juan I (through his daughter Yolande of Aragon, Queen Consort of Naples and Countess of Anjou). The archbishop was murdered immediately after the Cortes, on the return journey to Saragossa, between the towns of Almonacid and La Almunia de Doña Godina, by Anton de Luna, one of the leaders of the faction supporting the claim of Jaime II, Count of Urgell, a descendent of Alfonso IV, who had already served as governor general of Aragon under Martin I. Following the murder, the archbishop's body was taken to Almunia by his assassins. As a result of the assassination, Fernando of Antequera, Prince of Castile (son of Juan I of Castile and Eleanor of Aragon) acceded to the throne in the Compromise of Caspe (March-June 1412), beginning a new era in the history of the Royal House of Aragon (SOLDEVILA, 1922-3: III, 584; BISSON, 1986, p. 133-136; NAVARRO ESPINACH, 2011).

The political discourse of the interregnum was not detached from Jewish life in Aragon. Some of the conflict's main protagonists and spokesmen, such as the Dominican preacher Vicente Ferrer and Pope Benedict XIII, took part in establishing the new order with regard to Jews and *conversos* in Castile and Aragon; and Jewish communal leaders closely observed the political events as they unfolded. A conspicuous example of Jewish (and *converso*) involvement in the conflict is an official report, signed on May 6 1412 by two physicians, declaring a certain person – who had been sent as a representative of the town of Valencia to participate in the election of a new King of Aragon – to be insane. The delegate was thus officially declared insane and unfit to participate in the election. The report was jointly signed by the two famous physicians mestre Honorat Bonafé (the Christian name of Profyat Duran, the ‘Ephodi’, who had been forced to convert in 1391 but subsequently continued to take part in Jewish affairs) and Jeroni de Alcanyis (the former Yehoshua ha-Lorki of Alcañiz, who had been voluntarily baptised a few months before, taking the Christian name Jerónimo de Santa Fe) (FELIU, 1986, p. 55; FELIU, 2012; CARDONER i PLANAs, 1973, p. 104, 121, notes 87-89; Sobrequés i VIDAL, 1982, p. 146).<sup>7</sup>

This background offers greater insight into Ben Hannah's Hebrew letter. Yom Tov of Montalbán feared that the assassination of García Fernández de Heredia would lead to riots, ultimately affecting the Jews, and therefore implored his brother to leave his city, which he described as “unfortified without a wall”. Could the city in question have been the provincial town of Almunia, in which the archbishop had been buried? La Almunia de Doña Godina is known to have had an organised Jewish community, including (in the second half of the fifteenth century) 46 houses, a synagogue, a hospital and other institutions, so it is possible that Jacob resided there (MARÍN PADILLA, 1989, p. 135-152, 263-306; 1990, p. 85-127; 1991, p. 51-84, 299-337). Yom Tov may simply have been speaking metaphorically, and his brother may have lived in the capital city of Saragossa, where the scribe expected the violence to break out. It seems unlikely, however, that Ben Hannah would have used the expression “unfortified without a wall” to refer to Saragossa – a fortified city that had

successfully protected its Jews during the riots of 1391. Unlike Saragossa, La Almunia de Doña Godina was indeed unfortified, as confirmed by the supreme judge of the Jews, Hasdai Crescas, who resided there for a time, conducting the affairs of Aragonese Jewry from his temporary residence. In one of his responsa, Crescas refers to Almunia (fruit or vegetable garden in Spanish) as a “village” [*kefar*]: “my many duties on behalf of the holy community of *Saraqusa* [Saragossa] that are now conducted in this village of *Lamunya* [La Almunia], where there are no books” (METZGER, 1993, Responsum 27: 48). We may deduce from Crescas' remark that he lacked the books he required to write a Halakhic responsum as there were no extensive Hebrew libraries in the town at the time, indicating that the Jewish community was indeed a small one.

At the same time, however, in light of the general political situation in Aragon immediately following the archbishop's murder, Jacob ben Hannah could also have lived elsewhere – perhaps in Belchite (discussed below), as there were widespread fears of civil war in the Kingdom of Aragon, in the aftermath of the assassination. Beyond the kingdom's borders, were armed groups that sought to apprehend and punish the assassin, Anton de Luna, who had since fled Almunia, taking refuge in a number of fortresses held by members of his faction, which included – in addition to Jaime II, Count of Urgell – Artal de Alagón, Hospitaller castellan of Amposta, and Don Pedro Fernández de Híjar, chief commander of Montalbán (in the order of Santiago). Immediately thereafter and throughout the summer, alongside efforts to convene the *corte* of Aragon at Alcañiz (June 1411-February 1412), at which the Compromise of Caspe was drafted, troops from Castile, supporters of Fernando of Trastámara, entered Aragonese territory, as did troops from Gascony, supporters of the Count of Urgell. The various forces (which also included forces under the command of Juan Fernández de Heredia, a relative of the slain archbishop and an opponent of the Count of Urgell) moved from place to place, laying siege to various fortresses, such as that of Albarracín, and seizing key cities. The Castilians moved primarily in the direction of Belchite, which was at the heart of an area under the control of Anton de Luna. Consequently, De Luna moved northward, to the remote

and hard-to-reach (particularly from Castile) mountains of Huesca, which were also closer to the fortresses of the Count of Urgell (ABELLA *et al.*, 2011). We may, therefore, assume that Ben Hannah's letter was sent during this period, prior to the Compromise of Caspe, which allayed fears of war. It is possible that it was sent to nearby Belchite – on the road from Montalbán to Saragossa, which had a Jewish *aljama* at that time. One of the Jews residing in Belchite at that time was, according to the *Libro verde de Aragon*, Hakham Azach Avendino, father-in-law of the courtier Alazar Golluf (BAER, 1961, p. II, 476, n. 45),<sup>8</sup> who belonged to the same circle of courtiers in Saragossa with which Yom Tov ben Hannah was associated. It is thus conceivable that Jacob ben Hannah also resided at Belchite, and the approach of Castilian forces (“for the killing of the bishop”) was the reason for the author's plea to his brother, to leave the city.

Yom Tov Ben Hannah's consolatory letter thus contributes to our understanding of the sensitivity of the Jews of Aragon to external political events and particularly the caution they exercised with regard to shifting political and military winds during the interregnum. The sense of impending “upheaval” proved justified over the course of the following five years, with the promulgation of the Valladolid statutes (1412), the missionary preaching of Vicente Ferrer (1412-1416), the Tortosa Disputation (1413-1414) conducted by the schismatic Pope Benedict XIII and the mass conversions of Aragonese Jews during those years, including the greater part of the community of Montalbán. In 1416, the Jewish community of Montalbán ceased to exist –suffering the fate of other communities in Aragon. I have found no testimony regarding the fate of Yom Tov Ben Hannah. He may no longer have been alive at the time. His son, Joseph Abenhanya, on the other hand, who edited his formulary, was among those Jews who converted to Christianity, adopting the Christian name Gabriel de Santa Ana (BEN-SHALOM, 2013, p. 103).

## **Consolation, politics and martyrology**

It is interesting to see how the events of the time are reflected in all four of Ben Hannah's consolatory letters. The death of the great Jewish courtier Alazar Golluf (two years before the riots of 1391) is described as a national tragedy, and Ben Hannah wonders in his letter, who will now defend the Jews of the Kingdom of Aragon:

Woe to us! Who can stand up before the sons of kings /  
to cast light before the face of he who walked in  
darkness, / and to open, in straits, blind eyes? / Who can  
express [his] mighty acts, // with enemies at the gate, a  
voice on high?

For this our heart is faint, / our dance has turned into  
mourning. / We have been brought down as a ghost out  
of the ground; // our voice is lower than low, a still  
voice.

Who can stand up to repair the breach, / and to complete  
that which is wanting without number. // Among the  
wretched Jews, // who have lost their value, high of  
stature hewn down (Annex, 1).

In the consolatory letter on the death of Joseph Almali, Almali's two sons are called upon to take their father's place and to continue to engage, as he did, in public affairs, and to lead a dynasty with a "name of the great". The idea of dynastic courtiers, whereby a courtier's son would be called upon to succeed his father in advocating on behalf of the Jews, was part of the long-standing ideology of Jewish courtiership in Spain, and was how the role of courtier was, in fact, perceived in the collective Jewish consciousness. The greatest courtiers were sometimes considered remnants of the House of David and exalted emissaries of divine providence. Such succession was not a foregone conclusion, however, and there was no guarantee that a courtier's sons would follow in his footsteps, despite having been trained to do so, as Alazar Golluf's son Isaac would appear to have been. Isaac Golluf, who converted to Christianity a few months after his father's death, assuming the

Christian name Juan Sánchez de Calatayud, went on to pursue a brilliant career at the highest levels of the royal administration (BEN-SHALOM, 2012, p. 198-200). Thus, Ben Hannah's appeal to the sons of Don Joseph ben Almali, on the day of their bereavement, to remember their family legacy and assume their father's role was not merely a rhetorical flourish, but a reminder and appeal to do the right thing, in light of other opportunities for political careers that had recently opened up for the families of Jewish courtiers, and especially in light of the behaviour of their nephew, Isaac Golluf, who had flouted collective Jewish expectations that he would fill the high-level position he had inherited from his father, preferring, instead, to found a new, Christian dynasty of courtiers.

The consolatory letter, mentioned above, to Ben Hannah's brothers Judah and Jacob, on the deaths of their children, also relates to external events and Jewish vulnerability. In this letter, we find echoes of the riots of 1391 and the difficult period that followed. According to one interpretation, Ben Hannah calls upon his relatives to take comfort in the natural deaths of their children, and in the fact that they were afforded a decent burial:

For it is better to fall prey to evil and grievous death /  
than to have the raging waters pass over our souls. /  
And to suffer the same fate, we and our beasts, to be  
consumed by the fowl of the heavens and by the dogs.  
Therefore my brothers, do not weep over dead for whom  
the obligation of burial can be fulfilled. / Remember  
what our brethren have endured among the nations,  
And choose the lesser evil. Take comfort in the distress  
of many / (Ben Hannah: Annex, 3).

In this passage, Ben Hannah alludes to the riots of 1391 (“what our brethren have endured among the nations”), during the course of which many Jewish victims and martyrs were denied proper burial. He tells his brothers that they may take comfort in the fact that their children had not taken the path of baptism (“the raging waters”), as had many Spanish Jews during the riots. He thus affirms that death is preferable to apostasy.



There is one phrase in the passage that lends itself to more than one interpretation. I refer to “*met mišvah sheyesh lo qovrin*”, translated above “do not weep over dead for whom the obligation of burial can be fulfilled”.<sup>9</sup> The phrase may, in fact, suggest another possibility. The Halakhic concept of *met mišvah* refers to the corpse of an unknown individual, with no one to bury it. Jewish law imposes a general moral obligation to care for such an anonymous corpse and afford it a proper Jewish burial. The spiritual reward for fulfilling this obligation is said to be great, as the responsibility does not lie with any specific individual, but is, rather, a general one. Ben Hannah, however, describes a “*met mišvah sheyesh lo qovrin*”, that is a “*met mišvah*” that *has* someone to bury it – a contradiction in terms, as one who is given a proper burial cannot be considered a “*met mišvah*”. Although the borrowed use of the expression “*met mišvah*” is also found in earlier sources,<sup>10</sup> the change in the term's meaning here may indicate something about the manner of the deaths themselves that could be considered the fulfilment of a religious obligation, at a time of forced conversions, during the riots of 1391. If this interpretation is correct, the deaths of the three family members mentioned in this letter were not natural (as we have understood them), but rather, acts of martyrdom. The significance of Ben Hannah's words of consolation would thus be that while many other martyrs had not been so fortunate, these particular Jewish martyrs had indeed been given a proper burial. My reluctance to adopt this alternative interpretation stems from Ben Hannah's use of a sophisticated metaphor, obscuring the act of martyrdom; and, in particular, from the fact that he mentions illness (although the expression *memotei tabalu'im* is variously interpreted by Jewish exegetes as death by starvation or grave suffering) rather than martyrdom, in his words of comfort (“For it is better to fall prey to evil and grievous death / than to have the raging waters pass over our souls”), possibly indicating that as the cause of death of the three children. Furthermore, the author's son Joseph, editor of the formulary, makes no mention of unnatural deaths in his introduction to this text. He does not refer to the deceased as martyrs (*qadoš, qedošim*) and does not mention the name of the dead son (which might

indicate that he was still an infant at the time).

Whether we accept the alternative interpretation or not, there is no doubt that the letter was written in close proximity to the riots of 1391, and reflects a martyrological ideology. A similar view can be found, for example, in a consolatory letter written by the poet and scribe Solomon de Piera of Saragossa, on the death of the son of Benveniste de la Cavallería. In the letter, De Piera describes how his generation had hoped to live in peace and tranquillity, without bloodshed and without forced conversions – hopes that had proven false, compelling parents to sacrifice their children on the altar of faith (BAER, 1961, p. II, 137).<sup>11</sup> Discourse regarding conversion of a different kind also arises in some of the consolatory letters of Solomon Bonafed (PRATS, 2006, p. esp. 352). It is important to remember, however, that Bonafed's writing reflects the years after the second conversion crisis (1412-1415), which – despite the sermons preached by Vicente Ferrer, and the social and legal pressures exerted to encourage conversion – were not directly associated with martyrology, but with a spiritual crisis of faith..

De Piera and Ben Hannah both call upon the mourners to take comfort in the fact that their children and relatives had not converted during the riots, and in the memory of the riots themselves in which so many had died as martyrs. This literary motif is very different from the theme of resurrection and the attitude to death as liberation from the tribulations of the world, which are common motifs in the consolatory letters of Solomon Bonafed (and in some writings of illustrious Spanish authors and poets such as Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marquis of Santillana, and Jorge Manrique) (PRATS, 2006, p. 344-345, 349-350; PRATS, 2008, p. 191), and which, in my opinion, manifest a different historical context. This approach was not unusual, and reflects – contrary to previous conceptions of Spanish Jewry – a widespread consciousness of martyrdom, whereby death was preferable to apostasy (Ben-Shalom, 2001).<sup>12</sup> Alongside the development of an ideology of martyrdom, communal scribes and leaders, such as Yom Tov Ben Hannah, Profayt Duran, Hasdai Crescas and Solomon Bonafed, also expressed ideological positions regarding conversion and the *conversos*. A comprehensive

study of the Spanish-Jewish epistolary genre will undoubtedly lead to a better understanding of the new, hybrid consciousness that began to develop during this period, encompassing both religious coercion and martyrdom (BEN-SHALOM, 2013; BEN-SHALOM, 2014). Letters of consolation, as I have shown here, played a significant part in this epistolary genre. Skilful scribes, like Ben Hannah, expertly wove political ideas and references to the burning issues of the time into their words of comfort.

## **Annex**

### 1. Yom Tov ben Hannah, Formulary, fols. 264v-265r

And further he [wrote] a *ta'zjya*<sup>13</sup> to Don Joseph the physician, son of Almali his teacher, on the passing of his illustrious brother-in-law, Don Alazar Golluf, in the month of Av. / And he was, in the palace of a king, great and important. // And so he said:

Since the hiding away of the departed father of a multitude [Genesis 17:5], / in the treasury of eternal life. / As the master journeyed on<sup>14</sup> to [his] rest. // All who have seen him will say 'Where is he?' [Job 20:7]

Our joy is diminished<sup>15</sup> – and [we] sigh, / for the cities he has made, / which are without a wall. // They cry out and there is none to rescue [them] [Psalms 18:42].

Woe to us! Who can stand up before [Deuteronomy 9:2] the sons of kings / to cast light before the face [Numbers 6:25; Ezekiel 1:9, 12] of he who walked in darkness [Isaiah 50:10], / and to open, in straits, blind eyes [Isaiah 42:7]? / Who can express [his] mighty acts [Psalms 106:2], // with enemies at the gate [Psalms 127:5], a voice on high [*be-ramah*; Jeremiah 31:14]?<sup>16</sup>

For this our heart is faint [Lamentations 5:17], / our dance has turned into mourning [Lamentations 5:15]. / We have been brought down as a

ghost out of the ground [Isaiah 29:4]; // our voice is lower than low [Mishnah *Yoma* 4,4], a still voice [1 Kings 19:12].

Who can stand up to repair the breach [cf. Ezekiel 22:30], / and to complete that which is wanting without number [Qohelet 1:15].<sup>17</sup> // Among the wretched Jews [Nehemiah 3:34], // deprived of their worth, the high of stature hewn down [Isaiah 10:33].

For his blow I am struck with darkness, / seized by desolation [Jeremiah 8:21] and horror [Hosea 6:10], / sorrow and wailing [Isaiah 29:2; Lamentations 2:5], // and I will stand up, moved with rage and I will say:

Woe to an elderly father who sees / taken from him the glory and beauty, his only son, who lifts up his head and his honour [Psalms 3:4], // while he still has breath [1 Kings 17:17].

And woe to his wife and to his sons / exiled from his table of delights, // and woe to their forlorn souls.

Therefore, master, after the favour and good regard [Proverbs 3:4] your creator has granted you, / and the spirit of God that hovers over [Genesis 1:2] your honour, // the spirit of wisdom [Exodus 28:3],

You must comfort them in their bereavement and sadness, / and speak to their hearts, / and you will rejoice in them. // And with your descendants you will see comfort.

A soul like your soul, master, writing / suffering, faint of heart, / sitting [in mourning for] your grief //

Desolate [Ezekiel 3:15], with a crushed and tormented soul, / your son Yom Tov ben Hannah.

## 2. Yom Tov ben Hannah, Formulary, fol. 265r-v

And further he [wrote] a *ta'zija* to Judah<sup>18</sup> and Alazar, sons of Don Joseph, of blessed memory, son of Almali, on the passing of their aforementioned father.

To the loss of Joseph [Amos 6:6] is added my loss and grief in a voice

that doubly declares [Zechariah 9:12] the fury of his loss. / My soul failed me when he spoke [Song of Songs 5:6]. I was mute with silence [Psalms 39:3], / seized by desolation and horror [Hosea 6:10], / sorrow and wailing [Isaiah 29:2; Lamentations 2:5].

For whose eyes have seen / taken from him the crown of his beauty, the grandeur of his glory and majesty, the one who teaches him // for his benefit [Isaiah 48:17] along an even path [Psalms 27:11], forever guides him [Psalms 48:15]? If you sever his head will he not die [e.g. Bab. Talmud *Shabbat* 103a)?

My heart is faint [Jeremiah 2:18; Job 1:22]; / it is better for me to die than to live [Jonah 4:3], // [faint] for a heart as pure as the very heavens [Exodus 24:10]. May Hannah be given a double portion [1 Samuel 1:5].

I have called out of my affliction [Jonah 2:3]/ that my God has created for me, / and firm ruin he has indeed renewed within me [Psalms 51:12],<sup>19</sup> // and a comforter is far from me [Lamentations 1:16], to speak to my heart. / In anger and rage [Psalms 78:49], would that I could die now [Genesis 46:30; 2 Samuel 19:1].

And now, my brothers, what have I here [Isaiah 52:5] more bitter than death [Qohelet 7:26]? If with knowledge I multiply words, I will [only] increase suffering [Job 35:16; Qohelet 1:18]. Therefore I said, I will keep a muzzle on my mouth [Psalms 39:2], press [my] lips [Proverbs 24:26], keep silent, restrain myself [Isaiah 42:14]. Only as a reminder to ask your honours / that you follow in the ways of your fathers, from your own vessels [perhaps: “which do you honour”, or “against those who would cast you out” (Isaiah 66:5)]<sup>20</sup> / and like the name of the great ones [1 Chronicles 17:8], may your descendants and your name endure [Isaiah 66:22].

As I speak in prayer [Daniel 9:21], / that the soul of my master [Joseph Almali] may be bound in the bundle of life [1 Samuel 25:29] and a speculum that shines [Bab. Talmud *Sukkah* 45b]. //

May He who gives light to the earth [Genesis 1:15, 17; *Yoşer* blessing, *Shaharit* service] light up His face to you [Numbers 6:25], be gracious to the remnant of Joseph [Amos 5:15], / as your heart desires. / A soul like your

souls writing / on the morrow of the Day of Atonement. / With lamentation and bitter weeping [Jeremiah 31:14]. / Bound with the cords of your love [Hosea 11:4], / a brother in your troubles [Proverbs 17:17], / I am he who comforts you [Isaiah 51:12].

On a word of truth and faith [Psalms 45:5; 'Arvit service], / Yom Tov ben Hannah.

Superscription: The Nephilim [Genesis 6:4] fall, confounded in the valley of Baca [Psalms 84:7]. / From Gilgal to Bochim [Judges 2:1],<sup>21</sup> / the brothers who sigh. // Anon. [*peloni*] and anon.

### 3. Yom Tov ben Hannah, Formulary, fols. 266r-267r

And further he [wrote] a *ta'zija* to his brothers Judah and Jacob, on the passing of Judah's dear son, and he was left with only one son, named Abraham; and on the passing of Jacob's only daughter, named Soley, and he was left with only one son, named Joseph; and on the passing of the only daughter of their relative Judah ben Joseph, named Luna, on the festival of Passover. And so he said:

The Sun and the Moon and the stars / and the entire heavenly host [Deuteronomy 4:19] illuminate by their decree.

Declaring, like books / without speech or words [cf. Psalms 19:2]<sup>22</sup> / the glory of the Creator of the lights [Psalms 136:7] / for the earth and those who dwell [upon it] [*Yoşer* blessing, *Shaharit* service].

Orbiting and hastening and going on their watch, / hastening and returning to perform their labour [2 Kings 12:15].

Angelic messengers and potent champions, / perfectly executing their [assigned] tasks, and not by might.

But acting by faith [2 Kings 12:15], / happily and joyously [*Yoşer* blessing, Sabbath *Shaharit* service]<sup>23</sup> tilting,<sup>24</sup> / near to the Lord [1 Kings 8:59].<sup>25</sup>

And their portion is perpetual [2 Kings 25:30; ; Jeremiah 52:34] by God's will [Proverbs 16:7]. / Their paths are the paths of pleasantness [Proverbs 3:17]; they are all beloved [*Yoşer* blessing, *Shaharit* service].<sup>26</sup>

And who can describe the acts of the Creator who commands the sun [*heres*] / to become as an earthen [*heres*] pitcher [Lamentations 4:2], / covering it with heavy clouds [Job 22:14] that it might not shine [Job 9:7].

And He seals the fate of the stars [Job 9:7] upon the sun in Gibeon [Joshua 10:12], and upon the nature of those that go and [return]<sup>27</sup> to tell them you shall stand still [Deuteronomy 29:9].

And the sun will not quit its sheath [Bab. Talmud '*Avodah Zarah* 3b; *Bava' Metzi'a*' 86b] for the broad spaces [Psalms 144:14] / to fulfil its destiny [Esther 2:1]. And the planets, the separate intellects [*sekhelim nivdalim*], will stand idle / from their forceful and mighty acts [Esther 10:2], drawn to the service of their Creator, / blessed [*berukhim*; probably should read *keruwim*, "cherubim" – and thus "enthroned upon the cherubim"] enthroned [Psalms 99:1].

Having the ability [Daniel 1:4] to flee [*yenusun*] his rebuke, to hasten [*yehafezun*] [Psalms 104:7] - run away [*yeruSun*] [Joel 2:4], / runner to meet runner [Jeremiah 51:31, for thus is His judgement sealed upon them, to be banished / from their nest and be gone, / answerable for their misdeeds.

Therefore, my brothers, behold and see if [Lamentations 1:12] these synonyms [i.e. "flee" (*yenusun*), "hasten" (*yehafezun*), "run away" (*yeruSun*)] / were pronounced upon wondrous and terrible bodies, / immortal and everlasting [Psalms 72:5],<sup>28</sup> that passed under sentence [*'avru bein ha-gezarim*] [Genesis 15:17],<sup>29</sup> what shall be done to man covered by worms [Job 21:26] / that, like a lion, rend his hands and feet, breaching him / and creating openings in him [e.g. Bab. Talmud *Bava' Batra*' 75a; *Berakhot* 24b].<sup>30</sup>

The day of His commandment [Leviticus 7:38] decrees that all who are born must perish. / Let it suffice them that their flesh will be washed in living waters [Leviticus 15:13]. /

Wrapped in a shroud of fine linen and purple [Esther 8:15], / placed in beautifully-crafted [Song of Songs 7:2] cedar wood.

Borne by righteous friends to a tomb carved after the fashion of a palace [Psalms 144:12].

For it is better [2 Kings 5:12] to fall prey [2 Samuel 24:14] to evil and grievous death [Jeremiah 16:4; 2 Chronicles 21:19; Deuteronomy 28:59] / than to have the raging waters pass over our souls [Psalms 124:5]. /

And to suffer the same fate, we and our beasts [Numbers 20:4],<sup>31</sup> to be consumed by the fowl of the heavens [e.g. Psalms 79:2; Jeremiah 7:33] and by the dogs [1 Kings 14:11].

Therefore my brothers, do not weep over dead for whom the obligation of burial can be fulfilled [e.g. Bab. Talmud ‘*erubin* 17b]. / Remember what our brethren have endured among the nations,

And choose the lesser evil. Take comfort in the distress of many.

And if, in your distress for your eyes [i.e. your children], you care not for your lives [Deuteronomy 19:21], / and your faces are sombre, consumed with tears [Lamentations 2:11], and red as crimson [Isaiah 1:18], remove sorrow from your hearts [cf. Isaiah 1:16; Nehemiah 2:2], and in showing kindness your faces [e.g. Mishnah *Avot* 1,14] / will become as white as snow [Isaiah 1:18], that you might live and be inscribed [for life].

And I will console you with words of comfort for length of days and years of good life [Proverbs 3:2].

May He who brings out their [celestial] host by number [Isaiah 40:26]<sup>32</sup>, bring forth from Judah an heir tenfold [Daniel 1:20], a man greatly beloved [Daniel 10:11]; and [may He] deal well with Abram [Genesis 12:16], and lavish upon him a true seed from Jacob [Jeremiah 2:21; Isaiah 65:9], and Joseph [also “add”] twice as much [cf. Isaiah 40:2; Proverbs 4:2, 1:5]. And then the light of the sun will be sevenfold [Isaiah 30:26].

A soul like your souls, your brother, who writes in tears, praying for the remnant that is left [2 Kings 19:4; Isaiah 37:4] to the One who is dwells [between the] cherubim.

I am he who comforts you. And in all your sorrow, my festivals and new moons and joys and Sabbath [cf. Ezekiel 45:17; Lamentations 5:15] are filled with sorrow [Isaiah 28:15]. My soul abhors all Sabbath foods and



pleasures [cf. Isaiah 1:13-14].

Yom Tov, *selab*.

Superscription: Those who eat the bread of sadness [Psalms 127:2], who suffer as they wail. / May their mourning be turned to joy and good times [Esther 9:22]. / And may this be their comfort, and my words pleasant before them. May they be comforted from Heaven, my brothers, beloved Ju[dah] and Jacob.

#### 4. Yom Tov ben Hannah, Formulary, fol. 267r-v

And further he [wrote] a *ta'zija* to my uncle R. Jacob, his brother, on the passing of his wife, may her rest be glorious [Isaiah 11:10].

The fire of grief shall keep burning within me,<sup>33</sup> / I am almost without breath [1 Kings 17:17]. / Smoke went up from my nostrils [2 Samuel 22:9], / with the burning of my nostrils, my eyes dimmed and my breath fled [cf. Deuteronomy 34:7]. //

My strength has dried up like a potsherd [Psalms 22:16], / my tongue cleaves to my palate [Psalms 137:6], / until I swallow my spittle [Job 7:19] that my pain might pass, / and the word is not in me [Jeremiah 5:13]. //

And when I heard the evil tiding [i.e. report of a death; cf. Bab. Talmud *Berakhot* 60a], I was stirred with weeping and lamentation for the passing of the glorious woman, your wife [lit. “your rib”].<sup>34</sup> I am greatly troubled for your trouble [1 Samuel 28:15], / for I know that your life hangs before you [Deuteronomy 28:66] because of her absence. / And woe to her father and mother who shall never see her again.

And now my brother, may God preserve you, I lack the strength to dwell on empty words of consolation / that neither avail nor deliver [1 Samuel 12:21], but only ask you to depart from the upheaval [Genesis 19:29], / and that you may not be hindered [1 Samuel 25:31] / by the fact that the city is unfortified without a wall [Proverbs 25:28] / and is readied for fury

and distress / and a cohort of evil messengers [*mal'akhei ra'im*] [Psalms 78:49], for the killing of the bishop [*begmon*]. Do not look back, / to pity your possessions / more than your life. When the Lord is pleased with your ways [Proverbs 16:7] / to lengthen your days, / you will live all the more. / And may God be with you [Exodus 18:19]. Like your wretched soul, I who speak with pain upon my bed [Job 33:19], and my soul is very afraid [Psalms 6:4], / taking twice as much of the evil spirit from God that has terrified you [1 Samuel 16:15]. / Your brother Yom Tov. *Selah*

Superscription: A soul sated with the bread of mourners [Hosea 9:4]. / Lacking strength and might [Isaiah 40:29]. And the wine he has drunk [Daniel 1:5, 8] is mixed with his tears, / with mourning and lamentation. The brother who sighs, R. Jacob ben Hannah. *Selah*

א. יום טוב בן חנה, אגרון, 264 ע"ב - 265 ע"א  
 עוד לו תעזי"ה לדון יוסף הרופא בן אלמלי רבו על פטירת הנכבד גיסו דון אלעזר כולוף  
 בחדש אב. / והוא בהיכל מלך גדול ורב. // וכה אמר:

משנגז אב המון הבא, / בגזז חיי עלמא. / בנסוע האדון אל המנוחה, // רואיו יאמרו איו.  
 ממעטין בשמחה - ואנחה, / למדינות עשה, / אשר אין להם חומה. // יצעקו ואין מושיע.  
 אוי לנו מי יתיצב לפני בני מלכים, / להאיר אלי עבר פניו אשר הלך חשכים, / ולפקוח  
 בצרות עינים עורות. / מי ימלל גבורות. // את אויבים בשער, קול ברמה.  
 על זה דוה לבנו. / נהפך לאבל מחולנו. / שפלנו כאוב מארץ, // קולנו דקה מן הדקה קול  
 דממה.

מי יעמוד לגדור פרץ, / וחסרון לא יוכל להמנות להשלים. / ליהודים האמללים, // ומערכם  
 גרועים גדועים רמ"י הקומה.

על שברו השברתי קדרתי, / החזקתני שמה ושערוריה, / תאניה ואניה, // ואקים [צ"ל  
 ואקום] ואתמרמר ואומר: אוי לו לאב זקן בראותו / ילקח מאתו הוד והדר בנו יחידו, / מרום  
 ראשו וכבודו, // איך נותרה בו נשמה.

ואוי לאשתו ולבניו / שגלו מעל שלחן עדניו, // ואוי לנפשם העגומה.  
 לכן האדון אחרי חנך יוצרך / חן ושכל טוב, ורוח אלי"ם מרחפת על פני כבודך, // רוח

חכמה.

עליך לנחמם מאבלם ומעצבם, / ולדבר על לבם, / ואתה תגל בם. // וזרעך אתך תראו  
בנחמה.

כנפשך האדון, ונפש הכותב / כואב דוה לב, / על צערך יושב //  
משמים בנפש מדוכה ומעונה, / בנך יום טוב בן חנה.

ב. יום טוב בן חנה, אגרון, 265 ע"א- ע"ב.

עוד לו תעזי"ה ליהודה ולא לעזר בני דון יוסף ז"ל בן אלמלי על פטירת אביהם הנז' [כר].

על שבר יוסף נוסף שברי ויגוני לקול מגיד משנה קצף שברו. / נפשי יצאה בדברו. נאלמתי  
דומיה, / החזיקתני שמה, ושערוריה / תאניה ואניה.

כי מי הוא זה עיניו ראו / לקח מאתו עטרת תפארתו, / הדר כבודו והודו, ומלמדו, // להועיל  
בארח מישור, ינהגהו על מות, / פסיק רישיה ולא ימות.

לבי דוי, / טוב מותי מחיי. // על לב טהור כעצם השמים, / לחנ"ה יתן מנה אחת אפים.

קראתי מצרה לי, / ברא לי אלהי, / ואיד נכון חדש בקרבי, // ורחק ממני מנחם מדבר  
על לבי, / בעברה וזעם. מי יתן אמותה הפעם.

ועתה אחי מה לי פה מר ממות אם בדעת מלין אכביר, אוסיף מכאוב. על כן אמרתי אשמרה  
לפי מחסום. שפתים אשק, / אחריש אתאפק. אלא כמזכיר לבקש מאת כבודכם, / לאחוז  
מנהג אבותיכם בדיכים מכדיכם [אולי צ"ל מכ(ב)דיכם או (מ)מנדיכם?], / וכשם הגדולים  
יעמוד זרעכם ושמכם.

עוד אני מדבר בתפילה, / להיות נפש אדני [יוסף אלמלי] צרורה, בצרור החיים ואספקלריה  
המאירה. //

המאיר לארץ יאר פניו אליכם. יחון שארית יוסף, / כאשר לבכם כוסף. / כנפשכם ונפש  
הכותב / מחרת יום הכפורים, / בנהי בכי תמרורים. / נקשר בחבלי אהבתכם, / אח

לצרתכם, / אנכי הוא מנחמכם. //

על דבר אמת ואמונה, / יום טוב בן חנה.

על הכתב: הנפלים נפלים / בעמק הבכ"א נבוכים. / מן הגלג"ל אל הבוכים, / האחים  
הנאנחים. // פלו' ופלו'

ג. יום טוב בן חנה, אגרון, 266 ע"א- 267 ע"א.

עוד לו תעזי"ה לאחיו יהודה ויעקב על פטירת הבן יקיר ליהודה, ונשאר לו בן יחיד שמו

אברהם. ועל פטירת בת יחידה ליעקב שמה שולי. ונשאר לו בן יחיד שמו יוסף. ועל פטירת בת יחידה לקרובם יהודה בן יוסף, ושמה לונה, בחג הפסח. וכ"ה אמ"ר:

השמ"ש והיר"ח והכוכבים / וכל צבא השמים בגזרתם מאירים.  
 כספרים מספרים / בלי שפה ודברים, / ומהדרים לעושה אורים / לארץ ולדרים.  
 בסבובם ורוצם ולכתם על משמרתם, / רצים ושבים לעשות מלאכתם.  
 ילכו במלאכותם, גבורי כח / בפעל שלם. ולא בכח,  
 כי באמונה הם עושים, / שמחים וששים נוטים, / אל י"י קרובים.  
 וארוחתם ארוחת תמיד ברצות י"י. / דרכיהם דרכי נעם, כלם אהובים.  
 ומי ימלל מעשי יוצר האומר לחרס, / להיות נחשב לנבלי חרס, / ולא יזרח, ישים סתר לו  
 עבים.

ובעד כוכבים יחתום גזר דינם על שמש בגבעון, ועל טבע שיכים ההולכים, לאמר להם אתם נצבים.

וחמה מנרתקה אין יוצאת ברחובותיה / לקיים את אשר נגזר עליה.  
 וכוכבי לכת, שכלים נבדלים, בטלים / ממעשה תקפם וגבורתם, ולעבודת יוצרם נמשכים /  
 ברוכים [צ"ל כפי הנראה כרובים] היושבים.  
 ואשר כח בהם לעמוד מגערתו ינוסון, יחפזון ירוצון. / רץ לקראת רץ, כי כן משפטו עליהם  
 חרץ,

להיותם מגורשים / מקנם ואינם, / על קלקלתם משיבים.  
 לכן אחי, הביטו וראו אם נאמרו אלה שמות נרדפים / על גופים נפלאים ונוראים, / חיים  
 נצחיים לדור דורים, עברו בין הגזרים. מה לעשות באיש רמה תכסהו / ותשסע כארי ידיו  
 ורגליו, ותפרצהו / ובר"א בו נקבים.

יום צתו יגזור אמר על הילודים להיות נפסדים. / רב להם ירחצו בשרם במים חיים,  
 וילבישום תכריך בוץ וארגמן / לתתם נגנזים בעצי ארזים מעשה ידי אמן.  
 יובילום חברים ברים לקברים, תבנית היכל מחטבים.

הלא טוב לנו נפלה נא ממותי תחלואים רעים ונאמנים, / מעבור על נפשנו המים הזדונים, /  
 ולהיות נדונים בגזרה שוה, אנחנו ובעירנו מאכל לעוף השמים ולכלבים.

ולכן אחי, אל תבכו למת מצוה שיש לו קוברין. / זכרו את אשר עברו אחינו בקרב הגוים,  
 ובחרו לכם מן הרע במיעוטו. קחו לכם נחמה מצער רבים. /

ואם באשר צר לכם על עינכם, אל תחוס נפשכם, / ופניכם זועפים כלו בדמעות ויאדימו  
 כתולע. הסירו מכם רוע לב, ובסבר פנים / כשלג ילבינו, למען תחיו ותהיו נכתבים.

ונחתמיד [צ"ל ונחמתיד] בתנחומין לארך ימים ושנות חיים טובים.

המוציא במספר צבאיו יוציא מיהודה יורש עשר ידות, איש חמודות, ולאברם ייטיב, ומיעקב זרע אמת ישפיע עליו ויוסף לקח טוב כפלים. ואז אור החמ"ה יהיה שבעתים, כנפשכם ונפש אחיכם, הכותב בדמע, המתפלל על השארית הנמצאה לשוכן הכרובים. אנכי הוא מנחמכם, ובכל צרתכם צר לי מאד חגי וחדשי ומשושי ושבת. תתעב נפשי כל אוכל וענג שבת, יום טוב סלה

ע"ל הכת"ב: אכלי לחם העצבים, בקינתם כואבים. / יהפך אבלם לששון ולמועדים טובים. / ותהי זאת נחמתם, ודברי לפנייהם ערבים. / מן השמים ינוחמו אחי, יהו[דה] ויעקב הנאהבים.

ד. יום טוב בן חנה, אגרון, 267 ע"א- ע"ב.

עוד לו תעזי"ה לדודי ר' יעקב אחיו על פטירת אשתו תמ"ך [תהי מנוחתה כבוד].

מאש היגון תוקד בקרבי, / כמעט נשמה לא נותרת בי. / עלה עשן באפי, / בחרון אפי כהתה עיני ונס רוחי. // יבש כחרש כחי, / דבק לשוני לחכי, / עד בלעי רוקי יעבר כאבי, / והדבר אין בי. //

ולשמועה רעה שמעתי, נתעוררתי / בבכי ומספד על פטירת הכבודה צלעת"ך. / צר לי מאד על צרתך, / כי ידעתי חיך תלויים מנגד סבת [אולי צ"ל בסבת] העדר מציאותה. / ואוי לאביה ולאמה לא יוסיפו לראותה.

ועתה אחי י"א [ישמרך אלוהים], אין בי כח להאריך בדברי תנחומין / של הבל לא יועילו ולא יצילו, רק לבקש ממך לצאת מתוך ההפכה / ולא תהיה זאת [לך] למכשול ולפוקה, / היות העיר ההיא פרוצה מאין חומה / ומוכנת לזעם וצרה / ומשלחת מלאכי רעים על הריגת ההגמון. אל תבט אחרוך / לחוס על ממונך / יותר מנפשך. ברצות הש"ם דרכיך / להאריך ימיך / תחיה ביותר. ויהא אל[ה]י"ם עמך / כנפשך העלובה, / ואני המדבר במכאוב על משכבי. ונפשי נבהלה / מאד, נוטל פי שנים ברוח אל[ה]י"ם רעה מבעתך. / אחיך יום טוב. סלה

על הכתב: נפש שבעה לחם אונים. / באין עצמה ואונים. / ויין משתיו / מהול בדמעותיו / במספד וקנינה. / האח הנאנח, ר' יעקב בן חנה. סלה

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Prats (2008) for an exhaustive review of the scholarship and bibliography on the subject of consolatory letters and elegies in the fields of Jewish studies and European Latin and vernacular literature. On the vernacular literature in Spain, see also Cátedra (1993, 1995, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> I thank Peter Lenard for his help in the literary analysis of the letters.

<sup>3</sup> All four letters appear, in full, in the annex. Relevant biblical and other references are noted in square brackets within the text, in the annex only. Corrections are given in square brackets, and all punctuation and division into paragraphs are mine.

<sup>4</sup> This idea was raised and developed in a seminar paper on this letter, by Tamar Menashe, for a Master's seminar I gave at the Hebrew University in 2013. Menashe examined the possible connection between Ben Hannah and members of the Neoplatonic circle, particularly Solomon Alconstantin, who was in close contact with the Saragossan group of courtiers and poets. Solomon de Piera, for example, sent him a poem, to raise his spirits during a bout of illness. See Huss (2003, p. 64).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Alconstantin wrote, in *Megalleh 'amuqqot* (SCHWARTZ, 1996, p. 271): “And understand that which I have said, as I may not reveal anything further in this matter, because this miracle is already renowned among all the nations, *a fortiori* our own nation, for whose merit and sake it was. And understand it.” See also Levi ben Abraham's commentary on the miracle at Gibeon, in *Livyat hen* (SCHWARTZ, 1999, p. 154).

<sup>6</sup> Responsum to Rabbi Hasdai Solomon of Tudela: “We too experienced such things. Last winter, we were slandered and handed over to the crown, for a reason similar to yours.... I could not respond ... for I had heard that you had fled to city to save yourself from the plague that stalks in darkness [Psalms 91:6], to find swift refuge, and I was not told where you had stopped.”

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Maurice Kriegel for this information.

<sup>8</sup> According to Baer, this is the same Rabi Çag Abendino in whose name

messianic reckonings for the year 1391 are cited in a book by the apostate Maestre Juan el Viejo de Toledo, written in 1416.

<sup>9</sup> This idea was raised in Tamar Menashe's seminar paper.

<sup>10</sup> In *Sefer Ḥasidim*, for example, the term is explained as follows: “Love the precept (*mišvaḥ*) that is like a dead man (*met*)”, that is to say that it is the specific duty of the pious to fulfil a precept that all avoid. A further example is cited from the realm of study, concerning largely-neglected tractates of the Talmud (DAN, 1990, p. II, 17-19).

<sup>11</sup> Baer cites the following, from a letter by De Piera, found in Berlin ms. 114, p. 179-180: “*We can inherit no portion of comfort, only think of the favor of those who have been lost and cast out by the fury of the oppressor. He has subdued the best among our faith, he has brought the youth of Israel to its knees. Nor did the first days, which were better, last long: [alas] the slain by sword and killing and destruction, and moreover God’s martyrs. And this will be the day we look for and reckon of, the day of peace: When a man may die a righteous death at home, neither falling into the hands of his fellow man, nor changing [his God], but living blessedly. But now raging fathers slaughter their sons [i.e., martyr their sons to prevent their conversion, as was the practice of the Ashkenazi pietists in times of persecution], high praise to God. Let us then lift our hearts in prayer to God in heaven, that he may establish and have mercy upon the remnant [of Israel], and the company that is left shall escape.*” The additions in regular typeface are Baer's; those in italics are mine, as are the emphases.

<sup>12</sup> See also, there, on the concept of martyrdom in the consolatory letter by Profayt Duran.

\* The consonants in the Hebrew text are given as in the manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> Arabic for letter of consolation.

<sup>14</sup> “As the master journeyed on” (*binsoa’ ha-’adon*) follows Numbers 10:35: “as the ark journeyed on” (*binsoa’ ha-’aron*), evoking the disappearance (“hiding away”) of the Temple vessels in the month of Av, at the time of the destruction of the First Temple. The phrase “since the hiding away of the Ark [of the Covenant]” (*mišenignaz ’aron*) appears a number of times in the Tosefta and the Talmud (e.g. Tosefta *Yoma* 2,13; Bab. Talmud *Yoma* 52b; see

also Mishnah *Sheqalim* 6,2).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. “Since the hiding away (*mišenignas*) of the departed father (’*av*) ... joy is diminished” and “With the beginning (*mišenikbnas*) of [the month of] Av, joy is diminished” (Mishnah *Ta’anit* 4,6).

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 31:14: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping.”

<sup>17</sup> See Abraham Ibn Ezra, commentary on Qohelet 1:15: “One who is wanting cannot be numbered among the complete, and that is the meaning of 'that which is wanting' – 'one who is wanting'. ... And the second interpretation is that one who is born under a deficient constellation, lacks the ability to perfect his soul. Thus, one who seeks to discover the essence of nature from the workings of the heavens engages in futility, and this is true of a majority of people and a majority of their actions.”

<sup>18</sup> See Baer (1929, p. 612-613; 722), documents 390 and 459, on Jaffudano dAlmali.

<sup>19</sup> The verse in Psalms 51:12 reads: “and firm spirit renew within me”.

<sup>20</sup> See *Leviticus Rabbah* 20,11: “Whoever takes precedence in inheritance takes precedence in honour, on condition that he follows in the ways of his fathers,” See also Bab. Talmud *Shabbat* 35b; *Hullin* 13b; Jer. Talmud *Pesahim* 30b, 4,1. The word *mikadeikhem*, in the manuscript, may in fact read *mekhabdeikhem* (“which do you honour), with the *bet* omitted due to a copyist's error; or [*mi*]menadeikhem (“against those who would cast you out”), with the initial *mem* omitted by haplography. If [*mi*]menadeikhem is the correct reading, we must assume that there were those within the Saragossa community who opposed the sons of Joseph Almali, and believed that they should not take up their father's mantle of leadership.

<sup>21</sup> The toponyms Baca and Bochim are meant evoke the idea of weeping, as they resemble the Hebrew root *BKH*, “to weep”.

<sup>22</sup> Psalms 19:2: “The heavens tell God's glory, and His handiwork the firmament declares.”

<sup>23</sup> “Happily and joyously” – cf. “Happy in their rising and joyous in their setting”, in the *piyyut* 'El 'adon, recited as part of the *Yošer* blessing, in the



Sabbath *Shaharit* service. See also Mishnah *Pesahim* 10,6.

<sup>24</sup> The term “the tilting wheel” (*ba-galgal ha-notel*) signifies the zodiac (KLATZKIN, p. 1930, p. III, 29-31).

<sup>25</sup> See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (II,12): “They imagined that He command the angels, and the angels perform those actions in proximity and in the touching of one body to another, as we do.”

<sup>26</sup> In the Sephardic rite, the *Yozer* blessing includes the following passage: “may You, our rock, be blessed forever... creator of servants ... who stand in the heights of the world ... all beloved”.

<sup>27</sup> The ms. reads שיכים, *sikkim* (see Numbers 33:55) – probably a copyist's error for שבים, *shavim*, “return”.

<sup>28</sup> Psalms 72:5: “They will fear you as long as the sun and the moon endure, for all generations.”

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 15:17: “when the sun went down ... and a flaming torch passed between the pieces [*avar bein ha-gezarim*]”.

<sup>30</sup> Bab. Talmud *Bava' Batra* 75a: “And I created many openings in man”; *Tosafot* on *Berakhot*

60b: “And the Holy One blessed be He created many openings in man”; Bab. Talmud *Berakhot* 24b: “You created us with many openings and cavities. Manifest and known before You are our disgrace and shame in our lives, and the maggot and the worm that are our end.”

<sup>31</sup> Numbers 20:4: “And why did you bring the Lord's assembly to this wilderness to die here, we and our beasts?”

<sup>32</sup> Isaiah 40 begins with the words “Comfort you, comfort you.”

<sup>33</sup> The phrase “The fire of grief shall keep burning within me”, based on Leviticus 6:6 (“A perpetual fire shall keep burning on the altar”), was adopted in the poetry of Sefarad as a metaphor for intense and perpetual pain. Cf. Judah Halevi: “A fire shall keep burning within me [*eš tuqad be-qirbi*] / as I sacrifice my heart [as a burnt offering]” (*Seliḥah* from the liturgy for the Ninth of Av). On “A fire shall keep burning within me”, see Levin (1976-1980, p. II, 503-507). The poem is attributed in most medieval sources to Judah Halevi (see LEVIN, 1976-1980, p. II, 503; RATZABY, 2001, p. 48;

RATZABY, 1993, p. 45). For a translation of the Ashkenazi tradition, see Rosenfeld (1965, p. 144-145).

<sup>34</sup> The woman's name, perhaps Soley, may be intimated in word *šal'atekba*, “your wife [rib]”.

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