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AJS Conference Seminar: The World of Nature and Jewish Mystical Tradition

Seminar Paper: The Kabbalistic Telescope: Visions of the Natural World in Mystical Hebrew Poetry from Early Modern Italy

Lunar Rhetoric

Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh (Ex. 3:14), look from heaven and behold: the moon which you fixed in place and upon whose seat you looked—how its face has turned blacker than soot, while its harp has tuned to a dirge! Time and again, like Zeboim and Admah,¹ it is forlorn and desolate as never before. If my voice be heard, and my strength grow² to let the One my laments are turned to and invoke know, will I not wail in grief from earth and over my woes weep? It is I who am this moon! Once, O my Sun, You loved me and the light of Your face shone upon me. But now darkness burnishes me and the light of night shines on me. My share of the dark is larger than that of the lesser light, facing me. For month by month, it is newly arrayed in majesty and splendor, while I am perpetually downcast, and compassion is hidden from my eyes, scourged by endless punishments, for over one thousand five hundred years! What more can I say, my Rock, since my moon has turned into a moan, my globe into a glob, my crescent to putrescence. But Yours is the right of redemption!³

The opening quotation is a prayer in rhymed prose from *Kenaf Renanim* (Wing of Songs),⁴ a collection of liturgical hymns by the seventeenth-century Modenese poet Joseph Jedidiah Carmi. Not much is known about the author, who, like other poets of that period, seems to have channelled his creativity almost entirely into sacred lyric. According to the scattered documentary sources in which he is mentioned, Carmi was born around 1590. In 1623, he was appointed cantor in the private synagogue established by the Usiglio brothers in Modena, where the members of a *Shomerim la-Boker* confraternity, a group devoted to pre-dawn devotions, used to gather. As Carmi recounts in the preface to *Kenaf Renanim*, the compilation was meant to be used during the gatherings of the confraternity. It was eventually printed in 1626, after a litigation that saw Carmi opposed to his brother-in-law, the renowned kabbalist Aaron Berechiah Modena, who was the

¹ See Deut. 29:22 (KJV 29:23): “And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom, and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in his anger, and in his wrath.”

² Eccles. 10:10.

³ *Kenaf Renanim*, fol. 36^v; cf. T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Poetry*, p. 490.

⁴ As Carmi himself states in his preface to the compilation, the title alludes to the ability of poetry to ascend to the heavenly realms and thus be the most efficacious way to express love and devotion to God. A quotation from Job 39:13, the expression *kenaf renanim* is traditionally interpreted as a synecdoche meaning ‘songbird.’ It is worth noticing that in contemporary Italian baroque poetry the parallel expressions *voce pennuta* and *piuma canora* (respectively, ‘feathered voice’ and ‘singing feather’) used to indicate the nightingale, the bird which in view of his sublime singing was considered as a representation (and a sort of *alter ego*) of the poet.

leader of a competing confraternity of watchers.⁵ The pre-dawn penitential vigil had started to spread among Italian communities in the second half of the sixteenth century on the example of similar observances practiced within mystical sodalities of Ottoman Palestine and soon led to the establishment of dedicated confraternities in all major Jewish towns of northern Italy. Besides contributing to the dissemination of Lurianic customs, these groups played a central role in fostering the composition and fruition of mystical poetry: specially written and ritually customized compositions by the poetically minded among the sodalities' members, but also by local literati as well as established poets, found their way, in varying proportions, into the special collections of prayers and hymns that were recited during the ceremonial gatherings, thus turning the groups of watchers into a main arena for the production and enjoyment of sacred lyric and mystically inclined poetry.⁶ Among the collections compiled for the *Shomerim la-Boqer*, *Kenaf Renanim* stands out both for the literary quality of the compositions included and for its format. Indeed, although Carmi's compilation was not the first collection of kabbalistic poetry to appear in print⁷ nor the first breviary compiled for a confraternity of watchers, it was the first to include a thick apparatus of explanatory glosses, in which Carmi produced, in fact, a commentary on his own poetry, ranging from explanations of the mystical theories underlying the compositions, to the list of the

⁵ An account of the litigation is provided in the prefatory materials included in the print of *Kenaf Renanim*. Apparently, Aaron Berechiah opposed the publication arguing against the composition of new *piyyutim* based on *midrash* which would supersede the traditional ones. In his introduction to the collection, Carmi advocated the continuing composition of liturgical poetry in view of the ever-renewing greatness of creation which had been a source of inspiration for generations of poets. According to Isaiah Tishby, the polemic arose because of the long *widduy* in rhymed prose for the pre-dawn vigil on the Day of Atonement which Carmi had arranged to reflect the order of *hekhalot* in the realm of *yeztirah*, rather than the order they have in the realm of *beri'ah* according to Lurianic Kabbalah. *Kenaf Renanim* was finally published in 1626, accompanied by the approbations of more than ten rabbis of the time. The vicissitudes that surrounded this publication (and in which poetry, Kabbalah, and social primacy within the community were all involved) are illustrative of the complex fabric of relations and the conflicts that animated the confraternal world in Jewish Modena. See Isaiah Tishby, "The Confrontation Between Lurianic Kabbalah and Cordoverian Kabbalah in the Writings and Life of Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena" (in Hebrew), *Zion* 39, nos. 1-2 (1974): 8-85; Meir Benayahu, *Haskamah u-Reshut bi-Defuse Venetzayah* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben-Zvi, 1971), 103-105, 278; Ariel Rathaus, "Poesia, preghiera, midrash: Il verdetto di R. Netanel Trabotto sul piyut contemporaneo," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 67, nos. 1-2 (2001): 129-150.

⁶ The poetry produced within the confraternities belongs to a larger phenomenon of poetic efflorescence that Dan Pagis dubbed the "later piyyut from Italy" (*ha-piyyut ha-me'uḥar me-Italyah*), thus referring to that large corpus of sacred compositions from approximately the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, which developed at the margins of official canonical liturgy, as a sort of late offshoot of the classic piyyutistic genre. See Pagis, "Liturgical Poetry in Seventeenth-Century Italy from a Hebrew Manuscript" (in Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 50 (1975), 289.

⁷ See the collection *Yefe Nof* by Yehudah Zarko, which included poems by Isaac Luria and was printed in Venice, in 1575. Still in Venice, in 1599-1560 had appeared the third (expanded) edition of *Zemiroth Yisra'el*, collecting the hymns of Israel Najara.

sources—biblical and other—he drew upon,⁸ to linguistic and prosodic notes. Carmi's religious fervour and the literary effort he invested in the collection are both evidenced by the number of original compositions it contains: the compilation's 19 different *sedarim* for the vigil include overall 90 poetic compositions, 64 of which are hymns; these last consist for the most part of penitential verse, such as *qinot*, and poems that, although referred to by the author with generic terms like *shir* and *piyyut*, can be ascribed to the traditional genre of the *selihah*.⁹

The compositions included in the collection display the themes characteristic of penitential poetry, such as, admission of contrition and repentance; fervent expression of love and devotion to God; admonishments against the seductions posed by the evil inclination, and naturally, ardent supplications and requests for collective forgiveness and redemption. Entreats for the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple, the return of the Shekhinah to her intended dwelling, and the reunion of the two *sefirot Malkhut* and *Tiferet* are frequently included. Symbolic representations of the perennial battle opposing the forces of good to those of evil bespeak of apocalyptic tensions, contributing some of these poems a visionary tone and surreal atmosphere. Deep concern for the consequences that human sin has on the divine substance and cosmic order and the consequent need for atonement pervades Carmi's poetry: thus, returning sections in rhymed prose are built as moral dialogues between soul and body, and meant—as the author explains in his para-text—as spiritual preparation to the confession of sins. The concern for the collective fate of the people of Israel and the mystical significance of their historical (and meta-historical) experience, more evident in the hymns, leaves room in the compositions in rhymed prose to a more personal and individualistic tone, that betrays the search for an intimate relationship with the divinity: the poet begs for grace, and fearing his own inadequacy, wonders how he may be so blessed, the idea of a possible rejection filling his soul with foreboding.

⁸ Carmi's poems largely draw upon rabbinical and kabbalistic sources and are studded with quotations from the *Gemara*, the *midrash*, as well as from the *Zohar*. Among the kabbalistic works Carmi refers to are *Pardes Rimmonin* by Moses Cordovero and *Asarah ma'amarot* by Menahem Azaryah Fano (1548-1620), one of the leading Italian kabbalists of the time, to whom Carmi refers as his teacher (three elegies written by Carmi in memory of Fano are inserted at the end of the compilation; one of them is a sonnet, on which see Dvora Bregman, ed. *A Bundle of Gold: Hebrew Sonnets from the Renaissance and the Baroque* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1997, no. 142). Devotional and ethical compilations circulating at the time such as *Sefer Haredim* (Venice 1601) by Ela'azar Azikri and *Reshit Hokhmah* (Venice 1579) by Eliyahu De Vidas are quoted too. The resort to kabbalistic sources is particularly prominent in the *piyyutim* inspired to liturgical festivities, which are often built as expositions of the mystical meaning of the related holiday.

⁹ All the poems included in *Kenaf Renanim* are by Carmi, except for a prayer whose recitation, as explained in the introductory note, was introduced among the members of the confraternity by Shelomoh Terracina, one of Carmi's teachers, who had learned it in Jerusalem (the prayer was later inserted also in *Ma'avar Yabboq* by Aaron Berechiah Modena), and a dedicatory poem by Moses Israel Foa inserted at the end of the long introduction to the book, praising the work and celebrating its author's eventual judicial victory in the legal suit over its publication.

A personal and intimate tone marks also the prayer in rhymed prose quoted at the beginning of this paper. The composition is included, together with three *piyyutim*, in the liturgy for the pre-dawn vigil on the Eve of the New Moon (*'Erev Rosh Hodesh*). Also known as *Yom Kippur Qatan* (Minor Day of Atonement), this penitential observance had been revamped by the kabbalists in Safed and transformed into a day of fasting and prayer observed at the communal level. Disseminated by the works of the Safedian kabbalistic tradition, in Italy this observance enjoyed particular popularity among devotional confraternities.¹⁰ Its meaning was rooted in the passage from tractate *Hullin*¹¹ in which God promises to atone for unfairly diminishing the moon's original status, and in subsequent mystical interpretations of the Talmudic story, particularly zoharic.¹² Being the moon one of the symbols for the Shekhinah, its state of diminution was interpreted as an allegory of her (and Israel's) exile. The waning crescent moon became a reminder of the condition of subjugation of the Shekhinah to the forces of the *Sitra Aħra* in the sefirotic structure. Hence the need for prayer and fast to atone for the sins that caused the strengthening of the powers of evil and the consequent separation between the two *sefirot Malkhut* (the moon) and *Tiferet* (the sun). Conversely, the New Moon, which marks the start of the moon's reinstatement to its original luminosity, symbolized redemption. For the *Shomerim la-Boker* watchers who used to gather in the last hours of the night before dawn, light symbolized redemption and salvation, and as such it was opposed to darkness, being this symbol of sin and exile; the penitential celebration meant to ensure the monthly reintegration of the moon and the symbolism associated to it was thus coherently expanding their established course of devotions. It does not come as a surprise if all Carmi's compositions forming the *seder* for the pre-dawn vigil on the Eve of the New Moon included in *Kenaf Renanim* revolve around the set of oppositions that mark the meaning of the holiday: light versus darkness, exile versus redemption, divine severity (*din*) versus forgiveness (*ħesed*). These oppositions are rendered by Carmi by resorting to polysemous words that also bear a visual connotation. One of the most frequently used is *kofer* (which besides meaning 'camphor,' thus evoking the colour white, also carries the meanings of 'pitch,' thus creating an inner oxymoron, as well as of 'ransom'). Carmi's resort to equivocal language creates a sort of illusionistic verbal effect, which simultaneously conveys the idea of the undefined boundaries between the contrasting poles of light and darkness, good and evil, thus pointing to their essential contiguity.

¹⁰ See Daniel Goldschmidt, *On Jewish Liturgy: Essays on Prayer and Religious Poetry* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980, 322–348, particularly 322–323; Hallamish, *Kabbalah: In Liturgy, Halakah and Customs* [Hebrew]. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2000, 537–566; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, 151–153.

¹¹ See TB *Hullin*, fol. 60^v.

¹² See *Zohar* 1:fol. 181^{r-v}.

In the prose passage, the status of minority to which the moon is condemned is seen as an embodiment of the condition of exile and separation from God of the people of Israel, which also coincides with the one experienced by the poet himself. In fact, Carmis' prayer succeeds in translating the mystical meaning of the New Moon (i.e. the periodic reintegration of the lesser light to its original status) and its collective redemptive value into a personal and intimate dialogue between the self and the divinity. This is something Carmi achieves through the clever use of imagery and by resorting to powerful 'lunar rhetoric.' To begin with, the poem is constructed as a series of personifications: the first one has as protagonist God who is urged to look down from heaven and observe the moon, thus assuming an attitude that is specular to that, common on earth, of looking up and gaze at the familiar celestial body. The second personification concerns the moon: the planet has a countenance (*to'ar*, a term that also means 'shape,' 'form,' and 'appearance'), which is suggestive of the folkloric and mythical image of the "face of the moon" (*facies lunae*); when waxing, thus being reinstated to its original glory, the moon is clothed in majesty and splendour, a metaphor that graces it with finery. The third personification establishes the identity between the moon and the poet, and indeed the image of the moon-poet is probably the most remarkable among those displayed in the text. The kinship thus established between the two lies in their state of passivity, since they both receive their light from the sun, that is God, and in their condition of defectiveness due to sin and consequent exile. But while the periodical transmutations of the celestial body foretell its future reintegration, the poet sees no escape to a condition in which instead of the sun—as he powerfully expresses by way of a series of oxymorons—is darkness to burnish him and the light of night to envelope him. The similitude thus established between the moon and the poet is further elaborated in the continuation of the poem by means of a series of plays on words: the poet's moon has turned into a moan, his globe into a glob, his crescent has given way to putrescence. Created by applying in tandem the rhetorical devices of paronomasia and antithesis, these linguistic and visual metamorphoses place an emphasis on change and transmutation and mimic on the page the unstable and mutable appearance of the moon in his periodical fluctuations. The visual, almost pictorial quality of the passage is achieved by the incorporation of a variety of images evoking the contrast between dark and brightness, day and night and by multiple references to the sense of sight: three different verbs all connected to vision are referred to at the beginning of the poem, evoking the vivid representation of God looking from heaven at the moon, observing its waxing and waning as human beings would do from earth, only looking up rather than down.

At the time in which Carmi was boldly depicting himself as the moon in his prayer, common perceptions surrounding the lunar globe were being revolutionized by the invention of the telescope. With the publication in Venice, in 1610 of his *Nuncius Sidereus*, Galileo for the first time had challenged the validity of the traditional Aristotelian depiction of the moon as a perfect, unchangeable, and incorruptible celestial body, radically different from anything that could be observed on the earth. Although Galileo's evidence was restricted to visual and the moon, the planets, and the stars remained inaccessible as they had been for thousands of years, in less than a generation his observations nevertheless radically changed the way people were looking at the sky. The visual closeness produced by the telescope translated into the idea of perceived physical proximity, thus impacting the representation of the celestial body by contemporary artists and literati.¹³ In his *Nuncius Sidereus*, Galileo had rendered the telescopic images into familiar terms borrowed from terrestrial phenomena, thus demolishing the notion of a fundamental dichotomy between the earth and the heavens, and turning the distant and mysterious ashy moon into a material body with which the sublunar world shared more similarities than differences. The zoharic passage in which the diminution of the moon is discussed, states that "the righteous are the constant companions of the moon, and suffer of her same defectiveness."¹⁴ Although Carmi does not cite this passage as a source for his prayer, it is likely that the idea of self-identification with the moon was inspired by it. His choice of language and his use of imagery, though, would be hardly understandable were it not for the central role attributed to vision in seventeenth-century culture and the new perception of nature it brought about.

The Kabbalistic Telescope

Scholarship has variously illustrated how vision and observation came to play a pivotal role in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture, mainly as a consequence of the *artificiosa observazione* enabled by optical instruments, such as the telescope and the microscope.¹⁵ Privileged over other sensorial functions, traditionally considered as less objective and therefore unreliable, sight was now expected to answer fundamental questions and resolve cosmological riddles thanks

¹³ See Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *A World in the Moon: A Study of the Changing Attitude toward the Moon in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* [Smith College Studies in Modern Languages, 17.2]. Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1936.

¹⁴ *Zohar*, 1:fol. 181^r.

¹⁵ See, for example, Andrea Battistini, *Galileo e i Gesuiti: miti letterari e retorica della scienza*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000, 15–60; H el ene Tuzet, *Le cosmos et l'imagination*. Paris: J. Corti, 1965, 291–296; Ofer Gal and Gal Chen-Morris, *Baroque Science*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 53–113.

to the new expanded forms of observation into the celestial remote and the very small. As the limits of the visible world were quickly shifting with their trail of unsettling implications, the use of optical instruments meant that the visual experience for the first time coincided with the cognitive experience.¹⁶ The new fundamental role played by the act of seeing in the epistemological process and, at the same time, the ambivalence it generated reverberate also in another seventeenth-century poem composed under the impact of mystical theories, that is *Tofteh 'Arukh* (Hell Arrayed) by the eminent Mantuan scholar and kabbalist Moses Zacuto (c. 1610-1697). *Tofteh 'Arukh* is a 185-strophe dramatic poem vividly depicting the afterlife of the wicked according to Kabbalah. Lying at the intersection of esoteric mystical studies and popular religiosity, the Italian literary tradition and the Spanish baroque, homiletics and drama, *Tofteh 'Arukh* is perhaps Zacuto's work that best conveys the polycentric ambience of early modern Italian Jewry in which the poem was composed and the rich, multifaceted personality of its author. First printed in 1715, *Tofteh 'Arukh* was instantly transformed into an early modern 'cult book:' explicated and annotated, later supplemented by a 'paradisiacal' sequel by a fellow poet, it went through several editions and was even the object of public readings verging on theatrical performances. Its erratic and scabrous subject captured the imagination of generations of readers, as much enthralled by its outlandish kabbalistic imagery as bewildered by its unrivalled linguistic complexity.¹⁷

The main source of inspiration for the composition of the poem lay in the rabbinic traditions surrounding the *Ḥibbut ha-Qever* (Beating of the Tomb), the preliminary judgement to which, according to the midrash and the *Zohar*, all dead are subjected before they are sent to hell for

¹⁶ This has been remarked by Ezio Raimondi with reference to Galileo and his telescope, the use of which conferred onto sight and observation an essential classifying function. See Ezio Raimondi, "La nuova scienza e la visione degli oggetti." *Lettere italiane* 21.3 (1969): 265–305, especially 267, 269 and 280.

¹⁷ First published in 1715, *Tofteh 'Arukh* was reprinted in 1744 in an expanded edition including also the sequel *'Eden 'Arukh* (Paradise Arrayed) by the Ferrarese poet Jacob Daniel Olmo (c. 1690–1757). Subsequent reprints were issued in Metz, in 1777 and Kolomyia, in 1880. On *Tofteh 'Arukh* see Ch. Hamiel, "Tofteh 'Arukh by Moses Zacuto" [Hebrew]. *Sinai* 25 (1949): 304–319 and 26 (1950): 101–112; Shimon Levy, "Hellish Hebrew Theatre: The Spiritual Quest of *Tofteh Aruch*," *Maske und Kothurn* 35.1 (1989): 45–58 (originally published in Hebrew in *Bamah* 113–114 (1988): 114–124); Dvora Bregman, "Dimness and Clarity in "Tofteh Aruch" by Rabbi Moses Zacuto." [Hebrew] *Pe 'amin* 96 (2003): 34–52; Ronit Meroz, "Rabbi Moses Zacuto's Allusions in *Tofteh 'Arukh*" [Hebrew]. *Pe'amim* 96 (2003): 107–119; Andrea Yaakov Lattes, "La concezione della morte e dell'oltretomba nel dramma *Tofte 'aruk* di Rabbi Mošeh Zacuto," *Materia giudaica* 17–18 (2013): 149–154; Andreatta, "The Baroque World of Moses Zacuto's *Tofte Arukh*." In Elisabeth Hollender, Naoya Katsumata, and Joachim Yeshaya, eds. *The Poet and the World: Studies in Honor of Wout van Bekkum*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Publishers, 2019, 275–297. A partial edition of the Hebrew text of *Tofteh 'Arukh* was published by David Friedman, in 1922. A diplomatic edition of the Hebrew text based on the 1715's print has been conducted by Bregman (Dvora Bregman, "A Few Words on *Tofteh 'Arukh*" [Hebrew]. *Dechaq* 2 (2012): 333–376); an edition of the Hebrew text accompanied by an annotated Italian translation is available in Andreatta, ed. *L'inferno allestito. Poema di un rabbino del Seicento sull'oltretomba dei malvagi*. Milan: Bompiani, 2016, 105–208.

punishment or, in the case of the righteous, ascend to heaven.¹⁸ Revived by the kabbalists in Safed, popularized among Italian Jews by devotional literature of mystical inclination, this belief soon gained the acceptance of popular religiosity, being mentioned even by a staunch critic of Kabbalah such as the Venetian rabbi Leon Modena (1571-1648).¹⁹ Zacuto's *Tofteh 'Arukh* stages the afterlife fate of an unrepented sinner, from his awakening in the grave, to the tomb's plunging into the earth until it reaches hell, to the dead's encounter with the terrifying demon in charge for administering the preliminary judgement. The second part of the poem, in which the leading role is now passed on to the demon itself, takes the reader on an hallucinatory journey through the seven pits of hell, whose depiction is largely based on the description of the *Shiv 'ah Hekhalot ha-Tum'ah* (The Seven Palaces of Impurity) included in the *Zohar*.²⁰ According to midrashic and zoharic sources, for the *Hibbut ha-Qever* to take place, the sensitive soul reenters the body, since soul and body need to be judged together. As a result, the dead protagonist is still in possession of his senses and faculties (as Zacuto's introductory note to the poem clarifies), and as such reasons, feels, and speaks as if he were still alive. He is thus able to provide a detailed description of the chaotic, cacophonous, both spectacular and bewildering scenery of hell, in which senses, particularly sight, play a central role:

I can see ravines plunging into the abyss,
 I can see valleys as deep as the netherworld,
 I can see caves, craters and burrows,
 I can see caverns blazing with flames,
 I can see crevices carved in by sparks.²¹ (131-135)

I look at their floor on whose ground
 Are sulphur and salt mixed with pitch,
 Mud, lime and dung. If thou step on it,
 Thou shalt sink, thy foot unable to lift:

¹⁸ See TB *Berakhot*, fol. 18^v. The first detailed elaboration of the belief is found in two later midrashim, i.e. *Massekhet Hibbut ha-Qever* (Treatise of the Beating of the Tomb) and, to a lesser extent, *Massekhet Gehinnom* (Treatise of Hell), both the work of early medieval redactors who produced spurious expansions of preexistent rabbinic sources (see Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:147–152). In the *Zohar*, the rite is referred to as the “judgement of the grave” (*dina de-qivra*). See *Zohar*, 2:fol. 151^r; 199^{r-v}; 211^v; 3:fol. 53^r; 126^v–127^r. On the ineluctability of this punishment, which is inflicted both on the wicked and the righteous, see *Zohar* 2:fol. 151^r.

¹⁹ See Mark Cohen, ed. and trans. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988, 94 and Leon Modena, *The History of the Rites, Customs, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews, throughout the World*, trans. Edmund Chilmead. London: printed for Jo. Martin and Jo. Ridley, 1650, 243.

²⁰ See *Zohar* 2:fols. 262^v–268^v.

²¹ The hammering verbal repetition by which Zacuto opens the description of the infernal landscape cannot but remind, by analogy, the anaphora in the first tercet of Canto III of Dante's *Inferno* in which the first part of the warning inscription engraved on the entrance to hell is spelled out as solemnly as ominously. In *Tofteh 'Arukh*, the repetition is meant to mark the transition to the netherworld and, at one time, to sanction the reality of what the dead protagonist is now contemplating, of which he is offering ocular proof.

Up to thy head the mire will reach! (136-140)

I behold the walls around each compartment:
There, like fiery furnaces, ovens and stoves
Are fanned by a blowing wind and set ablaze,
On all sides, by thistles and thorns
Impregnated with resin and oil. (141-145)

I watch sea abysses and gushing water,²²
Glaciated boulders²³ in the racing stream,
Flanked by towering walls of snow,
Freezing mist, hailstone, and frost the likes of which,
Even in Egypt were not seen!²⁴ (146-150)

The prominent role played by verbs referring to the act of seeing in the section just quoted— in which the unfortunate protagonist provides his eyewitness description of the infernal landscape—render Zacuto’s insistence on vision, observation, and ocular apprehension explicit. Such insistence is functional to empirically substantiate the truth and reality of what is being described and thus ultimately instrumental to the didactic aims of the poem and to proclaiming that hell *does* exist. But by emphasizing the faculty of vision in the meta-real experience narrated in *Tofteh ‘Arukh*, Zacuto’s poetry simultaneously gives expression to the ambivalence attached to the emerging practices of experimental natural philosophy. Paradoxically, early modern champions of observational empiricism had to justify the mediation of instruments by rejecting the immediacy of the senses themselves and the misleading information they procured. In the end, the enhanced vision of optics had also revealed that human apprehension of the world was nothing but phantasms and vain imaginations and that, fundamentally, human judgement was always wrong. Zacuto responded by claiming the empiricism of that dimension of human experience that science could not chart: beyond the misleading appearance of the external, ‘real’ world lies, for Zacuto, the *different vision* of the underworld, whose relation to sublunary nature is marked by a distorted, anamorphic representation, but whose materiality is not less actual and objective. Indeed, opposed and specular to the natural world, this ‘anti-nature’ would baffle, for Zacuto, the scores of philosophers whose wisdom resides in the exploration of the secrets of the natural world and of earthly and heavenly wonders (vv. 181–186):

²² See Job 38:16.

²³ See Exod. 15:8.

²⁴ A reference to the ten plagues that, according to the account in Exod. 7:8-12:34, struck Egypt, the seventh of which was hail.

I can see a river of fire²⁵ whose waves
And surging tides resemble flooding waters;
In their rapacious race,²⁶ more and more
They set ablaze, in their swamping and sweeping,
More and more they rumble with tremendous uproar. (166-170)

(...)

From there they descend into the abyss' depths
And therefrom a boiling foam surges as a tide.
With ferine rage and terrible fury,
The flames there gather and assemble;
From there they then depart and split. (176-180)

Each stream of fire forks there
Into cavernous corners and overflowing hollows.²⁷
The force of the blaze and burning fire
Would puzzle the philosophers of nature,²⁸
As no thinker ever conceived such a thing! (181-185)

Zacuto makes it clear that in this *'olam hafukh*, specular and opposed to the divinely devised order of nature and heaven, in this meta-nature which is ruled by the principles of chaos rather than harmony, by incoherence rather than rationality, and by annihilation rather than regeneration, the laws of the existent are subverted and inverted, leaving the mind at loss. And yet, like the "great book of nature" also this other world can be known through the senses and needs to be read and

²⁵ In Aramaic, *nehar di-nur*. According to the Talmud, this is the river of fire that originates from the sweat of the angelical beasts surrounding the divine throne. It then flows down into the depths of hell where it enfolds the wicked into its flames, scalding them (see TB *Ḥagigah*, fol. 13^v). *Massekhet Gehinnon* includes the following description of the fire in the Gehenna, upon which Zacuto seems to have drawn some of the details that make up his own poetic depiction of hell: "There are five types of fire in hell: there is fire that devours and swallows and fire that swallows but does not devour, and fire that devours but does not swallow, and fire that neither devours nor swallows, and finally there is also fire that devours fire. And in this blaze there are brands [as big] as mountains, and coals [as big] as hills, [...] and embers the size of huge rocks; and there are in it rivers of sulphur and pitch sweeping along burning thistles and thorns" (Jelinek, ed., *Bet ha-midrash*, 1:147; *Reshit hokhmah*, fol. 47^r).

²⁶ Literally, 'like beasts of pray.'

²⁷ Literally, 'wells of seven' (*be'erot sheva'*), based on the toponym recurring in Gen. 21. According to the biblical story, a quarrel rose between Abraham and Abimelech, on whose land Abraham was sojourning, over a well that the Abimelech's servants had seized. To prove that he had dug the well, Abraham offered Abimelech seven ewes from his flock (Gen. 21:25-30). According to the midrashic interpretation of this passage, the quarrel was settled by divine intervention as the well's water rose at the approach of Abraham and his sheep, thus supposedly overflowing the well's edges (*Genesis Rabbah* 54:5).

²⁸ On the identification of *בְּעֵלֵי הַטְּבַע* with natural philosophers, see Jacob Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus linguae Hebraicae et veteris et recentioris* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1928), vol. 1: 92. Zacuto's reference cannot but remind us of Hamlet's words: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.187-8).

interpreted literally. Indeed, although construed as abnormal and monstrous, Zacuto's infernal topography is not amorphous, but rather reproduces the familiar sublunary morphology with formations that are construed as mountains, valleys, rivers and caves. His depiction of the physical nature of hell establishes a series of analogies with terrestrial phenomena whose task is to translate what is beyond natural human reach and perception into familiar experiences to the reader's mind. Furthermore, Zacuto's characterization of the underworld landforms demonstrates, if not competence, at least clear sensitivity for the allied fields of mineralogy and geography: the four elements are listed in their various states and reciprocal combinations, thus denoting an attention to processes of association and dissociation of matter and bodies. Chemical elements, like salt and sulphur, and substances commonly used in alchemic experiments, like resin and mineral oil, are mentioned. While the strophes we quoted above well exemplify the taste for conceptual accumulation typical of baroque poetics, they also evidence Zacuto's fascination with natural elements.

Coda

By the time *Tofteh 'Arukh* started to be circulated among Zacuto's disciples and within the Mantuan confraternity of watchers that he himself had established—the group will be eventually responsible for the printing of the poem—the telescope and the revolutionary approach to sight and scientific investigation it had enabled had already been translated into moral terms, so much so that even the Jesuits, who had been among Galileo's most strenuous critics, adopted it as the symbol of their order. The tool's ability to transform what is far and small into something near and much bigger, the expansive vision it enabled became a metaphor for the moral act of attentively discriminate between good and evil. Interestingly, the first mention of the telescope in Hebrew is found in the text of another dramatic poem composed by an Italian Jewish poet. In 1670, 'Immanuel Frances (d. 1718) wrote a composition titled *Wiqquah Shirah* (Dispute in Verse) at the request of a Florentine confraternity called *Anelanti* (in Hebrew, *Sho'afim*, 'those who yearn'),²⁹ for them to "perform with the cittern and the lute according to the art of music."³⁰ Except for the sparse information we can glean from Frances' own introductory notes to the composition,³¹ purpose and

²⁹ Immanuel Frances, *Diwan*, ed. by Shimon Bernstein, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1932, no. 160 (*Wikkuah Shirah*).

³⁰ "Mashmi'im qol 'ale 'ugav we-kinnor 'al pi hokhmat ha-muziqah". Frances' remarks about the circumstance of the commission are included in the author's introductory note to the composition (Frances, *Diwan*, 195).

³¹ According to Frances, the confraternity had its own seat, a house in which a shield was hanging with the group's motto and emblem, this last portraying the image of a tortoise intent to climb a mountain (Frances, *Diwan*, 203). It is worth mentioning that the iconography of a tortoise, in this case bearing on his shell a wind-

nature of the commissioning group are not known. Nevertheless, based on the name of the sodality, apparently alluding to messianic longing, and judging from the character of some of the works they commissioned, it seems they functioned as a sort of learned academy while also promoting some form of devotion of penitential nature. It is also clear that music and singing played a prominent role in the life of the group and consequently also in the communal events they hosted. The subject of Frances' poem is the perennial battle between good and evil inclination for establishing dominion over mankind. In this case, the specific object of contention is the soul of a little child, who is asked to contemplate, with the help of "the tube of observers, which in Italian is called *canocchiale*"³² the tortures inflicted to the wicked in hell and the beatitude of the just in paradise. Convinced by ocular evidence of the existence of afterlife retribution, he will eventually acknowledge the necessity to follow the good inclination and reject the evil one.

Frances was not a kabbalist. Vision, which in *Tofteh 'Arukh* was paradoxically invoked to support the verisimilitude of what described, becomes for Frances an emblematic faculty, able to transcend the limits of time and space and, through its demystifying power, to show us what lies beyond the deceiving screen of earthly appearances. Zacuto's operation was rather different: by indirectly appealing to claims typical of his age—such as the epistemological role attributed to the senses and the preeminence of vision—and by applying them to kabbalistic beliefs, he underscored the intellectual relevance of the mystical strand of Jewish traditional lore, thus transforming *Tofteh 'Arukh* into an empirical study of meta-nature and a sort of pamphlet by which he reconfirmed the inner truth of Jewish tradition.

Appendix

1. *Kenaf Renanim*, fol. 36^v (cf. T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Poetry*, 1981, p. 490)

אהיה אשר אהיה. הבט משמים וראה. ירח אשר כוננת. ועל מקומו התבוננת. איך חשך משחור תארו. ויהי לאבל כנורו. זה כמה וכמה. וכצבואים ואדמה. כל עובר עליו ישום. יען כי גם מתמול גם משלשום. לא נהיה כדבר הזה. וכי אשמע קול מדבר. וחיילים יגבר. לדעה אל מי תלונותי תסובנה. ולמי כאלה תקראנה. הלא כאוב מארץ קולי אהמה. בקול נהי צורח. אני אני הוא הירח. אשר מאז אתה שמשי אהבתני ובאור פניך הארתני. ועתה חשך ישופני. ואור לילה בעדני. ותרב משאת אפתי. מהמאור הקטון אשר לעומתי. כי מדי חדש בחדשו. הוד והדר לבושו. אך לי נפלו פני. ונוחם יסתר מעיני. בדינים מדינים שונים. זה לי אלף וחמש מאות ועוד שנים. ומה אומר עוד צורי. אם לי ירח נהפך לחרי. סהר לסרה. ולבנה לנבלה. ולך משפט הגאולה.

filled sail, had been chosen to give visual expression to Cosimo de Medici's favorite maxim *festina lente* and could be seen in Palazzo Vecchio, as elsewhere in Florence.

³² *Shefoferet shel ha-tzofim (qa'noqya'lo be-la'az).*

2. Tofteh 'Arukh (Venice 1715)

אַרְאָה בְּקַעוֹת כְּתֵהוּם עִמָּקוּ,
אַרְאָה עִמָּקִים כְּשֵׂאוֹל מִתַּחַת,
אַרְאָה מַחְלוֹת מִהַמּוֹרוֹת פַּחַת,
אַרְאָה מְעָרוֹת לוֹהֲטוֹת דָּלְקוּ,
אַרְאָה נְקִיקִים בְּשִׁבִיב נְחָקְקוּ. 135

אַבִּיט בְּקַרְקַעַם מְקוּם יִצְיַע
גְּפְרִית וּמֶלַח נֶעָרַב בְּזַפְתָּ,
צוֹאָה וְטִיט יִנּוּ וְעִבְטִיט רְפַת.
יִטְבַּע מֵהֶלֶךְ בּוֹ וְלֹא יִשִּׁיעַ
רַגְלָיו, אֲבָל עַד קְדָקְדוֹ יִגְיַע. 140

אַשְׁכִּיל בְּקִירוֹתָם סְבִיב כָּל בַּיִת:
כִּירוֹת וְתַנּוּרִים כְּדוּד נְפוּחַ
וּמִנְפָּחִים בְּהֵם בְּחֶזֶק רוּחַ,
וּמִלְהֲטִים מַחֲרֵץ וְגַם מִבַּיִת
עֲטָרוֹן וְנִפְטָ אַחוּז בְּקוֹץ וְשִׁית. 145

אַצִּיץ תְּהוֹמוֹת יָם וְנִבְכִי מִיָּם
קִפְאוּ כְּמוֹ גַד נוֹזְלִים בְּפִלְגַּי,
וּמִסּוּבְבֵי חוּמָה בְּהָרֵי שְׁלֵג,
קָרַח וּבָרָד עִם כְּפוּר שְׁמַיִם:
לֹא נִהְיִתָּה כְּזֹאת בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם. 150

(...)

אַשׁוּר נִהַר דִּינּוּר אֲשֶׁר יִרְמוּ
גִלּוֹ וּמִשְׁבְּרֵיוּ בְּזֶרֶם שְׁטָף,
דוּמִים בְּמַרְאֵיהֶם לְגוּרֵי חֶטֶף:
כֵּן יִשְׂרָפוּ, כֵּן יִשְׁטָפוּ יִזְרְמוּ,
כֵּן יִנְהָמוּ, כֵּן נִהָמוּ יִהְמוּ. 170

(...)

מִשֶּׁם לְעַמְקֵי הַתְּהוֹם יִרְדוּ,
שֶׁם יַעֲלוּ יִשְׂאוּ רְתִיחוֹת קֶצֶף,
שֶׁם בְּחֶרוֹן חֶמָה וְזַעַם קֶצֶף,
יִאֲסְפוּ יִתְדִיּוּ וְיִוַּעְדוּ,
אַז יִלְכוּ מִשֶּׁם וְיִפְרְדוּ. 180

שֶׁם נִחְלְקוּ כָּל נִהְרֵי שְׁלֵהֶבֶת
לְפָאֵת מְעָרוֹת אוֹ בְּאֵרוֹת שְׁבַע;
לֹא יִאֲמִינוּ בְּעֲלֵי הַטְּבַע
חֶזֶק שְׁבִיב הָאוּר וְאֵשׁ צְרָבֶת,
כִּי לֹא שְׁעָרוֹם חוֹשְׁבֵי מַחְשְׁבֶת. 185