The Rain in Spain:
Jewish Thought, Practices and Transmissions

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Abstract:

The link between rains, religion and prayer, as well as individual charisma, is ancient. This paper looks at some late medieval and early modern reverberations on this topic. They are of interest because of the intensity and prominence of the subject in the contemporary evidence. They also allow us to observe the rich coalescence of different areas of Jewish thought on the same subject: liturgical jurisprudence, poetry, calendar, family and other traditions. They also present us with the possibility of adding and comparing contemporary Christian perceptions to the Jewish ones. They raise the question of different Jewish perspectives on prayers and rains.

Keywords: Jews in Spain. medieval rain. medieval liturgy. oral traditions. textual transmissions

To achieve a sense of proportion on the subject's chronology and geography, it is necessary to bear in mind that the concern with droughts, rains, floods and so on is not privative of the transition from late medieval to early modern period nor to Spain, i.e. the focus of our attention. The relations of such natural phenomena to religion are in evidence very early on. One needs only recall Irit Ziffer's analyses of archeological discoveries in Biblical Tirzah. They relate to ancient Near Eastern representations of rain and their figurative language within the cult of the late 10th-early 9th century BCE. Rain plays a significant role in the archeological finds analyzed by her.[1] Manuel Antonio Marcos Casquero[2] sees the concern with rain in the frame of archaic aquatic cosmogonies which continue until the decline of the Middle Ages. Some threads of such ancient rain lore would reverberate in the Late Middle Ages. Our focus in the following lines is on the Jewish [and, occasionally, *judeo-converso*] responses to drought and rain in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period.

I

In the Temple, a notable ceremony was the water libation when the water was brought to the altar through the Water Gate.[3] After the destruction of the Temple, the focus is transferred

to liturgy. In the Talmud, prayers for rain are discussed [particularly in *bTa'anit*]. None other than N. Wieder[4] saw these pro-pluvial rogatives as the most impressive items in the whole Jewish Order of Prayers.

The prayers are linked to matters of individual charisma[5] and to a number of individuals. But the most prominent personality was Honi [Onias] the Circle maker.

> Once, most of the month of Adar had passed but rain had still not fallen. They sent this message to Ḥoni Ha-Me'agel: Pray, and rain will fall. He prayed, but no rain fell. He drew a circle in the dust and stood inside it, ...
> Ḥoni said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until you have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain. Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. His students said to him: Rabbi, we have seen that you can perform great wonders, but this quantity of rain is not enough to ensure that we will not die. It appears to us that a small amount of rain is falling only to enable you to dissolve your oath, but it is not nearly enough to save us.
> Ḥoni continued: Nevertheless, bring me a bull. I will sacrifice it as a thanks-offering and pray at the same time. They brought him a bull for a thanks-offering. He placed his two hands on its head and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your nation Israel, whom You brought out of Egypt, cannot bear either an excess of good or an excess of punishment. You grew angry with them and withheld rain, and they are unable to bear it. You bestowed upon them too much good, and they were also unable to bear it. May it be Your will that the rain stop and that there be relief for the world. Immediately, the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, the sun shone, and everyone went out to the fields and gathered for themselves truffles and mushrooms that had sprouted in the strong rain. [*bTa'anit* 23a]

The archetype of Honi reverberates in the Middle Ages in a number of ways. His model continued the link between rain, religion and God. Honi's case emphasized the individual's role and charisma. That he was recognized as having a particular personal style of prayer is clear from the rabbinical reservations about his prayer. He underlines the notion of a certain "familiarity" with God in matters of rain, and a particular bond between God as rain maker and his people.

The Jewish prayer for rain consists of the petition for dew and rain in the ninth benediction (Birkat ha-Shanim). When, in fourteenth-century Seville, Abudarham wrote on liturgy, the Jews of Spain adhered to the Talmudic rule that "a man must not ask for his worldly necessities" in the first three benedictions; therefore Abudarham distinguishes the additional service for the Eighth of the Feast only by having the reader proclaim "He causeth the wind," before the silent prayer.[6] The question which arose was about the exact time of year when the prayer was to be recited.[7] The general practice amongst Jews of Europe was to follow the Babylonian procedure of starting this *tal u-matar* prayer on the sixtieth day from the autumnal equinox. Numerous legal/halakhic authorities from the eleventh to the fourteenth-century attest

to the concern with this issue, not only in France, Germany and Italy, but also in Spain. Thus, for example, Abraham ha-Yarhi settled in Toledo in 1204. His main work, *Sefer Ha-Manhig*, [ca 1204] witnesses several concerns of the Jews in Spain, including rain. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili had been a disciple of Adret [d. 1310] in Barcelona and his *Novella* treat the question of rain. The Geronan Nahmanides' anonymous student refers to Catalonia in this frame in the thirteenth-century. Hayyim ben Samuel of Tudela, the 14th century disciple of Adret, is yet another rabbinical authority concerned with rain and so is Rabbi Nissim of Gerona [d.1376].[8]

Asher ben Yehiel of Toledo, [*Responsa* IV,10] is particularly interesting. His responsum was edited by a descendant. It dates the writing to Passover 5073=1313. At the time there was no rain and a fast was proclaimed. On the first night of Passover, he was sitting by the entrance to his house surrounded by his disciples. And he asked them: why not pray for rain till Pentecost? And, indeed, the precentor at the Great Synagogue [of Toledo] prayed but there was opposition. Asher says that he did not fight it because he wanted to avoid factionalism in the community. He compares the Franco-German territories of Ashkenaz – whose climate is generous – to his new home [Spain] where they need water more than anywhere.

The responsum, usually read for its halakhic arguments, is of moment in other ways too. The point of departure is the drought of Passover 1313 and the consequent prayers and fast. This is not formulated as if it were an unusual occurrence nor is the majority population involved by way of commands or by applying pressure. The question of dates of prayers was taken so seriously that Asher feared that it would lead to internal fights or factionalism in his community. Asher weaves his own experiences into the juridical argument. The liturgical question was conducive to establishing specific, concrete, physical geography and the region [i.e. not merely "Diaspora," but Cologne, Montpelier, Toledo] as concepts in Jewish legal thought on the topic.

II

As has been seen, the liturgical halakhic discussions were permeated by questions of dates and the calendar. Similarly, stories about bringing down rain frequently note the month of the drought or the rain. The liturgical focus is closely linked to the calendar. This barely requires comment in the case of a time bound liturgy such as the Jewish one, but it also applies to rains, which are season-bound. Recent research has emphasized that questions of calendar can be an index of the beliefs of a given society. In the case of the Jews, they can provide evidence for aspects such as the tenor of Jewish-Christian relations and Jewish attitudes to the Christians in a given place and period. Such questions are more complex and nuanced than might be thought. Thus, the use of Christian dates, frequently related to beliefs in saints, was looked upon unfavourably by some medieval rabbinic authorities who explicitly forbade even the mention of places with saints names. And yet, practice in real life, as revealed by archival documents, was another matter. We can find Hebrew character signatures agreeing to such

stipulations of time as the day of John the Baptist, in the famous accord of the Puebla de Alcocer in 1382.[9] We now know more about such Jewish practices because of the discovery of multiple manuscripts in Hebrew characters containing equivalences between Jewish and Christian calendars including days of saints, whose names are frequently – but not exclusively – mentioned in their Ibero-Romance form.[10]

Here we may note a small sample of some additional Hebrew MSS containing matters related to calendars and rain, culled – not from Cambridge but – from the Vatican collections.[11] The sample is primarily from the Mediterranean area. This would constitute an alternative to the repeated attention to liturgical law or to piyyut. The latter may have obscured other, perhaps more mondaine, evidence and perceptions. That is to say, we may pay attention to the less frequently observed evidence for scribal activities and reading: what does the scribal dissemination of texts tell us about the understanding of rains in the late medieval period? what were their practices of selection and contiguities?

Thus, for example, Vat. ebr. 80 is in a late 15th century hand with Italian and Sephardic semi-cursive scripts. It is interested in calendrical matters. It mentions the year [50]93=1332. The final extracts are omens predicting the annual rainfall. Vat. ebr. 167 is of 1467, in a Sephardic semi-cursive script includes portents of rains followed by portents predicting the wheat harvest. Vat. ebr. 286 is dated to mid-late 14th century and located in Byzantium. It contains rules for reciting the prayers for rain. Vat. ebr. 305 is of the late 13th century in Ashkenazic semi-cursive script. On f. 55v, it has commentaries on Hossana prayers for the festival of Sukkot or Tabernacles and the liturgical rain poem [*kerovah*] by Qallir on ff. 45r–50v. Vat. ebr. 320, is a 14th c Byzantine Hebrew MS. It includes liturgical poems for rain such as a *kerovah* by Abraham ibn Ezra (ff. 243r–245r), Vat. ebr. 329 is dated to the mid-13th century and is in Ashkenazic semi-square script. The third calendar includes the dates on which one begins to recite the prayer for rain. Vat. ebr. 509 is a collection of different manuscripts and parts of manuscripts from Italy, mainly in Italian semi-cursive scripts dated to the mid-14th century. It includes, inter alia, portents for predicting rain. Vat. ebr. 525 is a mid-16th century MS in Italian semi-cursive script highly concerned with calendar issues and how to tell whether a month will be hot or cold, rainy or dry. These scribal selections reveal something of the interests of the Hebrew reading public. Calendar and liturgy appertaining to rain are prime topics. We note the concern with omens and portents for rain.[12]

III

The presence of an early and rich tradition of liturgical poems for rain did not inhibit the creative compositions of poems for rain in late medieval Spain. An important example is the poetry of Shlomoh de Piera in the Crown of Aragon ca 1400. Bernstein, who studied him and his liturgical poetry in depth,[13] notes a difference in tone in the late fourteenth-century poetic compositions on rain. He locates it in a simplicity, sobriety or restraint which reflects the

aristocratic milieu of the poet's patrons, the Aragonese Cavalleria dynasty. He draws attention to the relative multiplicity of rain poems [seven] by this poet. He admires de Piera's evident mastery of the poetics and rules which govern that liturgical type. A minute sample of his multiple Prayers for Rain, in Cole's translation, reads: "the nation's king has asked the Lord/to set the table with food for the poor/may his words be pleasing for Him/so that the living waters pour"[14].

If de Piera's choice of the subject of his creativity echoes earlier famous poets e.g. Elazar Ha-Qalir[15] ibn Gabirol or Abraham ibn Ezra, other facets of the attitudes to rain also reveal continuities. The individual's prayers, the question of individual charisma – the individual's personal relation with God as crucial in prayer for rain, – as well as God's relation with His people are concepts reminiscent of Honi which reappear in 15th century Spain.

This reminds us that, while liturgical jurisprudence/law was the more visible site of attention to the subject of rain, there were other facets as well. In the late medieval responsa from Spain, rains are frequently mentioned in contexts which are not treated here, such as laws of damages to houses and laws of ritual baths which depended on rain water. But some are concerned with pro-pluvial solicitations and ceremonies. Examples could be provided by the more than eight hundred responsa of the Mallorcan R. Simeon b. Zemah Duran [d. 1444]. One of his letters concerns the case of a congregation who decided to fast because of lack of rain and then the rains came before the appointed date for the fast. The question is whether they need to perform the fasts they had agreed upon.[16] There is no sign of any non-Jewish involvement. Nor does it appear to be an unusual activity. Another responsum in Duran's collection refers to a case that transpired about twenty years earlier than the date of writing. A Jew [in Valencia], who later became a converso, dreamt that the congregation needed to perform three fasts and R. Isaac b Sheshet paid attention to that dream. The result was that the congregation ridiculed them to such an extent that they could barely find a quorum for afternoon prayers [ii, 128]. The impression is that special prayers and fasts for rain could be an internal matter with no pressure from the majority population and that they were not uncommon.

Baer seems to have accepted, or at least valued, the memories or traditions about Hasdai Crescas and his prayers for rain in the age of the above-mentioned Duran and de Piera, ca. 1400.[17] The source is Abraham Saba (1440–1508), who is known for his sermons. He had left Castile for Portugal before 1492 and had to leave Oporto in 1496, when King Manuel I ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal. Further tragedy was the forcible abduction of his two sons. It is against this background that one must read his homiletic collection Bundle of Myrrh/*Tsror ha-mor.*[18]

According to Nahmanides, offering a sacrifice – in the Jerusalem Temple – produces nourishing rain. For Adret, God waters the Land of Israel himself as opposed to the rain elsewhere, which depends on astral influences. They both cite Talmudic and Midrashic dicta which shape their views on rain. D. Schwartz[19] has recently argued that there are elements of

theurgic magic in their interpretations. This is arguably the background to Saba's homily on Crescas' powers to bring down rain. In his sermon on the pericope beginning in Leviticus 26:3, Saba engages the traditional question on the link between the pericope of the previous week and that of the present one, both from Leviticus. The previous week's lesson concerned the sabbatical year, that is, it concerned the fields. The present one concerned the rain which is necessary for the fields. He focuses on the verse at the beginning of that week's pericope [Leviticus 26:3] "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; 4 Then I will give you rain in due season" and particularly on the formulation "give *you* rain". In this homily on Leviticus 26, he wrote the following on the verse (in the passage of admonishment,) "and I will break your proud glory. I will make your skies like iron" (Leviticus 26:19):

> I have already noted that our pride and glory in the hands of those who took us captive was our having the power to bring the rain in its season, through all our prayers. This is well-known, for it was on this condition that we were received in the lands of other nations when we were exiled. It happened that in Aragon in a time of drought all the Jews were cast out of the city and the gates closed against them until they brought rain. Rabbi Hasdai Crescas explained this, saying at the outset of his words, "the water belongs to us" [quoting Genesis]. The Lord remembered His people and gave them rain. Later, due to our sins, we would cry and shout in a multitude, but there was no one who listened to us, since the words of Scripture, "and I will break your proud glory," were being fulfilled for us and them on account of our sins. For this is our pride and glory, our ability to bring rain in due season through our prayers. and this was the glory of our strength when the nations received us because we knew how to bring down the rain and this is what they say only this wise and intelligent people when they see the precentor enveloped in his prayer shawl when he mentions in his prayers, amongst the thirteen qualities that of "brings down the rain".[20]

Rabbi Hasdai's feat may be alluded to, somewhat obliquely – without mentioning rain explicitly – by yet another contemporary rabbi, Joseph ben Hayyim Yaavetz (1438-1539), also one of the rabbis exiled from Spain.[21] As is clear from their dates, these were not eye-witness reports but relied belatedly on oral tradition. They may, therefore, despite necessary qualifications, be juxtaposed with Sambari's *Divre Yosef*:

> R Isaac Aboab may his memory be blessed...at the time of the expulsion in those places the Jews and their descendants committed themselves to and engaged in time of drought in prayer and rogatives to bring down rains of good will and blessing and gift and on this condition the king allowed them into his land ...

The allusion is to Isaac Aboab II, the fifteenth-century Castilian rabbi and biblical commentator. He was held in esteem as a talmudist.[22]

Earlier than these authors, closer to the above-mentioned Crescas, Duran and De Piera, but in a different, philosophical vein, were the comments of Joseph Albo of Daroca in 1425. Albo is mainly remembered because of his philosophical work, the *Book of Principles*. The question of

general versus special Divine Providence was important in medieval philosophy. Albo produces positive arguments to prove the reality of individual Providence for humans. He sees in various natural and human phenomena, proof against the merely "natural" as treated by the principles of Aristotle's Physics or the laws of uniformity. This shows the presence of individual Providence. Thus, the existence of dry earth, the heaviest element, above water, cannot be accounted for by the laws of Physics. The phenomenon of rain cannot be reduced to natural law, therefore it shows will, purpose and Providence. As Husik wrote:

> Albo asserts in his *Principles* that outside of the prophets, the righteous and the pious have various degrees of power according to the degree of their union with God. Some can in this way influence the powers of nature to obey them, as a person can, by thinking of food, make his mouth water. *So they can by thought cause rain and storm.* Others can bring down fire from above and revive the dead.[23]

The above-mentioned stories about Hasdai Crescas or Isaac Aboab cohere with Albo's perspective to the effect that righteous and pious individuals can influence the powers of nature to obey them. They stand in the long line of beliefs in individual charisma modeled on Honi/Onias. The stories may be better understood by noticing how they contrast with or contradict the ethos of other views which focus, rather, on the whole congregation's petitions for rain. They contrast even more markedly with yet another trend. It is most clearly represented in the Jewish versions or oikotipe of religious tales [AT 827 or 752,] namely "Simpleton's prayer brings down rain" or "The prayer of the innocent brings down rain". These may be written or oral and their roots may be traced back to the Talmud if not the Bible and they continue into the modern era.[24] Schram, who has studied these traditions, underlines also the mythical connections between tears and rain. These are most clearly materialized in the tear-bottles [Ps.56:8] which accompany the buried. These motifs serve to bring into relief the character of the different fifteenth-century ideas mentioned above.

IV

The evidence for attention to and supplications for rain is not limited to Hebrew texts. Nor is it purely a matter of internal myths and ideas. A simple, apparently innocuous utterance might be enlightening and introduce us to the subject. It comes from Berlanga del Duero, the town of ca 500 inhabitants in central Castile, in the orbit of Soria.[25]

Gil Navarro said that sometimes he heard Juan say when it did not rain: "let us commend ourselves to God". The frame belongs to the papers of the Inquisition. That is to say that from the 1480s onwards utterances concerning rain were not restricted to the realm of thought but were of practical interest to the Inquisition. The witnesses in 1536 had been asked whether Juan Lopez de Vzeda, *vecino* of Berlanga, deceased, had, in moments of anxiety, commended himself to "Our Lord Jesus Christ his glorious mother and all the saints of the celestial court". Juan Lopez, according to the witness, had failed to do so, because when talking about rain he

entrusted himself only to God. This means that the Inquisition was interested in matters concerning Jews, judeoconversos and rain. This opens up a corpus of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century evidence for the historian.

More informative is a 1489 testimony before the Calatayud Inquisition.[26] The witness refers to the Jews who would take out the Torah scrolls into the streets to bring down the rain and about the Jews who were wailing and singing and blowing the ram's horn [Shofar] to bring down the rain. The testimony is worth citing in translation[27]

> When the Jews of Calatayud took out the Thoras to pray in the street, in Barranco Street, before the house of Ybrahim Pazagon [ancestor of Michel de Montaigne] about 13 or 15 years ago [in the 1470s] there was a great famine of bread because there was no rain the witness saw Simon of Sta Clara by a window of Pazagon's house and when the Jews performed that ceremony blowing the horn [i.e. the Shofar] singing and wailing so as to bring down the rain this witness saw how Sta Clara wept a great deal and moved his lips as if in prayer just as any Jew who was praying and weeping though not singing loudly and how the said Simon being by the window would look at the said Thoras and at the whole ceremony.

The witness does not seem to be overeducated. The witness loses the intervocalic /r/: *pa que lloviese.* The description makes it clear that the prayers for rain were recited outside the synagogue. This is not a local Calatayud custom or a folkloric trait. It follows rules laid down, before the year 200 CE, in the *Mishna Ta'anit,* II, which regulates the ceremonies to be observed in fasting, the prayers and the blowing of the Shofar in this connection:

> MISHNA: What is the order of procedure on the fast-days? The ark containing the Holy Scrolls is to be brought into an open place in the city... The eldest among them shall then address them in heart-moving terms, ... the tradition of the prophets is (as it is written): "Rend your hearts, and not your garments" [Joel, ii. 131].

The wailing mentioned by the witness would be the practical performance of the idea in the Book of Joel. The music mentioned by the witness in 1489 is not prefigured in *Mishna Ta'anit*. Musicologists have opined that:

> With the Sephardim the most representative melody of the "Geshem" and "Ṭal" is that reserved for the beautiful poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol commencing "Leshoni bonanta," which occurs in both services. This melody is of Spanish origin, and bears evidence of having been originally set to words of a different rhythm. It is probably one of those numerous folk-songs which, according to the repeated testimony of contemporaries, were constantly being adapted for synagogal use from the tenth to the fifteenth century.[28]

In the Inquisition testimony we have a contemporary's impression of the music/song as worthy of notice and as distinct from the wailing.

The Calatayud testimony gives us an idea of rain ceremonies in the Crown of Aragon. But they were also occurring in Castile. The relations between Jews, new and old Christians, the intellectual and economic tensions in la Puebla de Montalban – known then as originating in a "town of Jews"[29] – are complex. They are a part of the historical background of Juan de Lucena, printer of Hebrew books and of Fernando de Rojas, author of the fifteenth-century masterpiece known as *Celestina*.

The reconstruction of the *ambiente* of the Puebla de Montalban, near Toledo, in the late fifteenth century, by Stephen Gilman, affects also our understanding of other aspects and other – less famous – Jews and conversos.[30] Thus, the converso Pedro Serrano acted in accordance with the procedure of *tachos,* whereby the accused points to incidents and arguments which might have brought about his denunciation. The written result was a record of hatreds in the Puebla de Montalban around the 1480s:

> Abulafia, the physician, hates me and is my enemy; after quarreling with me because I said that I disapproved of the Jews' praying for rain one day and the Christians the next and that that was why no rain had fallen, he came to me in great fury and asked me if I meant what I said. He said he would complain to his Grace [don Alonso], because Kings and grandees had always sponsored such prayers. He told me I couldn't deny belonging to his lineage, and, while we were arguing in the kitchen, he picked up a stick and said he would beat me. Thus, the hatred began and the insults, for he called me another fat-tailed one [otro rabigordo]. I'll never speak to him again except when I have to. . .

The Hebrew printer Juan de Lucena's unmarried daughters, Leonor and Teresa lived in the Puebla in 1485 with their relative, Beatriz González, at a time when the latter confessed to the Inquisition: "When the Jews bring out their Torah in order to pray for rain, I remember I humbled myself before it sometimes, praising God with some words". The formulation in her testimony implies that to "bring out their Torah" from the Synagogue (in the Puebla) was a repeated custom rather than a single occurrence. The Jews leave the synagogue and go out into the street in something resembling a procession in front of which the observer can humble herself and praise God. It also shows that the custom of Castile was like that in Aragon, despite the differences.

V

The ancient links between religion and rain appear at this time in surprising associations of subjects. We find such links in brief sayings such as those of a converso who, in Segovia, in the early 1500s, asserted that after the conversos left for the Holy Land it would not rain for seven years.[31] This is the case also in the record of a conversation preserved in Inquisition papers. In Gilman's paraphrase we read:

> ...The people are dying of hunger. O, Saint Mary! What a great drought there is, because there's no rain. Gil replied, "How do you expect it to rain, when the king is going to take the Moors' home away, when

> they haven't done him any harm". Diego protested that the Catholic faith was being spread by the campaign, but the farmer responded, "How does anyone know which of the three laws God loves best?".

There is no indication that Gil had any connection with Judaism. The previously mentioned deposition by Pedro Serrano draws attention to the awareness of a certain commensurability between Jewish and Christian responses to drought.[32] The witnessing of both Christian and Jewish rituals for rain in one and the same city at almost the same time did not produce a sense of the affinities between religions. On the contrary, it stimulated polemics and skepticism. This is apparent in conversations of the period such as that of Serrano. Of course, these conversations, by their very nature (oral, dangerous) were not meant to survive in their totality. This makes the relatively few surviving testimonies more valuable and indicates a much wider reaction than noticed.

Around 1478-1480 in Calatayud, the Christians devised a procession for rain and ordered compulsory attendance under threat of fines. When the procession reached the Calatayud market, the judeoconverso Fernando Lopez, known as "El Mudo", asked Joseph Sarfati to stand in front of him so as to hide him and his absence from the compulsory procession. When the procession moved on, Lopez, the converso, referred to those taking part as five hundred drunkards who sing and believe that God will hear them. Further in the conversation Lopez asked Joseph Sarfati whether the Jews take out the Torah to bring down the rain. Joseph replied in the affirmative.[33]

There were also responses of a different kind. W. Christian[34] notes that in the sixteenth-century "lay professionals circulated through the Castilian countryside selling their services to individuals or communities to ward off ... hailstorms by magical methods. Known variously as necromancers, enpsalmers, or conjurers of clouds, they competed directly with the priests of the parishes." Similarly, the cloud chasers were hired by towns to conjure hail-storms.

This sixteen-century phenomenon is the frame for Diego Lopez activities. In the words of the prosecutor, Andrés González, "[Diego López] has stated to everyone in this area and its residents that he has a thorn from the crown of our savior and redeemer Jesus Christ, and as such he asks all those who see it to revere and respect it". A witness reported that "Also, when there were hailstones both Diego and his daughters placed the thorn in the window of his house so that these would be transformed into clear rain so as not to damage the crops".[35] Similar occurrences are reported from New Spain in 1544 when a witness asserted that the ceremonies related to the drought, to propitiate the god of rain, were performed in caves in the mounts of the Suchitepeque region, according to Maraver informants.[36]

VI

As has been seen in the cases of Saba, Yaavez and Sambari, all of whom write outside Spain, the Expulsion did not stop these musings and narrations about rain and drought. On the contrary, they seem to intensify after the Expulsion. This is when there appears the *Shevet*

Yehuda/Sceptre of Yehudah,[37] published in print around the mid sixteenth-century. It has been rated "l'ouvrage central de l'historiographie hébraïque lors de sa brève efflorescence au XVIe siècle" or "l'ouvrage sans conteste le plus significatif ..."[38] It is believed to reflect the mindset of the Iberian exiles, the culture and memories they took with them. It contains references to bringing down the rain. These are placed within dialogues at court between a King and a Jew retold in *oratio recta*. They must be read against the history outlined above.

The relevant dialogue [ch. 64] begins with a King asserting that as Jesus wrought miracles, he is divine. Ibn Yahia replies that the Jews who used to live in Toledo were asked by the Christians to bring down the rain and the Jews with their prayers brought down the rain. In one conversation, Thomas says that David had a peculiar gift for petitioning God (in tears). This seems to be in the line of ideas, since Honi, emphasizing individual charisma. The king avers that now he understands why the prayers of the Jews for rain are answered in times of drought. There is no awareness of the contradiction – present in other texts mentioned above – between ascribing the ability to one Jew and to the Jews as a whole or as a community. Elsewhere, the conversation is so unlikely that it cannot be other than humorous. The Christian Spanish king is turned into a Talmudist who polemizes with the Jew on prayers for rain, drawing on his knowledge not only of the Hebrew/Aramaic text of the Talmud but even on the medieval Talmudic exegesis by Rashi.

The short story in that chapter bears comparison with a fifteenth-century anonymous Christian work of brief tales: the *Ejemplos muy notables* edited recently by Silvia Iriso Ariz.[39] In it, there is a conversation between a *juglar* and a king. They discuss rain. The *juglar* says that he has just returned from paradise where he spoke to God and told Him off about rain.[40] God replied that the world is like the *juglar*'s orchard with its many trees: they do not all mature and give fruit at the same time. In both, the frame is a dialogue at court, in both there is a measure of humour, the subject is rain, there are elements of the supernatural – rain miracles in Toledo or a return voyage to paradise or a Spanish king who knows Aramaic. In both there are utterances of the Wisdom type. In both there is a king and a subordinate, but the tone is relatively "familiar", lacking in formality. There seems to be an echo of the motif of "too much or too little rain" reminiscent of the Honi story mentioned above. Noteworthy is the motif of weeping during pro-pluvial rogations, here attributed to King David and in the eyewitness accounts attributed to Jews and judeoconversos.

Also relevant to the traditions of the exiles is the chronicle *Qore Ha Dorot* found by Avivim in a MS text inside a printed book.[41] It had a complex history of transmission and seems to be late. Nevertheless, it is valuable, as it testifies to – and names – numerous learned personalities who arrived in Marakesh following the expulsion from Spain. In it, the story that is relevant here begins by noting that most of the listed exiled personalities came from Castile and that they and their wives and children had distinctive/different dress and were known locally as *al-flamingos*.[42] In addition, they refused to partake of the meat slaughtered by local rabbis.

Offended locals sent a delegation to the king, accusing the recent arrivals of being wealthy. The king called the Spanish exiles to court, where they said that they knew that he had been told they were rich. They said that if he wanted he could have money. But they said they were able to grant him something no other king possessed. That is the ability to bring down rain.

A tradition preserved in Vajda's "Recueil..."[43] [linked to Saadya ibn Danan II], narrates how in Morocco, in the year 5313-1553, the rain was slow to fall since the beginning of the year. The drought lasted four months. It was a great famine, so much so that the price of a *sahfa* of wheat reached six ounces. People were all distraught. The rabbi imposed three days of fasting on individuals. It still did not rain. He imposed a repeat performance and then it rained.

A document from the Portuguese Inquisition reveals that in the late sixteenth-century, António dos Reis shared with other new Christians a childhood memory. After a drought in Marrakech, the Xarife sent for his grandfather, Yosef Bacarta "xeque dos judeus" to pray to God to send them rain. Having placed an altar in the city square for this purpose, his grandfather brought out the Book of the Law which is called "sepher aTora" and he fasted and prayed that day with his community. Immediately afterwards a torrential rain fell that was considered miraculous.[44] Here the ceremony is even closer to the procedure as mentioned in *Mishna Ta'anit*: note the placing of the altar. The royal interest in Jews who bring down rain conforms to a well-documented Jewish idea as has been shown. It is also, at times, alluded to in non-Jewish Inquisition documents, i.e. in records of New and Old Christians' descriptions and expressions of their understanding of events.

VII

Observing and confronting the attitudes at the time in broader areas is certainly of comparative interest and may help to build an overall impression of the issues at stake here.[45] Further testimony appears in a letter that students from a Talmudic academy in Jerusalem sent to Italy in 1521, in which they describe vigils as a sign of divine response to their prayers:

> And on the day that we arranged the vigil, ... He showed us a sign of redemption... the Eternal thundered in the heavens, and his voice was heard from on high, and there was a driving rain and a great wind that broke up mountains and smashed rocks. And this was on the eleventh day of the *omer*, when rain in Jerusalem is a miracle, for rain does not fall there in the summer days, but only during the rainy season between Tabernacles and Passover...[46]

Here we find the interest and beliefs about prayer for rain in connection with the understanding of the link between rain and redemption.

The Christians in Muslim lands were sometimes accused of being responsible for some natural disaster due to the sin involved in their making of wine. As noted by the seventeenth-century traveler, Fray Matías: "the poor Christians also suffer great persecution, because if it does not rain on time or the storms ... they fall back on this as a crutch, saying it is the sins of the

Christians ... the cause of evil".[47] Figueras' study of rain folklore in the Catalan Pyrenees asserts that very often the villagers blame the local priest if hailstones destroy the crop.[48]

Kedar mentions an example of a contrary trend: in 1317, Jerusalem experienced a drought and all the wells went dry, except for the Spring of Silwän. Muslims, Christian, and Jews, went out to an open space and implored God for rain; their prayers were answered on the third day. Another case is from 1348, when a plague broke out in Damascus, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims fasted for three days and then marched together in a procession, praying side by side. Both cases concern crisis situations.[49] Similar examples come from the writings of Rabbi Yom Tov Tzahalon, or Yom-Tov ben Moses ha-Sefardi, from Safed [b.1559], who heard the following story from his father:

> ...when the Moslem kadis prayed for rain unsuccessfully in time of drought, it is said that the great judges amongst them disheveled their hair (removing their headcoverings) and prayed. Some show even greater subjection, instead of a fine scarf that they put around their necks, making a scarf of shoes which they link one into the next and place on their necks instead of a scarf and pray in subservience; so I have heard from my master and father, of blessed memory, who saw that the great judges did this in Jerusalem in time of drought; yet with all this they were not answered, until they finally had to force us to pray. Then the Torah scroll was taken out into the city's streets and the rabbis of Israel came out; and the Lord heard them and answered them, and they did not return into the city except in a triumphant rainfall; and all the great men of the other nations came to greet them, and the gentile leader came out and spread his shawl over the Torah scroll so that it not be ruined by the heavy rain; and His great name was sanctified. Thus I heard from my father and master, who saw it with his own eyes.[50]

Here again we see the common goals of Jews and Muslims in a local setting in special circumstances. Attention to Safed, Jerusalem and Damascus helps to delineate more clearly – by contrast – the contours of the phenomenon in medieval Christian Spain. It is also – like many testimonies mentioned above – a text about oral traditions by someone who was not an eye-witness to the events, in contrast with the responsa or with the cases from Berlanga, Calatayud and Puebla de Montalban mentioned above.

Conclusion

The prominence of the texts about Jewish prayers for rain in Spain and its followings and derivates seem to be mostly fourteenth- to sixteenth-century phenomena. Although weather history tends usually towards long range chronologies, there seems to be a view that these dates belonged in a period of great transition from the milder climate of the High Middle Ages to the harsher one of the early modern period. This transition between one climatic regime and the next was marked by extreme variability in temperature and precipitation levels that could lead to unusually dry weather in some places or extraordinary rainfall in others.[51]

Questions of rain or drought bring into relief differences and contradictions. The

difference between the rain brought down by special individuals contrasts with the belief in the congregation or the innocent as agents. Drought could be a reason for anti-Christian action in Muslim lands or anti-Jewish one in Christian territories. But they could also be an occasion for local cooperation. The liturgical focus can, after research, be complemented by evidence for actions, such as the proclamation of special fasts. Christian contemporary observers reacted to these in different ways, but do not seem to have been aware that the activities for bringing down rain included fasting and were in accordance with ancient tradition and regulations on fasts. These actions appear to have been much more common than noticed in late medieval Spain. We have brought to bear on the question examples of eye witness reports from different types of evidence. But many others are not. They testify to a practice of writing down what were previously oral transmissions. They are particularly noticeable in the post-Expulsion period.

Endnotes:

1. Irit Ziffer, "Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy. The Imagery of the Shrine Model from Tell el-Far'ah North—Biblical Tirzah." *Religions* 10 (2019): 1-24.
2. Manuel-Antonio Marcos Casquero, "Ecos de arcaicas cosmogonías acuáticas en el ocaso del mundo medieval." *'Ilū* 13 (2008): 91-118. He cites a story recorded by Pausanias, i.e. a second century author highly conscious of the importance of regional parameters. According to Pausanias, the Hagno fountain, at the foot of Mount Lyceum, in Arcadia, had the peculiarity of never drying up, neither in summer nor in winter. When drought ravaged the region, the priest of Zeus Lycius would go to the fountain, performed a sacrifice and, after the pertinent prayers, introduced an oak twig into the water. According to Pausanias, the water began to shake, a kind of great cloud rose from it and it began to rain. The basic idea was that the force resident in the water, activated by a precise magical ritual, was capable of causing rain.
3. Mathias Delcor, "Rites pour l'obtention de la pluie à Jérusalem et dans le Proche-Orient." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 178.2 (1970): 117-132; Itzhak Brand, "Following the Path of the Water Libation." *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 15.1 (2012): 43-60.
4. Naphtali Wieder, "Three Derashot for Fast Days for Rain from the Geniza." *Tarbiz* 54 (1984): 21-60 (Hebrew).
5. Anu Põldsam, "Prayer for Rain by Elijah and by Honi the Circle-Maker." *Theological Journal/ Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* 72.1 (2018): 59-77.
6. D.A. De Sola, *The Ancient Melodies of the Liturgy of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*, Harmonized by Emanuel Aguilar. (London: Wessel, 1857) number 45. David Sabato, "Praying for Rain (Sheîlat Geshamim) in Israel and Diaspora: Halacha, History and Geography." *Oqimta. Studies in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature* 8 (2022): 117-40. On the Hallel see e.g. Abraham A. Neuman, *The Jews in Spain*, (Philadelphia: JPS, 1944), ii, 157
7. Arnold A. Lasker, Daniel J. Lasker, "The Jewish Prayer for Rain in the Post-Talmudic Diaspora." *AJS Review* 9.2 (1984): 141-174.
8. Menachem Raab, "The proper time to say 'tal umatar'." *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 23 (2000-2001): 17-21.

9. Eleazar Gutwirth, "Jewish Moneylending in 14th Century Castile: The Accord of the Puebla de Alcocer." *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Division B. Volume II. The History of the Jewish People. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), 151-158.
10. Eleazar Gutwirth, "Fechas judías y fechas cristianas." *El Olivo* 19 (1984): 21-30; idem, "Sephardi Culture of the 'Cairo Genizah People' (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)." *Michael* 14 (1997): 9-34.
11. Benjamin Richler, Malachi Beit-Airé, and Nurit Pasternak (eds.), *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2008).
12. The search for rain omens may be traced back to at least as early as the Talmud [*BYoma* 21b, *Baba Bathra* 25b]. In a famous article, C. Ginzburg attended to the roots of scientific method, to Morelli, Freud and innovators who changed the very tenor of their fields. Their achievement was rooted in valuing that which the average observer would dismiss as minor details, inadvertent little gestures. In some cultures, such interest in clues begins with -amongst others-the art of foretelling rain. See Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method." *History Workshop* 9 (Spring, 1980): 5-36.
13. Simon Bernstein, "The Dıwan of sacral poetry by R. Selomoh de Piera." Part. II. *HUCA* 19 (1945): 1-74 (Hebrew).
14. Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492* (Princeton: University Press, 2009).
15. See for example Ezra Fleischer, "The Early Piyyutim for Tal (and Geshem)." *Kobez Al Yad* 8 (1975): 91–139 (Hebrew).
16. *Responsa*, Amsterdam 1738, II, 6. He also wrote a commentary on the Hoshanot published by Usque in Ferrara 1553
17. Yitzhak Baer, *Historia de los judios en la Espana cristiana*, traducida del hebreo por Jose Luis Lacave (Madrid: Altalena, 1981), 608; idem, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 477 n. 49. For drought as punishment for practices of the urban aristocracy in the Zohar see *op cit*, vol I, 262. For an analysis of Crescas' image see Ram ben Shalom, "Memory of a Leader: Don Hasdai Crescas in the Eyes of his Contemporaries and in the Eyes of the Generation of the Expulsion" in *Or-Ha-Shem mi-Sefarad*. ed. S. Harvey (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2020): 67-102 (Hebrew).
18. *Tzeror ha-Mor ha-Shalem*, ed. R. B. Wichholder, (Bne Brak, 1990); Abraham Gross, *The World of Rabbi Abraham Saba* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 209.
19. Dov, Schwartz, "From Theurgy to Magic: The Evolution of the Magical-Talismanic Justification of Sacrifice in the Circle of Nahmanides and His Interpreters." *ALEPH* 1.1 (2001): 165–213.
20. See Gross, *loc.cit*.
21. He wrote in his *Or Ha-Hayyim*: "Rabbi ibn Hasdai, who excelled in his intelligence over all the philosophers of his day, even the wise-men of the Moslems and Christians, not to mention the wise-men of the Jews, and was a great man before G-d, for he called to the Lord, and He answered him in gatherings of tens of thousands of gentiles, so that the Lord was sanctified by him." This passage may refer to the same event mentioned by Rabbi Abraham Saba. See Gros *loc cit*.
22. Yosef Sambari, *Divre Yosef*, ed. S. Shtauber (Jerusalem, 1981), 145.
23. Isaac Husik, *A History of Jewish Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 433.

24. Dov Noy, "Tefilat ha-tamim moridah geshamim" [The prayer of the Innocent brings down rain]," *Maḥanayim* 51 (1961): 34–45. See also Dan Ben Amos, *Folk Tales of the Jews, Tales from the Sephardic Dispersion* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2006), I, 426 on the donkey driver Pentakaka whose prayers for rain were answered. Peninnah Schram, *Stories within Stories: From the Jewish Oral Tradition* (Lanham: Aronson, 2000).
25. Ricardo Muñoz Solla, *Inquisición y conversos La comunidad judaizante de Berlanga de Duero en los siglos XV y XVI* (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2022), 856.
26. José Cabezudo Astrain, "Los conversos aragoneses según los procesos de la Inquisición," *Sefarad* 18 (1958): 272-282.
27. Cabezudo Astrain, *loc cit*, 282
28. *The ancient melodies of the liturgy,* ed cit.
29. Stephen Gilman, *Spain of Fernando de Rojas: The Intellectual and Social Landscape of La Celestina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 222 n. 31 about the Bachiller Ramirez de Orejon: "Andando a buscar Ios vecinos de la tierra de Montalban donde vivir mas sanos, porque vivian enfermos junto al rio, hallaron una poblacion de judios en el lugar donde esta aora fundada la dicha villa, y se vinieron con su jurediccion al dicho lugar donde esta fundada, y ansi Io oyo decir a sus padres y algunos ancianos desta villa" (263).
30. Gilman, *Spain of Fernando de Rojas*; Eleazar Gutwirth, "'Techne' and Culture: Printers and Readers in Fifteenth-Century Hispano-Jewish Communities," in *The Late Medieval Hebrew Book in the Western Mediterranean: Hebrew Manuscripts and Incunabula in Context*. ed. Javier del Barco (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 338-367; Javier Castaño, "'Cleanse Me from My Sin': The Social and Cultural Vicissitudes of a Converso Family in Fifteenth-Century Castile" in *Bastards and Believers. Jewish Converts and Conversion from the Bible to the Present*. ed. Theodor Dunkelgrün and Paweł Maciejko (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020): 102.
31. Fritz Baer, *Die Juden im christlichen Spanien*, vol. II, (Berlin: *Akademie*-Verlag, 1936), 528.
32. See, for propitiatory rituals concerning rain in medieval Madrid, the eighth chapter of Eduardo Jiménez Rayado*, Agua y sociedad en Madrid durante la Edad Media,* (Cádiz: Ediciones Universidad de Valladolid, 2021).
33. Encarnación Marin Padilla, *Relación judeoconversa durante la segunda mitad del siglo XV en Aragón: La Ley.* (Madrid: E. Marin Padilla, 1986), 79.
34. William A. Christian, Jr, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
35. Leonor Zozaya Montes, "A Thorn in the Community: Popular Religious Practice and Converso Dissidence in the District of Molina de Aragon" in *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond* I, ed. Andrew Colin and Kevin Ingram (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 171.
36. Richard E. Greenlea, "La Inquisición Episcopal En Nueva España, 1535- 1571." *Temas Nicaragüenses* 138 (2019): 307-341. Juan Blázquez Miguel, "Brujas e inquisidores en la América colonial (1569-1820)." *Espacio, tiempo y forma*. *Serie IV, Historia moderna* 7 (1994): 71-98.
37. *Shevet Yehudah*, eds. Azriel Shochat and Yitzhak Baer, (Jerusalem: Mossad Byalik, 1947), 142.
38. Maurice Kriegel, "Conscience historique et écriture de l'histoire dans le monde juif, IXe/Xe siècles-XVIe siècle. Histoire socioculturelle du judaïsme médiéval et modern." *Annuaire. Enseignements EHESS* (2011-2012): 277-278.

39. Silvia Iriso Ariz ed., *Libro de ejemplos muy notables* (Valencia: Lemir, 2001).
40. Ibid: "yo fui al Paraíso a reprehender a Dios e díxele que non sabía regir el mundo e fize contra Él una razón... Si demandamos sequedat, Vós dádesnos agua, e si demandamos pluvia, Vós non nos dades pluvia, e assí paresce que vós non sabedes regir el mundo".
41. J. Avivim, "Qore ha-Dorot Mi-Marakesh." *Peamim* 38 (1989): 58–67.
42. This point may add credibility to the source. On other remarks about dress see also Jennifer Vanz, "D'une rive à l'autre de la Méditerranée: mobilités, recompositions et adaptations des groupes juifs aux XIVe et XVe siècles." *L'Année du Maghreb* 27 (2022): 23-39.
43. Georges Vajda, "Un recueil de textes historiques judeo-morocains." *Hesperis* 36 (1949): 163-6.
44. Claude B. Stuczynski, "Apóstatas marroquíes de origen judío en Portugal en los siglos XVI-XVII.Entre la misión y la Inquisición." *Entre el Islam y Occidente Los judíos magrebíes en la Edad Moderna*. ed. Mercedes García-Arenal. (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2003), n. 86.
45. The rain figures in Joseph Ha-Cohen's *Vale of Tears* [1563-1575]. That is to say, the work of an author whose family originated in Huesca. See Joseph ha-Kohen, *Sefer Emeq ha-Bakha. The Vale of Tears*, ed. Karin Almbladh (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1981). It also appears in the *Elyahu Zuta* [1523] by Elyahu Capsali, who writes that he records the information received from exiles. He refers to an undertaking by Jews to brng down the rain when there is drought. But his chapter 40 is thought to be inspired by Abravanel on Kings. On Capsali see e.g. Yolanda Moreno Koch *El judaísmo hispano según la crónica hebrea de Rabí Eliyahu Capsali: traducción y estudio del "Seder Eliyahu Zutá", capítulos 40-70* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2005), 58.
46. A. Ya'ari, *Iggerot Ereẓ Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1934), 165.
47. Maite Ojeda-Mata "Jews under Islam in early modern Morocco in travel chronicles." *Jewish Culture and History*, 21.2 (2020): 104-130.
48. J. Romeu Figueras, "Folklore de la lluvia y de las tempestades en el Pirineo catalan." *RDTP* 7.2 (1951): 92–326.
49. Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Studying the 'Shared Sacred Spaces' of the Medieval Levant: Where Historians May Meet Anthropologists." *Al-Masāq* 34.2 (2022): 111-126; Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Convergence of Oriental Christian, Muslim, and Frankish Worshippers: The Case of Saydnaya." *De Sion exibit lex et verbum domini de Hierusalem: Essays on Medieval Law, Liturgy and Literature in Honour of Amnon Linder* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 59-69; Daniel Boušek, "'... and the Ishmaelites Honour the Site': Images of Encounters between Jews and Muslims at Jewish Sacred Places in Medieval Hebrew Travelogues." *Archiv Orientalni* 86.1 (2018): 23-51.
50. *Responsa Maharitatz ha-Hadashot*, ed Y. Spiegel, (Jerusalem, 1980). See the richly documented study by Yaakov Spiegel, "'I will grant your rains in their season' – Sanctifying the Name of G-d", in Bar-Ilan University's *Parshat Hashavua Study Center*, https://www2.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/bechuko/spi.html#_ftn5.
51. Christopher M. Gerrard, David N. Petley, "A Risk Society? Environmental Hazards, Risk and Resilience in the Later Middle Ages in Europe." *Natural hazards* 69.1 (2013): 1051–1079; S. Lüning, et al. "The Medieval Climate Anomaly in the Mediterranean Region." *Paleoceanography and paleoclimatology* 34.10 (2019): 1625–1649; Adam Franklin-Lyons, Marie A. Kelleher, "Framing Mediterranean Famine: Food Crisis in Fourteenth-Century Barcelona." *Speculum* 97 (2022): 40-76.

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